

# China's Downwardly Mobile Millennials Are Throwing in the Towel

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**Exhausted and alienated Chinese students and white-collar workers are “lying flat” to register discontent with the status quo. For their protest to produce change, they’ll need to transform individual passivity into collective activity.**

In April, an anonymous user on China's Baidu Tieba platform posted a picture of himself reclining in bed in a bare-walled room, curtains drawn against the sunlight.

He described himself as unemployed and living alone, taking occasional gig work and minimizing expenses by consuming and doing very little. This lifestyle is perfectly possible, he explained, if you simply constrain your desires and forget your ambitions. He does not envy busy people who waste their lives chasing unattainable dreams.

The poster [called his philosophy](#) *tang ping* (躺平), or “lying flat.” “Lying flat is my wise movement,” he wrote. “Only by lying flat can humans become the measure of all things.” In the simplest terms, it means not trying anymore.

The concept struck other users as profound. It resonated in particular with college-educated but downwardly mobile young people who have spent their whole lives endeavoring to get good grades and a good job, only to find themselves either boxed out of the white-collar labor market or miserably overworked in it.

What would it be like to admit defeat, to drop out, to stop striving and simply exist?

Lying flat has since become an internet phenomenon and a [media buzzword](#). Online communities of “lying flatists” have cropped up, [trading advice](#) about how to survive outside the traditional workforce. Memes have appeared across the web, mostly showing cute cats in prostrate poses.

The lying flatists' declaration that they will no longer follow the script, including buying a house and car and starting a family, has alarmed some older people who view the trend as fatalistic and antisocial. Adherents say it beats sustaining or feigning optimism in pursuit of elusive success.

In late May, a [poem published online](#) titled “Lie Flat, Young Man!” distilled the essence of the idea. “Come, let's lie down together, please don't be depressed,” wrote the poet, who goes by the name Xiaopan. “Everyone has an ideal that is hard to let go. Work hard without complaint and get no reward. When the ideal becomes a trap designed by those in power, lying down is a good medicine for struggle.”

Xiang Biao, a professor at the University of Oxford and the director of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Germany, says that so far lying flat hasn't actually translated into a meaningful shift in behavior. “There are of course individual cases,” he says, “but we have not seen any evidence to suggest that sizable numbers of young people are changing how they participate in

education and the job market.”

Still, lying flat still captures a pervasive mood of alienation and burnout among Chinese youth. And to understand what gives rise to it, Biao says it’s helpful to first consider another phenomenon that’s become a buzzword in China lately.

This concept is *nèijǔǎn* (内卷), or involution. It literally translates to something like “inward rolling,” but in popular usage it describes the condition of putting an increasing amount of energy into one’s life activities and still getting nowhere.

Involution is the condition that lying flat responds to. In other words, if lying flat means quitting the rat race, involution describes the unsustainable experience of the racers.

### **Exertion Without Breakthrough**

Anthropologists used the word “involution” academically for decades before it started to gain popular currency. For example, it’s been used to describe a type of design in Javanese art that curls in on itself perpetually. It’s also been used to describe the phenomenon of agricultural development intensifying for centuries [without ever breaking through](#) into industrialization.

Biao himself has used “involution” to describe the needless complexification of the system set up to facilitate Chinese labor out-migration, which involves the proliferation of agents and bureaucrats whose job is to navigate an intensifying labyrinth of red tape created by other agents and bureaucrats, with no rational function or observable payoff for the system as a whole.

Last year, “involution” went mainstream with a related but novel definition. Biao says it emerged with a group calling itself 985 Waste, which refers to a group of elite universities in China identified as part of the 985 Project (announced in May 1998, or 98/5).

“This is a group of young students who graduated from these elite universities, hoping that they would land a well-paid and secure job, but failed to do so,” says Biao. “So they mock themselves, calling themselves waste and rubbish.”

These castoffs of elite society, many of whom come from middle-income rather than wealthy families, began reflecting together on their situation. They felt their lives had been characterized by nonstop work to get ahead, squandered in service of a dream that seemingly would never materialize. To better describe their predicament, they began using the academic term “involution.”

From there, involution entered the popular discourse with a new meaning: the condition of profound existential depletion caused by pouring all of one’s energies into a doomed project of self-advancement and fulfillment of society’s expectations.

Involution has since been broadened to include not just failed job seekers but also white-collar workers who do have jobs but find them grueling and pointless, and students who haven’t yet entered the labor force but, the thinking goes, should prepare to be met with disappointment.

The popular usage of involution levies a critique of China’s ultracompetitive education and white-collar work cultures. Those who use the term, mostly millennial and Gen Z social media users, feel that the only reason anyone participates in the senseless modern struggle is that others do, and that this conformity is to everyone’s detriment.

An episode of the TV drama *A Love for Dilemma* (爱乐迷) [aired in April](#) that many on the platform Weibo felt perfectly captured the critique implied in the concept of involution.

In it, two characters compare the education system to an audience watching a show in a theater. If one person stands up to get an advantage over the others, then others must also stand up to see. And when inevitably people start standing on chairs to increase their advantage, everyone must stand on their chairs.

The show keeps playing regardless, and it's not necessary to strain so much in order to experience it. That is, circumstances remain the same despite the exertion. There is no extra reward for the extra effort. Everyone is simply straining to secure an advantage because everyone else is — a stressful, meaningless, endless competition.

Last September, when a photo went viral of a Tsinghua University student working on his laptop while riding his bicycle, the internet crowned him "Tsinghua's Involuting King."

The suggestion was that he was one of the many students in China who will devote their youths to single-minded preparation for a future that will never be his. His is an intense expenditure with no payoff, metaphorically similar to agricultural development with no industrial breakthrough or an intricate design pattern that collapses in on itself forever.

### **White-Collar Spiral**

The concept of involution has not caught on with the Chinese working class in general. "Urban migrant workers do not use these words," Biao says. "They just call their experience exploitation or suffering." Instead, involution is a term used exclusively by overextended students and alienated young white-collar workers with college degrees.

That doesn't mean their hardships are imagined. Chinese education and office work culture are becoming more competitive, while the prizes are increasingly reserved for only the top performers. For Chinese white-collar workers, broad prosperity is being replaced by cutthroat competition and ever-sharper divisions between winners and losers.

And even the winners frequently find that the fruits of victory are bitter. The best-case scenario for many university graduates entering the labor force, Biao says, is that they'll end up in a job where they'll be overworked and ruthlessly measured against their coworkers. They have little leverage to demand change, because there are millions of other potential employees just like them, rendering them expendable.

Some companies in China, especially e-commerce and tech companies that take their pick from the throngs of skilled college graduates released into the labor market every year, operate on a 996 work hour system — which stands for 9 AM to 9 PM, six days a week, amounting to a 72-hour workweek. At other companies, China's growing sales workforce is paid on commission, incentivizing similarly long hours.

After a lifetime of competing for grades, they now compete against each other for high marks at work. Increasingly, workers are automatically fired if they fall behind on certain metrics or underperform their coworkers. "In extreme cases," says Biao, "when a fellow workmate quits or is fired, other workmates can't name that person, because they use a numerical code and there is very little natural friendship."

Despite all this, it can feel like a privilege to work at these places because of a clever management strategy identified by another number: 345. According to this popular strategy, three workers are hired to do the work of five workers, and are given four workers' pay between them. It's meant to make workers feel they're being overcompensated compared to the average worker, when they're really being undercompensated in relation to how much work they do.

The more talented and capable white-collar workers prove themselves, the more likely they are to be asked by a company to work even *harder*. A promotion means more pay, but also vastly more responsibility, as companies heap work on the plates of the highest-performing individuals in order to take maximum advantage of their willingness and skill.

The result is a situation where white-collar workers are either rewarded for high performance with more work or punished for low performance with thankless dismissal and the total invalidation of a lifetime of striving.

The discourses around lying flat and involution suggest that many young people are running out of energy and motivation to climb this ladder to nowhere. Whether they're preparing to enter the workforce, already working, or unemployed despite a life of preparation, a growing number of college-educated Chinese youth are growing disenchanted and losing their will to compete with each other.

## Global Disillusionment

China's lying flatists aren't the only group of downwardly mobile youth throwing in the towel in the advanced capitalist world. In Japan, for example, there are the *hikikomori*, who [take social withdrawal](#) to extremes, often not leaving their houses for years at a time and frequently enveloped in a virtual reality.

But *hikikomori* doesn't quite capture the ethos of lying flat, which is more a public expression of exhaustion and disillusionment than a private symptom of agoraphobia and social inhibition. Biao says the Chinese term for the *hikikomori*'s total retreat into digital fantasy worlds would be *keng di tang ping* (躺平), or "lying flat at the bottom of a pit."

Perhaps more similar to the lying flatists are self-identified NEETs, an appropriated British government term which stands for "not in employment, education, or training." Like lying flatists, a global community of NEETs trade [tips online](#) for how to survive without participating in the normal economy.

But while NEETs sometimes turn their circumstances into a social statement, such as when they disparagingly call wagedworkers "wagies," being a NEET is more of a fate one accepts and adjusts to than a choice one makes. Unlike NEETdom, lying flat has a built-in connotation of protest. Lying flatists see themselves more as conscientious objectors than abject failures.

Their protest has unnerved some older adults who feel that lying flat is a repudiation of deeply held Chinese values, particularly that of hard work without complaint. But Biao says that the trend hasn't really rattled China's political and economic elite — and not only because it's relatively small.

Some reports suggest that China has censored social media content about lying flat because the establishment finds the concept threatening. Biao says that while there is suppression of *tang ping* content on social media, it's probably the result of algorithms that censor mass expressions of negative emotion. In reality, China's ruling class has little to fear from the lying flat trend.

For one thing, China is not starved for white-collar workers. If 10 percent of college-educated young people decided to drop out, for example, Biao says that would be at worst inconvenient rather than catastrophic. "If 10 percent of young people turned off their mobile phones and deleted all their apps, that would be serious," Biao says. But if they continue to click and scroll, consuming content and producing data from their darkened solidarity bedrooms, they're still generating value in the Chinese economy.

More conclusively, lying flat poses no major threat to entrenched power because of the form it takes. As a form of protest, it is individual and passive rather than collective and active.

If China's involuted youth want to break the perpetual spiral, they will need to do something more subversive than give up their dreams. They'll need to pursue new ones, radically redefined — together and alongside other workers, toward a mutually beneficial social-democratic agenda.

Rather than receding from public life, downwardly mobile college-educated millennials around the world can choose to make their mark on it. Refusing to comply by lying flat is a good start. The next step is standing upright again, finding each other, and joining with the broader working class to achieve a new kind of collective breakthrough.

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