

A GROUNDED THEORY RESEARCH ON CHINA'S COLLEGE STUDENT ENTREPRENEURSHIP COMPETITION

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the Chinese government has implemented several policies to increase its national entrepreneurship rate. One of the main policies is to fund colleges to organize entrepreneurship competitions to encourage college students to start their own business ventures. The winners of such competitions will receive prizes and startup fund to support their new business venture. We conducted the current grounded theory research to investigate the condition of such competitions in China. We found that many college entrepreneurship competitions are not well-organized, and they lack an adequate post-competition supervision system. In addition, we also found that such competitions has attracted college students who are not interested in creating their own business ventures to compete in such events in pursuit of their personal gains.

Keywords: College Students; College Managers; Entrepreneurship; Entrepreneurship Competition.

INTRODUCTION:

Entrepreneurship has always been one of the key topics of interest to governments around the world because it is one of the main drivers of national economy (Xu, 2009), and it is also an effective channel for job creation and economic resuscitation during troubled times (Gao, Cheng, Li & Jiang, 2008). In order to encourage more people to become entrepreneurs, countries such as the United States and Netherland have made 'entrepreneurship education' a part of the curriculum of their compulsory education (Oosterbeek, Praag & Ijsselstein, 2010).

Being one of the largest emerging economies that face challenges from economic slowdown, China tried to rejuvenate their economy by encouraging more of its citizens to start their own businesses. One of the main policies that the Chinese government uses in order to achieve this goal is to give incentives to college students who have entrepreneurial potentials to start their own businesses (Fang, 2004). For example, starting from 2006, the local government of Shanghai City invests one hundred million RMB every year to encourage its college students to engage in entrepreneurship (Yan, 2011). Similar financial supports are also given by the local governments of the other major Chinese cities (Chen & Sun, 2009).

The Chinese government usually provide financial support to colleges and public organizations to organize college-student-targeted entrepreneurship competitions (Xu, 2011). In such competitions, college students are asked to write a business proposal and present it to a panel of judges. The winners of such competitions receive the support necessary for them to start and run the business that they proposed in the competition (Du, 2011; Xia, Luo & Yan, 2012). Essentially, such college student entrepreneurship competitions are an effective avenue for the government to locate and invest in high potential business proposals. The government hopes that by investing in these proposed business ventures, these businesses can become successful and contribute to the country's economy.

However, while such competitions organized, could attract college students to participate and contest for the prizes, we ask: are these competitions effective in creating entrepreneurs? For example, although there were more than 20,000 entrepreneurship competitions organized in 2010, attracting more than 3 million college students, the number of entrepreneurial activity did not increase proportionately (Huang & Shi, 2010).

Hitherto, there is a dearth of literature that examines the effectiveness of such programs in encouraging college students to become entrepreneurs. Hence, we conducted this research to fill the gap in literature by studying whether organizing college student entrepreneurship competitions in China could successfully motivate college students to engage in entrepreneurship. We hope the findings of our research can provide insights to college managers and policy makers in general who are interested in motivating college students to become entrepreneurs by organizing such activities.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Entrepreneurship refers to new venture creation (Low & MacMillan, 1988). It is believed that entrepreneurship can make important contribution to a country's economy, especially when it is experiencing changes (Kanter, 1989). Thus, many countries made entrepreneurship education compulsory, hoping that it could inspire more individuals to start their own business venture, and contribute to the economy (Gibb, 1996; Oosterbeek et al., 2010).

One of the main targeted groups to receive entrepreneurship education is college students. Governments hope that, by encouraging college students to start their own business ventures, it could reduce the pressure on the job market when they graduate because these college students will become self-employed, and, potentially, also employ some of the other graduates (McMullan & Long, 1987).

Research indicates that entrepreneurship education is effective in influencing the entrepreneurial intention and motivation of college students (Rae & Ruth, 2013; Xiang & Lei, 2014). Educators use a variety of approaches to teach their students entrepreneurship, and motivate them to start their own business ventures. For example, some corporations organize entrepreneurship competitions to motivate students to engage in entrepreneurship (Meng & Huang, 2012). However, some Chinese scholars suggested that while entrepreneurship competition might have an influence on student's entrepreneurial spirit and entrepreneurial competency, it has limited impact on their eagerness to really start a new business venture (Li, Fan, & Li, 2012). Thus, in this research, we intend to analyze whether the organizing of college student entrepreneurship competition in China could successfully motivate college students to engage in entrepreneurship

METHODOLOGY:

We adopted the grounded theory research method for the current study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Kalhour & Ng, 2016). We conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with students who had participated in

entrepreneurship competition to collect our data. We mainly asked questions about their demographics, their competition experiences, and the supports that they received from the organizers after winning the competition. To keep our research focused, we restricted our interview to entrepreneurship competitions that were organized by colleges for two reasons. First, college-organized competitions represent majority of the college student entrepreneurship competitions held in China. Second, many government-organized entrepreneurship competitions only accept registration from winners of entrepreneurship competitions held by their respective colleges. Hence, by focusing our interviews on college-organized competitions, we will be able to obtain a more representative view of the event.

Our participants were chosen using a combination of theoretical sampling method and snowball sampling method. At the end of our research, we interviewed 31 college students. 23 of our participants are male, and 8 of them are female. The average age of our participants was 23 years, and they were college students from the major colleges in the Nanjing City of China's Jiangsu Province when the interview was conducted. While 24 of our participants had received awards from these competitions, only 6 of them become entrepreneurs.

FINDINGS:

We organized our discussion in this section by sorting the main findings of our research based on the main actors of college student entrepreneurship competitions: the organizer and the contestants. From the side of the organizer, we discussed two common management problems. The first problem is that, many college student-entrepreneurship competitions are disorganized when the competitions were in progress, and the second problem is that many organizers do not have adequate post-competition supervision system that monitors the post-competition entrepreneurial behaviors of the winners. From the side of the contestants, we discussed the phenomenon of professional entrepreneurship competition team.

The Organizer:

Disorganized Competition. We found in our interviews that many of our participants were dissatisfied with the organization of college student entrepreneurship competition. Common problems cited were, the frequently changed time, location, and proceedings of these competitions.

A typical entrepreneurship competition will usually involve the organizer first making an official announcement to invite interested parties to register for the competition. Upon receiving the news, college administrators will meet students to motivate them to participate in the competition. Those who are interested have to register for the competition, and then submit a business proposal within a week or two. The business proposals will be sent to the judges of the competition to undergo a selection process. Students who have their proposal selected at this stage will be invited to present their business plan to a panel of judges. These judges will then choose the winners of the competition based on the quality of the presentation. However, we found that this procedure is usually not followed by many organizers of such competitions. For example, one of our participants complained:

“College-organized entrepreneurship competitions are usually very chaotic. We were frequently asked to submit our final business proposal a few days after we got ourselves registered for the competition. At one instance, the period between the day when we learn about the competition from the college administrator and the deadline for proposal submission was only a few days! At the other instance, we heard almost nothing after we got ourselves registered for the competition. Then, after two or three months, when we had almost forgotten about the event, we were suddenly asked to submit our proposal!”

One contributing reason for this phenomenon is because the organizers of such events do not view it with equal importance as the contestants. We found that many colleges assigned the task of organizing college student entrepreneurship competitions to their administrators. These administrators were usually busy with their own daily routines and view the organizing of such competitions as chores due to the lack of incentives. The administrator’s attitude toward entrepreneurship competition lies in stark contrast to the attitude of students, who usually view it with great importance. One of our participants commented:

“Although we take these competitions very seriously and spend a lot of time preparing for it, the college does not think the same way. The college will usually assign the task to organize such competitions to the administrators. Most of the time, these administrators will delegate the task to students. These students will then become the “organizer” of the competition. When the presentation day is reached, the administrators will just ask some students to carry tables, chairs and a projector to a classroom, invite some teachers who were free to be judges, and finish the rest of the chores.”

Other than the organization of college student entrepreneurship competition, the other problem that is often

complained by our participants is the lack of face validity and rigor of the standard used to judge and choose the winning team. For example, most of our participants reflected that the judges of college entrepreneurship competitions are college teachers, but not practitioners who have experiences with entrepreneurship. Some organizers even invited college administrators to be judges.

For example, in one competition that our participants had participated, although the organizer invited an entrepreneur and some college teachers to the event, both teachers and entrepreneur left the competition site after giving an opening speech, leaving two college administrators to judge the competition. Many contestants were dissatisfied with the outcome of that competition not because they had lost that competition. They were dissatisfied because the two administrators only gave each of the 20 contesting teams 2 minutes to do their presentation, and also because they were administrators who mainly know how to take care of student affairs. Due to their lack of technical knowledge about the inventions and business proposals presented by many contestants, they dismissed their proposals without giving any comments. As a result, many of the contestants were skeptical about the outcome of that competition.

We found from our interviews that such situations are quite common in China's colleges. Although the Chinese government has paid a lot of attentions to college student entrepreneurship, college teachers and college managers are not as eager. Many college teachers and college managers are not willing to spend more time on organizing entrepreneurship competition because the key indicators of their performance appraisal are research quality and education quality, but not time spent on organizing such events. On the other hand, administrators who take charge of such events were not individuals who volunteered to be organizers. Hence, they were also unwilling to spend more time on such events. As a result, many college student entrepreneurship competitions that are held in China are usually disorganized.

Despite the prevalence of the problem that many college student entrepreneurship competitions are disorganized, we found that not many college managers are actively seeking solutions to improve the situation. This phenomenon is caused by two reasons: the students are unwilling to lodge formal complaint against the organizer, and college managers are not very concerned about the quality of the organization of such events. First, the Chinese culture is characterized by high power distance (George & Jones, 2008). The Confucius ideology that influences the Chinese culture has embedded deep respect for teachers and elders in the mind of Chinese students. Thus, although many of our participants were dissatisfied with the organization and outcome of the competitions that they contested, they were unwilling to reflect their "plight" to higher authority. Second, many college managers are college teachers who took on managerial responsibility. The successful organization of entrepreneurship competitions is usually not one of the key indicators of their performance appraisal. Thus, given that students are not willing to fight for their own rights, and college managers are not very concerned about the quality of such competition, many entrepreneurship competition held by colleges in China continue to be disorganized. While many people know that there is something wrong about the management of such events, not many people are interested in making changes.

Lack of Post-Competition Supervision. Ideally, colleges in China give two types of supports to winners of entrepreneurship competitions. They call it "hardware support" and "software support". Hardware support usually takes the form of the college investing in the winners to help them start and run their own business, and also providing them an office or workstation in the college's entrepreneurship incubation centre for them to work. Software support usually takes the form of the college assigning experienced teachers to the team as entrepreneurship advisors, giving them chances to interact and learn from the other established entrepreneurs and managers, and giving them the other administrative supports that they might need from the college for them to start and run their businesses.

The primary goal of organizing entrepreneurship competitions in colleges is to aid students who have the potential to run successful business ventures to realize their dream. However, many of our participants reflected that their colleges did not give them enough post-competition supports.

One of our participants reflected that while they have received the promised hardware supports, they did not receive enough software supports. Their college left them to survive on their own after giving them an office in the incubation centre and a small sum of startup fund. As a result, their business failed shortly after because these inexperienced college students lack the knowledge and capability to push their business idea forward. Another participant reflected that after they become the champion of their college's entrepreneurship competition, they were given a 20m² office in the college's entrepreneurship incubation centre. However, they did not receive any financial investment or advisory services from their college. As a result, after working hard for a year, their business remained at the startup stage because while they have the technical knowledge to develop products and services, they lack the relevant marketing skills and channels to sell it. Although some of

our participants tried to approach teachers from the business school who have the relevant entrepreneurial skills and know-how, they were only willing to give a few simple comments on the business. These teachers were unwilling to spend more time on the students due to the lack of incentives.

“The college promised everything when they asked us to take part in this competition. In the end, we only receive a tiny room! There is no advisory support or anything! We felt that everybody have forgotten us. We were left to survive on our own in this incubation centre!”

In some occasions, college students might even face challenges from employees of the college. One of our participants won the third place in the entrepreneurship competition organized by the city’s government. Their achievement brought good reputation to the college, and they received compliments from college managers. Their business idea was to create personalized student cards. However, after they printed flyers to advertise their product, and created posters to place on announcement boards, they were obstructed and driven out by workers who were employed by the college. When they tried to seek help from college administrators, the latter were impatient and left the matter at a corner after promising to help.

The Contestants:

During our interviews, our participants mentioned the existence of “professional entrepreneurship competition team”. Members of professional entrepreneurship competition team do not participate in such competitions to get financial supports for their own business venture. Most of the time, they are not even interested in starting their own business venture. These contestants will usually start by taking part in almost all types of entrepreneurship competitions to become “competition-smart”. For example, how they should write their proposal to pass the selection stage, and how to present their ideas to get good impression from the judges at the presentation stage. Then, they will use their knowledge and skills to win competitions. After they won a competition, instead of starting their proposed business venture, they will prepare for the next competition. One of our participants was a member of one professional entrepreneurship competition team. According to that participant, although they had won many competitions, they ended up working in corporations or studying for higher degree. They had not thought about becoming entrepreneurs. They participated to win prizes and honor. Members from professional entrepreneurship competition team took part in entrepreneurship competitions to gain personal benefits. Such benefits can come in many forms. For example, they can win cash prize from the organizer, or get an office in the college’s incubation centre. On the least, the fact that they had won a collegial competition will become a persuasive support for their capability in their credential when they are applying for jobs or for higher education.

Due to the lack of post-competition supervision system, these contestants were able to get away without penalty. Many of our participants reflected that they were no match for contestants from professional entrepreneurship competition teams because these individuals were experts in the competition game. Hence, many college students felt that their chances to start their own business ventures were stolen by these “con-person teams”.

Interestingly, some of our participants believed that the judges and organizers know about such phenomenon of professional entrepreneurship competition team, but they chose to ignore it. One reason for the suspicion that our participants gave is because the organizers tend to invite the same group of individuals to be judges of their competitions. Thus, these judges should be aware that there is something missing when the same group of contestants appears at almost all of the entrepreneurship competitions to present the same idea, and they tend to be one of the winning teams.

The other reason cited by our participants is they observed that some members of professional entrepreneurship competition team were students from one of the judges. Being familiar with the rules of entrepreneurship competition, these teachers taught their students on how to better present their ideas during the competition, thus giving an unfair competitive advantage to these college students. Some teachers even asked their students to prepare for forthcoming entrepreneurship competitions before the announcement was officially made because they know when these competitions will be held. Such behavior gave these students an unfair edge over the other students, especially when the lapse of time between the announcement of the competition and the deadline for proposal submission is short.

Nevertheless, while our participants lamented about the phenomenon, they did not make a complaint to the higher authority for two reasons. First, due to the gap in experience, skill, and knowledge on how to win competitions, the proposal and presentation of professional entrepreneurship competition teams tend to have better quality than the other teams. Second, again due to the high power distance of the Chinese culture (George & Jones, 2008), the students were afraid to lodge complaint against the organizers.

DISCUSSION:

In this paper, we discussed the problems of college student entrepreneurship competition in China. On the organizer side, we found that such competitions were generally disorganized, and it lacks an adequate post-competition supervision system. On the side of contestants, we found that some college students who had no intention to start their own business ventures had exploited the system to win prizes. Due to the lack of post-competition supervision system, these college students were able to go from one competition to another, winning prizes and displacing those who have genuine interest in starting their own business ventures along the way. These issues might be the “culprit” that cause the low college student entrepreneurship rate in China. On one hand, many winners of such competitions are not individuals who are interested in becoming entrepreneurs, and on the other hand, the organization of such competition is poor, and this might further turn potential entrepreneurs who might otherwise be interested in participating in the event off.

We believe that the contributing reason for these observations is college manager and college teacher’s lack of motivation to push forward college student entrepreneurship. Both college managers and college teachers face pressure to perform up to the college’s expectation in terms of research quality and teaching quality for them to stay in their job. Thus, we can expect these individuals to be inclined toward spending more time on doing their own research or on the courses that they teach. Policy makers should consider adjusting the public policy that affects college governance if they wish to improve the current condition of college student entrepreneurship.

An easy answer to the question of how to motivate college managers and college teachers to become enthusiastic in developing college student entrepreneurs is policy makers can consider making entrepreneurship rate of active students, graduates, and alumni as one of the indicators used to rank colleges, and college managers can consider making the number of quality hours spent on student entrepreneurship affairs a key criteria for promotion. Nevertheless, we must be wary of the potential negative effects that such approaches could cause. For example, the management of some colleges and teachers who are weak in either research or education, or both, might turn to focus on student entrepreneurship affairs with the belief that it is an easier way for them to climb the national ranking or to get promotions. Given that the fundamental role of colleges is to conduct research and give quality education, such policy might cause these entities to give up their fundamentals in pursuit of an “easier goal”. We believe that the answer to this question is not clear yet, and practitioners should conduct research to find the effective way to better motivate college managers and teachers if they want to achieve better results for college student entrepreneurship development.

Contributions and Implications of Research:

We believe that this finding of our research has two important implications for policy makers and college managers in general. First, if policy makers and college managers wish to motivate college students who have the potential to become entrepreneurs by investing in their business ventures, they should think twice if they wish to use entrepreneurship competition as a tool for them to locate high potential new business ventures. This is because the benefits that could be realized by winning such competitions could attract college students who have no genuine interest in starting their own businesses, and they might end up investing in “competition-smart” students instead of students who are really interested in becoming entrepreneurs.

One way that policy makers and college managers can prevent college students from exploiting the system is by implementing an adequate post-competition supervision system that has the necessary control and monitoring mechanisms. For example, they could enforce an on-site milestone check system to ensure that the winners are really running their business venture properly, and they could also require the venture to pay back the invested fund at the end of a term in order to deter contestants who are not interested in using the invested fund to start their business. Future research should be conducted to design an effective system that could serve this purpose.

Second, policy makers and college managers should make sure that no students are able to get undue competitive advantage by receiving guidance from teachers who are “insiders” in order to reduce the probability of low-quality business proposals that have good packaging from becoming the winning project. An easy way to achieve this goal is to implement a policy that forbids teachers who are advisors for student teams from becoming the judge of competitions that their students participate. However, given that students tend to find experienced and well-respected teachers to be their advisors, and a typical business school will have a limited number of teachers who specialize in entrepreneurship, such restriction might cause the college to have problem finding suitable candidates to become judges. Future research should be conducted to resolve this conflict of interest issue.

LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH:

This research has two limitations. The first limitation of our research is we had focused specifically on entrepreneurship competition that is organized by colleges for college students. Thus, the findings of our research might have limited implications for entrepreneurship competition that is organized by other entities for adult contestants. Nevertheless, we believe that our research has important implications for adult entrepreneurship competition because the problems of professional entrepreneurship team winning competitions and poor post-competition supervision system are not unique to college-organized entrepreneurship competition.

Based on our interviews, we were told by our participants that some “con-person team” had managed to win competitions organized by corporations and angel investors. These individuals would usually spend the invested money on their personal expenditures, and declare their business has failed after they have used up the startup fund. These individuals were able to get away due to the poor post-competition supervision system that these corporations have, and also because such behavior lies in the legal grey area. Due to the focus of our research, we did not continue our research along this track. Future research should be conducted to verify this information. If it is found to be true, we should rethink the nature of such behavior. For example, should such behavior be considered as fraud and be included in the penal code?

Second, we have primarily adopted the perspective of college students for this research. Thus, our findings are not representative of the perspective of the organizers. For example, although we know that the administrators will inform the students about the competition after they have received the information on the official announcement, we do not know much about what have happened between the reception of information and the communication of information to the students. Some of our participants believed that their college administrators did not get to them immediately, and they believed that they would have more time to make better preparation if they can get the information earlier. Future research should be conducted from the perspective of college managers, college teachers, and administrators to provide a more complete view.

In addition, future research should also be conducted to study the reason for why college managers and college teachers are not interested to spend more time on entrepreneurship competition. Other than having no incentives to become over-involved in developing student entrepreneurship, we also suspect that some college managers and college teachers might be not be interested in spending more time on student entrepreneurship affairs because they might not believe that their students should become entrepreneurs. For example, teachers and managers from non-business faculties (say, arts and natural science) might think that the specialization of their students is not suitable for entrepreneurship, and thus not interested to spend more time on such activities. These are questions that should be answered by future research.

CONCLUSION:

We conducted this research with the aim to better understand the condition of China’s college-organized entrepreneurship competitions that are targeted at college students. We found that there are several problems with the current management of such events, and there is a need to prevent opportunistic individuals from exploiting the system. Although we attempted to make recommendations to help alleviate these problems in this paper, we admit that there is no easy answer to the question at hand, and we have to conduct more research in order to find better solutions. We hope our research can inspire practitioners and academics to conduct more research on these issues, and we hope that these problems can be resolved in the near future.

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