

Sociology

## “Lying Flat” and Rejecting the Rat Race The Survival Anxiety of Chinese Youth

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“Lying Flat” is the literal translation of the Chinese slang term “Tang Ping,” which alludes to the current youth culture of giving up and living a life without ambition. The term was coined against the backdrop of a worldwide economic downturn and reflects the mental confusion and disillusionment of young people. Multiple variables, including excessive social competition, unsuitable school education, and permissive parents, contribute to adolescents’ inactive life attitudes. This article presented some typical lying-flat cohorts, explored the underlying causes, and provided solutions for this problem in an effort to provide suggestions for encouraging the younger generation to regain hope in life and attain self-actualization.

**Keywords:** Lying Flat; Youth Anxiety; Competition; Youth Employment

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“LYING-FLAT” is a new subset of Chinese youth culture defined by narratives that appear amusing but are actually incisive. It has rapidly spread and acquired popularity on social media platforms, finding resonance in the labor market among those born in the 1990s and 2000s. The adherents of the lying-flat culture oppose the rat race and “involution” in society, advocating for unambitious and carefree lifestyles. Once a sociological term used to describe a process of inward over elaboration in agricultural development, “involution” now refers to a social state where expansion of the labor force does not result in an increase in productivity and where workers face meaningless, vicious competitions due to a lack of more advanced economic models. No matter how hard people compete for the limited resources, it is difficult to grow in their careers or achieve the expected returns. Some young people who, despite repeated

efforts, are unable to envision a breakthrough for themselves are experiencing a profound sense of hopelessness and exhaustion. Marriage, establishing a family, and finding a respectable profession are no longer their goals. As a result of their disappointments, they choose a life of inactivity and a “lying flat” mentality. Therefore, a sensible evaluation of flat society requires a detailed investigation of this phenomenon’s core causes. In this study, we attempted to convey some representative images of lying-flat youth, analyzed the causes of their behavior, and provided suggestions for transforming lying-flat youth into active social members.

### Connotations of Lying Flat

“Lying flat” might be interpreted in two different ways. One focuses on its unfavorable associations, such as conformism and

passivism. The expression “lying flat” typically denotes a strong predisposition toward nihilism in the internet world. It conjures up traits like negativity, passivity, resignation, submission, and conformism. The lying-flat cohort is thought to be socially withdrawn and non-aspirational, discouraged by the competitive environment. Internet users who want to tap into “lying flat’s” positive connotation offer an alternative interpretation. On Baidu Tieba’s Chinese Population Forum, a post with the subject “Lying Flat Is Justice” garnered a lot of attention and was heavily forwarded in April 2021. The culture of lying flat is a fusion of Western naturalism and cynicism with the current “Sang” mentality as well as Chinese traditional Buddhism and Taoism’s ideology of “cultivating one’s mind and identifying one’s nature.” For the poster and those forwarders, lying flat is their response to life’s severe challenges and a form of self-mockery and mental relaxation in the face of excessive pressure (advocated by people who intentionally reduce their expectations to alleviate stress). According to some who view lying flat positively, it symbolizes people’s rejection of competing in the rat race and their desire for a simple, natural life (1). Many young people who are under a lot of stress can relate to both perspectives. Lying flat, however, is not the best way to deal with survival anxiety in a culture that is experiencing rapid development. It is important to properly explore the contemporary physical and spiritual difficulties that underlie our lying-flat civilization.

### Features of Various Lying-flat Cohorts

In order to survive the rigorous competition in education and jobs, some young people “lie flat,” downplaying their aspirations, ignoring parental expectations and their own social obligations, and in the worst cases, giving up completely. The world now sees this as a common problem. China’s lying-flat culture has been greatly impacted by the “low desire phenomenon” in Japan and the high turnover rate of new graduates in South Korea. Thus, we made an effort to provide pictures of the groups that were resting flat at a broad angle.

### Lying-flat Youngsters with Employment Difficulties

Due to the “demographic dividend” of the baby boomers who were born after World War II, Japan saw strong economic expansion in the middle of the 1960s. Nevertheless, Japan was going through a dip in employment when the children of the baby boomers entered the workforce. Nearly 20% of students at the turn of the century struggled to find employment after graduation, and nearly 30% of graduates were working irregular hours and at risk of losing their jobs at any time (2). Many of these young people experiencing job challenges have low educational backgrounds, the majority of whom dropped out of junior or senior secondary schools and came from low-income households in areas with low employment rates. Due to their disadvantageous schooling and family histories, finding a job was more challenging for them. Since many marriages still adhere to the traditional family structure in which “the husband is responsible for providing for the family and the wife is responsible for domestic affairs,” many married women choose to stop working and stay at home, leaving their husbands to shoulder the financial responsibility of supporting their families. As a

result, finding a stable career has become the top priority for Japanese young men while looking for work and a prerequisite for getting married. Therefore, men with low incomes or limited opportunities for career advancement are forced to cut back on their consumption and abandon their hopes of getting married, earning the label of “low desire” groups from academics, or they can indulge in the virtual world of online games to escape from reality (3).

China’s youth employment situation is unique. China has grossly misjudged the challenges that young people face in the job market while having the second-largest economy in the world. Employers are more likely to hire candidates who have relevant experience and skills because the majority of college and university curricula are obsolete and do not align with the fundamental abilities needed in the workplace. Young people who lose the job competition must go back to live with their parents, and some of them even withdraw socially out of embarrassment. They may become self-denying, aimless, and change their way of life as a result of the exclusion brought on by unemployment. Only the most fundamental demands for survival can be satisfied by lowering consumption. They can become increasingly dependent on the Internet and violent games, as well as experience severe sadness and anxiety over time. The number of this cohort can be inferred from Indoor Guys, a mutually supportive group with 20,000 members on the Chinese social media platform Douban, despite the fact that the government has not provided reliable information on unemployed, lying-flat young people (4).

### Working Youngsters Overwhelmed by Overtime

In contrast to their Japanese counterparts, young people in South Korea who are lying flat often have a solid educational background and a promising future, but their turnover rate is astounding. These highly educated youths reject the rat race in the workplace because they are dissatisfied with the current work environment, uncertain about the possibilities for professional advancement, and especially outraged about the company’s mandatory overtime needs. They choose to resign and devote time to self-improvement (such as enrolling in English classes) in order to qualify for better employment chances (5).

In China, there are also a lot of young people who are employed but who decide to quit their jobs in order to figure out what their true requirements are and where they want to go in life during the interim. Each year, fresh graduates with top credentials join the Internet giants in the hopes of finding professional success. They frequently anticipate that large corporations will not only pay them well but will also support their speedy development as professionals (6). However, they will soon discover that working for industry goliaths is a taxing struggle where the grueling “996” work culture is promoted as a standard practice (occasionally, employees must stay up all night to finish workloads), and gradually, overtime is accepted as a voluntary behavior without extra pay. When it comes to KPI assessments, the corporation is strict and penalizes individuals who do not satisfy the requirements for performance reviews. Furthermore, some organizations’ subpar handling of employee training and promotion prevents employees from seeing opportunities for

professional growth. Young employees who work in such a rat race are robbed of their personal lives and buckle under the pressure. As a result, a growing number of young people are leaving Internet behemoths and giving up a lifestyle reliant on computers 24 hours a day. Their rejection of the harsh exploitation of capital is expressed by lying flat. Most of these young people would use their savings after quitting buying an apartment in a small town or county, find a less demanding job, and spend their free time attending lectures, reading books, and picking up new skills to improve their personal lives. In this way, they are no longer just ever-spinning machine parts but rather real people who lead fulfilling lives (7).

### **Voluntary Lying-Flat Young People**

The third category of “lying-flat” young people choose to do so voluntarily because they want to broaden their life experience before settling into particular careers, in contrast to those forced to live a low-desire life due to employment frustrations or personal rejection of taxing working environments. Bynner & Parsons noted that in several European nations, wealthy families can give their children a steady sense of financial security, which has a negative impact on the latter’s intentions to look for work (8). Some young people in European nations opt to “wander” about for a brief period of time during which they do not go to school, work, or train but instead indulge themselves in spiritual inquiry while receiving support from their families and the nation’s welfare security system. Lying flat is just a common practice among the young generation in Western countries, where they expand their social experience, widen their perspectives, and engage in self-examination and reflection during the tour. This activity is sometimes referred to as the “global tour” or “study tour.” Such lying-flat typically lasts for a year and hardly ever results in long-term unemployment. Given the cultural specificity of this form of sleeping flat, the study’s discussion will concentrate on the first two categories of young people who are lying flat.

## **Causes of the Younger Generation’s Lying Flat**

### **Leniency in Home Education**

The accomplishments of China’s reform and opening-up program have greatly enhanced the country’s productivity and social prosperity. Several decades ago, the improving living standards of Chinese families, coupled with the one-child policy, produced a younger generation that has been the apple of their parents’ eyes and has grown up in their affluence. Since childhood, they have had a joyful and carefree existence, enjoying a culture of entertainment rich in films, television programs, and online games. Everything seemed within their grasp (9). As they have never experienced the acute scarcity of life supplies experienced by the previous generation, they cannot comprehend why one needs to labor so hard to survive. Due to their parents’ excessive care, some of them lack the opportunities to learn independence, participate in vocational training, and gain work experience. The lack of labor education hampers the growth of their sense of social responsibility as well as their capacity to respect and work with others. After leaving school, these over-protected youth are unprepared to take risks and have no idea

how to deal with social competitiveness, obstacles, and frustrations. They attribute their abandonment of attempts to social injustice, harsh circumstances, and other external factors. Instead of actively adapting to social development, adjusting to situations, and acquiring new abilities, they prefer to withdraw to their parents’ home to avoid confronting reality and live a lying-flat existence (10).

## **Defects in Current Education and Talent Evaluation Systems**

### ***Improper Higher Education Structure***

In the context of intensifying market economy reform and economic structure adjustment in China, society has introduced new standards for higher education. A proper higher education system should have a multi-level structure with a small number of research-focused universities, a larger number of application-focused institutions, and many vocational and technical colleges. Nonetheless, the educational focus of China’s colleges and universities is currently homogenous. There is no clear distinction between several sorts of colleges and universities. Higher education lacks a functional multi-level system. As a result, academic talents are abundant; however, applied and skilled abilities are scarce on the labor market. In addition, the majority of colleges and universities lack their own distinguishing qualities in curriculum design, let alone an association with the needs of the local economy, resulting in graduates with a high degree of homogeneity, as if they were manufactured goods. Simultaneously, the societal demand for talent has experienced major changes as labor-intensive and time-consuming traditional technologies have become obsolete and as certain obsolete industries have left the market. Despite this, the disciplines and curriculum of several colleges and universities have not changed. As a result, a significant proportion of graduates who have been exposed to obsolete information are struggling to obtain jobs relating to their majors. In an effort to become comprehensive and research-based universities, some colleges continue to expand enrollment without regard for need, resulting in an over-supply of graduates in presumed popular subjects (11). Consequently, the unscientific higher education system dampens young people’s desire to pursue employment and lying flat has become the vent for their dissatisfaction at being unable to obtain an ideal job after receiving a higher degree.

### ***Low Social Recognition of Secondary Vocational Education***

The stigma attached to vocational education in Chinese society has its roots in the country’s traditional culture, which values “Tao” (fundamental principles) but denigrates “Qi” (practical skills). People today have a collective unconscious bias against vocational education as a result of the historical marginalization of manual and physical labor.

Secondary vocational schools enroll students who drop out of the general education track which prepare students for college entrance exams after completing compulsory education. Students in the vocational track are classified as low achievers in the existing grading system based on general education, and vocational education is seen as a “low-end education”; prospects

for further study for graduates of vocational schools are limited (12). In order to build a respectable career in the future, many secondary vocational school students work extremely hard in their fields of study. However, the social undervaluation of vocational education poses a significant barrier to both career progression for those already working and employment for students enrolled in this course due to their “low-value” academic credentials. Some of them may decide to retire from the unfair rivalry in the job to a laid-back lifestyle after becoming discouraged by the discrimination against vocational education.

### ***Over-utilitarian Objectives of Education***

Since the reform and opening up of China’s market-oriented economy, utilitarian ideas have been overemphasized, and this has had a significant impact on education. Overly utilitarian pursuits have distanced education from its core objective, which is to foster students’ whole development. Students are urged in this situation to focus all of their efforts on studying for exams connected to school development and to limit their learning to knowledge and skills from textbooks. For educators, pursuing high enrollment and employment rates is the point of teaching. This schooling focuses on short-term results and stresses rote learning and cramming in order to achieve high efficiency. Students are kept busy with taking notes in class (to be memorized) and performing voluminous repetitive exercises after class while teachers dominate the classroom and convey knowledge and abilities linked to exams. Although this technique of teaching enables students to learn a lot in a short amount of time, it is adverse to the comprehensive development of students’ competencies (13). Teaching objectives at the higher education level are confined to preparing students for future careers with pertinent information and abilities while neglecting the development of student self-motivation and social adaptability. Such education hardly ever yields talents with high levels of situational adaptation and resistance to setbacks.

### **Social Problems Induced by Economic Circumstances**

#### ***Collective Anxiety among the Younger Generation***

As a result of four decades of reform and opening up, China has undergone significant transformation, becoming a highly commercialized society. However, the Chinese economy’s strong growth rate has been slowing down to a medium or low one as the reform process has become more intense. The decreased economic impetus exacerbated social class disputes while also making it harder for people to maintain stability in their jobs and personal lives and raising their levels of mental stress. When the economy is expanding quickly, workers can earn more money by working long hours or overtime, and the faster pace of life won’t cause them any severe stress. However, when the economy slows down, the formerly attractive earnings vanish. No matter how hard young people work and train, it is very difficult to advance in the profession. All they can do is put in a lot of effort to save their jobs (14). The enormous disconnect between young people’s aspirations and reality causes them to question the purpose of labor when hopes are dashed, and efforts are not

rewarded with anticipated rewards. They become more anxious and lose faith in the future as a result of stagnant personal development. So, in order to maintain self-acceptance and inner peace, some of them would prefer to “lie flat,” lowering their desires for consumer items and becoming unambitious about life.

### ***A Lack of Social Mobility***

Throughout the development of China’s market economy, a social hierarchy of upper, middle, and lower classes has emerged (10). In periods of economic distress, there is less social mobility due to fewer chances for entrepreneurship. Furthermore, the intergenerational transmission of wealth and social capital restricts social mobility even further. Children from rich families have greater employment chances. In addition, the unequal allocation of educational resources exacerbates the gap between social classes. Due to restricting factors like the urban-rural permanent resident registration system, young people from different regions and social classes have access to varying educational resources and possibilities. The lack of social mobility not only prevents lower-class youth from acquiring more social resources and increasing their social standing via their own efforts, but it also fosters their contempt for society, so compelling them to join the lying-flat group.

### ***The Expensive Costs of Modern Living***

Economic development has two sides: on the one hand, it enhances people’s salaries, but on the other, it increases their living expenses. The continuous introduction of new technologies has raised the living standard of humans while simultaneously increasing their living expenses. Once people are exposed to a higher quality of life, it is difficult for them to return to a lower one. Once a new product establishes its utility, it quickly becomes a requirement, resulting in additional costs. People cannot survive without the internet and electronic devices such as mobile phones and computers, for instance. Ye and Li performed 21 questionnaires in four cities and discovered that the cost of living in the Yangtze River Delta region increased by 29.8% between 2009 and 2005, with food prices increasing by more than 20% and medicine, cultural, and entertainment expenses increasing by more than 16%. (15). In their study, Zhang et al. found that prevalent high costs of living, such as high housing prices, medical expenses, and service fees, consume a disproportionate amount of people’s incomes, preventing them from achieving a higher standard of living and instead compelling them to work longer hours to secure basic living conditions (16). Using the property price as an example, it was discovered that the housing price in China’s first-tier cities can be up to 20 times the average annual wage in the country, although its counterparts in many other countries are only four to five times the typical annual salary (17). Numerous young adults get gradually resigned to the reality of their predicament and opt to “lie flat” in despondency as a result of living under such intense pressure.

### **The Devastating Impact of COVID-19 on the Economy**

Since 2020, the spread of the highly contagious COVID-19 virus and the resulting lockdowns have had devastating impacts

on China's entertainment, catering, transportation, retail, tourism, export, and real estate industries. The shutdown of industries and the drop in export demand induced by the prevention and management of the pandemic have proven fatal to many small and medium-sized businesses, affecting the employment of millions of people and causing widespread panic and dismal expectations for the future (18). The increase in unemployment caused by the COVID-19 pandemic-induced disruption of the capital chain and the decline in the asset quality of private businesses limits consumption, exerting additional downward pressure on the economy. Consequently, the economy and employment enter a vicious cycle.

Additionally, the battle for jobs is becoming fiercer in China due to the country's rising college graduation rate. According to figures from the Ministry of Education, China had 8.74 million college graduates in 2020, an increase of 400,000 from the previous year. The medium, small, and micro businesses that once hired a lot of recent graduates are now confronted with enormous difficulties. Numerous industries have experienced waves of salary reductions, layoffs, and closures, drastically lowering the number of openings for new graduates and lengthening the hiring process (19). Graduates who have struggled with severe anxiety and despair during the epidemic-ridden job seasons may become too sensitive to any uncertainty and withdraw to their parents' houses to lead a life of lying flat.

### **How to Address the "Lying Flat" Phenomenon**

The employment security mechanism must be improved, and higher education and vocational education must be reformed in order to decrease the lying-flat population. Through the systematic implementation of a number of policies and action plans, the younger generation will be assisted in overcoming the traumas of the past and rekindling their passion for building a better future.

### **Improving the Employment Security Mechanism**

To free the adherents of the lying-flat culture from "acquired helplessness," it is imperative to foster an environment of fair and reasonable competition, encourage social mobility, and continuously enhance the social security system. First and foremost, the government needs to modernize the industrial structure, expand work prospects for youth, and improve employment patterns. More online jobs have been developed, and employment is becoming more flexible in the internet era. For instance, "many workers for one position" or "one worker for numerous posts" can be used in place of the typical employment form "one person for one post." These newly emerging, more adaptable job patterns ought to be taken into account by the social security system. Additionally, for many young people, working overtime has become an intolerable burden. Some businesses willfully increase the hours that workers work, requiring them to forgo their own interests in favor of the organization's needs. The government must investigate this matter and establish the necessary legislation to control this phenomenon. Businesses should consider their workers' physical and emotional health in addition to their efforts to maximize profits, fostering a work environ-

ment that values and encourages talent. Establishing a multi-tiered training and promotion system within the company will help young people improve their careers, fulfill their need for self-actualization, and strengthen their sense of belonging to the company (20).

### **Aligning Higher Education with Labor Market Demand**

Since the College Enrollment Expansion Policy was implemented in 1999, the number of people who have completed a higher education has increased dramatically. The candidate's degree is less important to the business throughout the hiring process than his suitability for the position. When choosing its educational focus, each college or university must consider the needs of social and economic development while keeping in mind that the structural changes in the industry typically boost hiring standards and demand a diverse range of skills. Schools should create a variety of fields and majors with their own distinct features to provide students with individualized education and assist them in avoiding the vicious talent homogeneity competition, which increases their worry about finding employment (21); Additionally, labor education should be incorporated into college and university curricula to enhance students' practical abilities, bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical competence, and instill a feeling of responsibility in the next generation.

### **Modernizing Vocational Education**

Educational authorities should emphasize to the public the relevance of vocational and general education in order to dispel the public's incorrect and outmoded perception of vocational education as a "low-end education." Secondary vocational education, on the other hand, needs to reform its traditional training model and reshape the disciplinary standards and curriculum plans in response to the changing labor market demand for skilled and technical personnel in order to increase students' competitiveness in the labor market. To achieve this, it is critical to include new industrial knowledge, technologies, standards, and procedures into the curriculum, as well as to give practical training a larger role in the teaching plan in order to improve the practicality of course contents. Aside from post-based skills, all-around capabilities of students, such as communication, digital operation, information processing, and the usage of a foreign language, should be stressed in vocational education. This is to address the demand for technical and skilled professionals with broad skills in the new period of economic and industrial development as well as to facilitate students' lifelong development (22). Furthermore, it is recommended that relevant employment training be provided to soon-to-be graduates in order to improve their job-seeking abilities or to stimulate their idea of starting their own firm.

### **Conclusion**

The younger generation is more ambitious and aggressive than those in other age groups. Their ostensibly passive, lying-flat lifestyle is only a short-term self-preservation strategy to avoid pointless competitions, giving them a chance to reconsider conventional definitions of success. It also calls attention to the

problems with poverty and the widespread class inequalities in today's society. In order to give the younger generation the opportunity to pursue their dreams with positive attitudes and embrace visions of a better future, the country should improve ed-

ucation at school and at home, foster a friendly social environment for young people, and offer them more equitable competitive opportunities. ■

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