

“After Working So Long, I Just Felt Numb, Like a Machine”: the Disillusionment of Chinese Youth and Crisis of Work

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In early 2021, an ex-factory worker Luo Huazhong posted on Chinese social media a photo of himself and the curtains drawn, lying solemnly in bed. Entitled “Lying Flat is Justice”, the post quickly went viral and the idea expanded, resonating with those struggling with the modern workforce.

Referencing photos of cats lying face up, users reposted with the captions “*let it rot*”, “*refuse to do more than the minimum*”, and “*stay at home and watch tv all day*”. In other drawings, young men in business casual stare with dejected looks at their ceiling, a depiction of workers burnt out and looking for rest.

Though his post was later [removed by censors](#), Luo went on to quit his job, pursuing a cross-country biking trip and the use of odd jobs to get by. “After working so long, I just felt numb, like a machine”, said [Luo in a recent interview](#). Such sentiments rejecting modern work conditions can thus be applied to both those in blue-collar jobs, such as Mr Luo, and the corporate world.

From 996 to Lying Flat

The sentiments captured by *lying flat* were echoed by both those in working-class jobs and jaded young corporate employees. Although 996 — working from 9 am to 9 pm for 6 days a week — is promoted most popularly by Alibaba’s founder, Jack Ma, it remains a consistent working system for top Chinese technology companies. In return for higher wages and a promise of economic success, employees put in long hours and sacrifice other aspects of their daily life.

But prioritising long workdays is not sustainable in the long run; unrealistic labour expectations not only cause health problems for current employees but discourage those not in the workforce to participate. Despite Chinese labour laws dictating a work week of no more than [44 hours](#), this policy is not well enforced by top companies in both manufacturing and technology.

However, for many young professionals in China, the dominant culture of overwork in the 2010s is beginning to crack. As Chinese youth transition from a ruthless education system to a corporate culture structured by 996, they may find themselves disillusioned.

Lying flat is thus both a symptom and a protest to the unsustainable labour policies: in factories, long hours and global criticism over the mistreatment of workers are contributing to a labour crisis.

Structural Discontentment

The ongoing social phenomenon points to a larger discontentment for the younger generation, also exhibited by the [Covid-19 protests in major cities and campuses of late November](#).

But in contrast to street protests, *lying flat* as a form of resistance is silent. It is far more obvious in the country's growing youth unemployment, social media trends, and [widening academic inequality](#). Further, it is far more difficult to fix — how might a country which relies on the intense productivity of its workers cope, when the workers themselves decide to take a break?

Lying Flat takes its place as a growing counterculture for those early in their career. A country which is known for its strong economic growth has begun to slow. With this comes a corporate ladder that is increasingly hard to climb. The state's nationalised education system which prioritises high marks and an inflexible career path has seen little leniency, as it measures academic understanding in a quantitative fashion.

With this results frustration at a culture with seemingly few rewards: in short, 996 is no longer sustainable nor a guarantee for a young professional's career goals.

Consequently, labour-intensive jobs are unwanted; by [2025 there will be a shortage of 30 million](#) manufacturing workers nationwide. Those who "lie flat" are deciding to forgo jobs which yield little returns and a worsening quality of life. In every way *lying flat* can be seen as a form of implicit protest: there is no better way to express one's discontent over unrealistic labour expectations than to simply work less.

Rooted in Schools

Such a culture of burnout begins in schools. Though the nation's schools provide a top-notch education on paper — with ever-improving scores in [mathematics, science, and reading](#) — these metrics do not acknowledge a burgeoning mental health problem and students' career prospects post-education. Chinese high school students face mental health issues at a [rate of 41.8%, with the most frequent problem being academic stress at 59%](#).

Such high standards for students have consequences both on their mental health and social development. By understanding the implications of a high-stress education environment, it is far easier to gauge why Chinese young adults are more jaded by the workforce than the preceding generations.

Universities in China have a further mental health crisis: one of the country's most prestigious universities, Tsinghua, has an acceptance rate of [0.5% for nationals](#). To get into a top university, a self-diagnosed prerequisite for a stable career, students must overexert themselves for the later years of high school. The high familial value on education leads to an educated population but is detrimental to teenage mental health.

As university students, over [a quarter of those surveyed](#) are depressed. Such a crisis of mental health is attributed to "[study pressure, employment pressure, and economic pressure](#)". From starting primary school to beginning university the nation's students describe only an increasing pressure to perform, in an education system which defines one's success exclusively off quantitative metrics.

As these students transition into the workforce, they face economic conditions direr than promised. Young adults growing up in the 2000s and early 2010s were surrounded by the conviction that the country is one of compounding growth: the work put in as a student is reimbursed by a stable quality of life as an adult. With the implications of Covid-19 and slowing economic growth, a statement once perceived as truth is now being denounced. The "rat race" which began in schools leads to disenchantment when students believe it extends to adulthood.

Those leaving university today experience an economy where their earning power has shrunk and

fluctuating home prices give few signs of stabilisation. With stringent Covid-19 policies which both inhibit mental health and place pressure on those employed, along with stagnating wages and an ageing demographic of workers, 996 is now being picked apart.

China's high youth unemployment rate is symptomatic of structural changes to the economy. At [20% in urban areas](#), the hike is attributed to mass layoffs and a mismatch of skills. In order to have a stable portion of the population employed, *lying flat* indicates the need for a society to prioritise individuals' lives exterior to their positions at work.

Lying Flat Beyond China

In comparison to [China's reliance on material consumption for growth](#), lying flat encourages both less production and unnecessary spending. It can then be considered that China's high expectations of economic contribution for their youth are harmful not only to young workers but also to the employment levels of the country. East Asian countries — China, South Korea, and Japan primarily — are known for the longest hours worked per day.

Whilst *lying flat* remains a phenomenon associated with Chinese young adults, it is by no means exceptional. Similar patterns are emerging in other Asian countries. Following Japan's economic crisis in the 90s, a generation of those early in their career found themselves making less than their parents. This phenomenon has birthed the term "shut-ins", or hikikomori: an extreme form of social isolation which includes the refusal to work, socialise or leave their homes primarily dominated by [middle-aged males](#).

Whilst *hikikomori* contrasts with *lying flat* in its focus on social withdrawal, both phenomena indicate disillusionment with current economic conditions. Both countries have similar issues regarding an ageing population, high-stress schools, and social backlash to slowing economic growth. In perceiving contribution to a fast-paced society as unrewarding, a small but not insignificant portion of young adults choose not to contribute at all.

Radical Change Demanded

Similar themes surround China's demographic crisis. The high population growth experienced by the nation in the late 20th century has declined drastically, with a predicted decrease of [100,000 people by 2050](#). The Chinese National Health Commission reported a record-low fertility rate, at 1.3 children per female, in 2020. The country faces stringent immigration policies which do not account for the difference between births and deaths.

The ageing population particularly affects employment in technology sectors, where there is a predicted decline in the country's educated class. The expectation of an ageing population is an additional discouragement for young workers — if they do not predict the prosperity of the generations before them, there is far less reason to fall into the labour footsteps expected.

By taking a minimalist approach to life, which is the antithesis of a 21st-century encouragement for material consumption, economic prosperity must come from other means. Without a change to employer expectations and a regimented education system, the nation may find its workers further disillusioned.

In light of growing youth discontent in China and surrounding East Asian countries, in which students and early adults take to the street in protest of insufficient living and Covid-19 related conditions, there is both a need for structural and cultural shifts.

Despite *lying flat* defined as an inactive form of protest, from the perspective of a nation which

prioritises economic productivity, inactivity may be the strongest form of resistance. *Lying flat* counteracts the hyper-productivity of 996 which defined the 2010s: in the absence of higher returns to overwork *lying flat* may very well be more than a social phenomenon.

The movement highlights the grievances of a generation disappointed by their career and social prospects, and forecasts an increasing strength to civilian's voices — both through their actions silently and subsequently on the street.

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P.S.

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