

“Lying Flat” and “Involution”: A Sociological Study of Job Burnout and Social Mentality of Contemporary China Youth

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Abstract: In the contemporary China society, where material conditions continue to improve, the contradictory picture of "the study room in the early morning of 985 colleges and universities" and "college graduates returning home to lie flat" reveals the general job burnout and extreme behavior coping of young people. Based on the theory of Existential Milestones [11], this study shows that the contemporary youth in China are facing the binary behavioral differentiation of "involution" and "lying flat", which reflects the general job burnout and the response to structural difficulties. Based on the existential milestone theory, this study constructs a three-dimensional framework of macro-structure, meso-situation and micro-individual [4], adopts semi-structured short interviews, and makes a cross-border comparison with Japan and South Korea [16]. It is found that "involution" and "lying flat" are the differentiated strategies adopted by young people when traditional life goals such as "education-employment-marriage-housing" are difficult to achieve: the former is the extreme competition within the system, and the latter is the active adjustment of passive retreat and rational resistance [14]. The particularity of China's youth lies in the coexistence and high individualization of these two modes, which reflect the complicated reality of the coexistence of opportunities and pressures and the collision between tradition and modernity in the period of social transformation. "Lying flat" is essentially a "limited resistance" under structural constraints, which is both an adaptive strategy and a silent protest against unequal rules. The purpose of this study is to deepen the understanding of the changes in youth mentality and provide a basis for building an inclusive youth policy.

Keywords: Lying Flat; Involution; Existential

Milestone; Youth Burnout; Qualitative Research; Social Mentality

1. Introduction

Since the 21st century, the rapid economic and social development in China is obvious to all. However, with the increase of material abundance and opportunities, there is a pervasive and profound sense of burnout and powerlessness among young people [17]. "Involution" and "lying flat" accurately capture their contradictory behavior mentality: on the one hand, it is the self-exhausted competition symbolized by "985 study room lights all night", on the other hand, some young people choose to quit the mainstream track and "reduce their desire" to find their own place. This constitutes a key sociological puzzle: why do some young people show a strong intention to retreat and lose their meaning in an era of most development and opportunities?

The existing research mostly explains from a single path of structural oppression or individual value choice [1], lacking a systematic analysis linking macro-system, meso-interaction and micro-subjectivity; Methodologically, it is difficult to reveal the complex psychological process and meaning construction of young people's decision-making in specific situations by relying on theoretical speculation or large sample quantitative investigation. Although some studies have compared the plight of youth in China, Japan and South Korea [16], the uniqueness of China phenomenon in the specific transition background is not fully analyzed.

In order to make up the gap, this paper introduces Baert's existential milestone theory (focusing on the contradictory pressure when individuals achieve key life goals) [11] as the core analysis tool to understand the blocked experience of young people in the "education-career-family" chain. On this basis, a three-dimensional analysis framework integrating macro-structure, meso-situation and micro-individual is constructed to systematically

reveal the multiple dynamic mechanisms of youth mentality and behavior [4].

This study mainly adopts qualitative research methods [3], and through semi-structured short interviews with 32 young people, obtains their first-hand and narrative experience data in order to "deeply describe" their psychological changes and decision-making logic. At the same time, with the help of transnational comparative research, the China phenomenon is placed in the perspective of the youth dilemma in East Asia and even the whole world, and its commonness and characteristics are analyzed. The core issues of this paper are as follows: firstly, as concrete social actions, what are the social psychological mechanisms of involution and lying flat? Secondly, from the perspective of existential milestone theory, what are the essential differences between the coping strategies of China youth and those of Japan and South Korea? Third, how to understand the multiple meanings and social effects of the phenomenon of youth lying flat from the perspective of social structure transformation?

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Multiple Interpretation Perspective and Its Limitations

The research on the phenomenon of youth burnout and "lying flat" at home and abroad has formed several paths. There are mainly three representative views in domestic academic circles:

The first is structural determinism, which emphasizes that macro-structural factors such as high housing prices, involution in education, and class solidification [8][10] are the fundamental reasons for compressing the development space of young people and leading to their passive escape. The second is the theory of individual choice, which pays attention to the initiative of young people and regards "lying flat" as a reflection on traditional "success", an active control of the pace of life, and even the rise of a new philosophy of life [6][9]. The third is subculture theory, which interprets "lying flat" as the cultural practice of young people resisting mainstream social norms and constructing group identity through symbolic behavior [3].

Although there is no direct corresponding concept in foreign research, it provides important theoretical reference and comparative

baseline. The theory of "low-desire society" put forward by Japanese scholar Kenichi Ohmae [5] depicts the social picture of Japanese youth losing their struggle motivation under the long-term economic stagnation [15]. The study of South Korea's "Sampo Generation" reveals that under the pressure of extreme competition, young people systematically give up their life goals such as love, marriage and childbirth [12]. In addition, western studies on social pressure process [18], neoliberalism and youth instability [17] also provide tools for analysis [19].

However, according to my observation, there are obvious shortcomings in the existing research [7]: first, the structural analysis is out of touch with the subject experience, and the macro discussion often lacks a delicate grasp of the specific pressure perception and coping strategies in the daily life world of young people; Secondly, the disciplinary vision is divided, and sociology, psychology and cultural studies are fragmented, failing to form an integrated interpretation framework; Finally, static description is more than dynamic process analysis, and transnational comparison mostly stays in phenomenon analogy, lacking the deep social mechanism behind the differences.

2.2 Core Theory: the Dilemma of Existential Milestone

In order to transcend the above limitations, this paper introduces the "existential milestone" theory of Baert (2019) [11] as the core analysis. The theory points out that in the modern individualized society, the life course is no longer preset by tradition, but actively constructed by reaching key "existential milestones" such as obtaining a degree, establishing a career, forming a family and purchasing real estate, which constitutes the core foundation of individual self-identity and social recognition. However, there is often tension between milestones (such as the balance between career and family), and in modern risk society, its realization is increasingly uncertain and difficult [18].

Young people in China are trapped in this "existential milestone dilemma": the traditional expectation of "getting married and starting a career" is still strong [7], but the economic and social costs of achieving these milestones have soared to an prohibitive level. The expansion of education has led to the depreciation of academic qualifications [2], fierce competition

in the professional market, and high housing prices have become an insurmountable gap, which has broken or overloaded the "milestone chain" of young people—even if they strive to achieve educational milestones, they may not be able to exchange their ideal jobs [2]; Even if you get a job, the return is difficult to support the housing and family milestones [19]. This systematic blockage is the fundamental cause of universal anxiety and burnout [6].

2.3 Three-dimensional Integration Analysis Framework

The realization dilemma of existential milestones needs to be fully understood in a multi-level interactive framework. Based on this, this paper constructs a three-dimensional analysis model:

Macro-structural dimension: focusing on the fundamental institutional and market forces that shape individual opportunities and constraints, including educational stratification and involution, labor market segmentation and employment polarization, housing market financialization and imperfect social security system, the essence of which points to social inequality and unbalanced distribution of educational resources [10].

Meso-situational dimension: focusing on the field of interpersonal interaction, the core is the pressure and support of family intergenerational transmission and the social comparison of peer groups [13]. Family is not only emotional support, but also may amplify anxiety; Peer competition represents macro pressure as a sense of urgency in daily life.

Micro-individual dimension: Examining individual's psychological characteristics, cognitive framework, family conditions and values, covering psychological resilience, risk tolerance and other characteristics, as well as individual's revaluation and redefinition of values such as "success" and "happiness" [9]. "Lying flat" is essentially an individual's active deconstruction and reconstruction of the traditional milestone value.

The three factors do not determine the relationship nonlinearly, but are continuously constructed interactively: the macro-structure is perceived and interpreted by individuals through the meso-situation; Individual's collective choice and mentality change may also reshape the situation in reverse and even promote structural policy adjustment.

3. Research Methods and Design

In order to deeply explore the real experience and action logic of young people in the existential milestone dilemma, this study abandoned the path of large-scale quantitative investigation and adopted the semi-structured short interview method in qualitative research [3]. This method is good at capturing the complex and subtle process of meaning construction, which is highly consistent with the goal of this study [1].

3.1 Interviewees and Sampling

In this study, 32 China youths aged 18-25 were recruited and interviewed from September 2025 to November 2025 by the strategy of combining purposeful sampling with snowball sampling [1]. Fully consider the principle of maximum difference when sampling, so that the sample can cover multiple experiences. The final sample presents diversity in the following dimensions:

Distribution: First-tier cities (10 people), new first-and second-tier cities (12 people), third-and fourth-tier cities and counties (8 people) and rural areas (2 people).

Education background: covering senior high school (4 students), junior college (6 students), undergraduate course (14 students), master's degree or above (8 students).

Occupation status: including enterprise employees (12), institutional workers (6), freelancers (5), unemployed/intermittent employment (4) and students (5).

Self-classification: according to their main mentality and behavior tendency, the respondents were roughly classified as "involution" in 14 people, "lying flat" in 12 people and "wavering/contradictory" in 6 people.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The interview was conducted in a semi-structured way, with an average duration of about 15 minutes. The interview outline revolves around several core issues: 1) key nodes and feelings in the process of personal growth and education; 2) Current situation, satisfaction and stressors of career development; 3) Views and plans on major life issues such as buying a house, marriage and childbearing; 4) How to understand and locate its "involution" or "lying flat" state; 5) How to deal with stress in daily life;

6) Prospects and emotions for personal future and social future.

All the interview contents were recorded with consent, transcribed into text word by word, and made a rough statistics.

3.3 Cross-border Comparison and Literature Research

On the basis of qualitative analysis, this study systematically compares the phenomenon of "lying flat or involution" of China youth with the Japanese "low-desire society" [5] and the Korean "Sampo Generation" [12]. The comparison focuses on the different stages of social and economic development, the composition of core stressors and the cultural and social forms of youth coping strategies in the three countries [16]. This comparison aims to highlight the particularity of China phenomenon and the characteristics existing in the transition period [4].

4. Study Findings: Strategic Differentiation under the Milestone Dilemma

Semi-structured short interviews revealed how young people, due to the differences in resources, cognition and personal life goals, went to two completely different paths: "involution" and "lying flat".

4.1 "Involutor"

This paper holds that the interviewees who are "involved" usually do not deny the value of traditional milestones, but rather internalize their importance more deeply. Their "involution" is a kind of forced investment under highly rational calculation, and its core logic is that they still have to invest more resources to maintain their relative position or avoid falling when they know that the rules of the game are unfair and the income is decreasing.

Case A (Mr. Li, 24, an employee of an Internet company in Hangzhou): "It feels like I'm climbing an endless steep slope. Although I know '996' is unhealthy, Hangzhou's consumption is high, and it is still asking for money from home after graduation. The rent, water and electricity are fixed every month, and the colleagues around you are fighting for it. If you leave work on time, the boss will think that you are not motivated. This is not a question of whether you want to 'involute', but the system puts you there and can't get down. "

Mr. Li's narrative reveals the prisoner's dilemma

of involution: individual rational choice (redoubling efforts) leads to collective irrational results (such as the decline of overall welfare), but no one dares to quit first. Their pressure comes not only from the work itself, but also from the high expectations of their families and the fierce comparison with their peers. Many "involutors" come from ordinary families and bear the hope of the whole family class transition. This "intergenerational expectation overload" makes them unable to bear failure, and "involution" has thus become a tragic family mission.

4.2 "Lying Flat"

Different from the "involution", the typical feature of the "lying flat group" is the active reflection and systematic reevaluation of the traditional milestone value. Their "lying down" is not laziness or giving up, but a strategic retreat after cost-benefit analysis, aiming at putting limited energy into areas that they think are more valuable or controllable.

Case B (Ms. Zhang, 25 years old, former e-commerce operator in Hangzhou, now returning to her hometown to engage in self-media): "I commute for three hours every day in Hangzhou, and I can't finish the reports and 'resumption'. Most of my salary has paid the rent, so I can't afford a house and I can't see any room for promotion. When my father was ill last year, I came back to take care of him, and suddenly I felt that this pursuit was illusory. Now I'm doing travel recommendation in my hometown, and my income is only half of that before, but I have free time and can accompany my family, so I feel much more at ease. Others say that I am 'lying flat', and I think I am 'living and understanding'."

Ms. Zhang's trajectory represents the transition from "involution" to "lying flat", and its trigger point is often a life event, which urges individuals to reorder their life values. Lying flat is usually accompanied by the geographical shift of life focus (from big cities to small towns or villages) and the flexibility of professional identity (from full-time employment to freelancing). More importantly, it involves a profound reconstruction of the meaning system: from pursuing external social evaluation indicators (income, position and real estate) to paying attention to internal mental health, interpersonal relationship and life autonomy.

4.3 Individualized Internalization of Structural Pressure

The interview clearly shows how the pressure under the macro structure is perceived and dealt with by individuals. For young people who are relatively rich in resources and in the core competitive field, structural pressure is more transformed into the involution power of "must work harder". For young people with limited resources or on the edge of competition, the same structural pressure is more likely to be regarded as realistic evidence that "efforts are useless", thus leading to "lying flat". The individual's psychological resilience, family support network and risk tolerance have played a key regulatory role in this transformation process.

5. The Particularity of China from the Perspective of Transnational Comparison

By comparing with the social phenomena in Japan and South Korea [16], the uniqueness of China's youth "lying flat or involution" is highlighted.

5.1 Comparison with Japan's "Low Desire Society": Dynamic Anxiety and Static Abandonment

Japan's "low-desire society" occurred under the background of long-term economic stagnation and super-aging population structure [5][15]. Young people's low desire is a diffuse static adaptation after the whole society enters a stable (or stagnant) period. The social upward channel is almost closed, and the youth lack the expectation of change, thus showing a calm and extensive state of low motivation.

On the other hand, in China, the economy is still growing at a medium and high speed [4], the social structure is still changing dramatically, and opportunities are emerging in theory. China youth's "lying flat" is therefore full of dynamic tension and anxiety [17]. It takes place in the context of "opportunity is hard to seize" and "hope is accompanied by great risks", and it is an active and sometimes even intense emotional choice, rather than a passive acceptance. China's "lying flat" and "involution" coexist fiercely, which reflects this mentality of "hope and anxiety coexist" in the transition period.

5.2 Comparison with South Korea's "Sampo Generation": Individualized Choice and Collective Mourning

South Korea's "Sampo Generation" was born in a highly industrialized, chaebol monopoly and extremely competitive society [12]. The abandonment of young people is systematic and progressive (from giving up buying houses to giving up marriage and childbearing), which has a strong collective tragedy and intergenerational struggle, and is a concentrated expression of the sharpening of social contradictions.

In contrast, China youth's "lying flat" shows higher individualization and heterogeneity [9]. Because of China's vast territory, uneven development and complex social strata [13], the structural constraints faced by young people are very different. Therefore, the reasons, ways and degrees of "lying flat" vary widely, and it is more like a scattered collection based on personal life course calculation than a uniform slogan.

6. Discussion: Lying Flat as a "Limited Resistance" and Its Social Implications

Based on the above findings, this paper holds that it is one-sided to simply characterize "lying flat" as "passive escape" or "active resistance". In essence, it is a kind of "limited resistance" which is generated in a structural dilemma and has dual attributes [14].

From the individual level, "lying flat" is a pragmatic and rational psychological adjustment mechanism [9]. From the perspective of social psychology [18], when the goal is considered unattainable, lowering or giving up the goal is an important way to maintain self-esteem and mental health [19]. Facing the abnormally high housing prices and the "996" culture [8], choosing "lying flat" is the protection of young people's physical and mental health and the rejection of "overwork ethics" [17]. It helps individuals regain a sense of control over their lives in a high-pressure environment and has its positive adaptive function [6].

From a social perspective, "lying flat" can be interpreted as a social protest in the form of "Exit" [14]. When young people feel that it is difficult to change unfair rules through formal "Voice" channels, it is the most direct warning to game makers to choose to "quit" the competitive game itself collectively. This gesture of non-cooperation and non-participation, though silent, is powerful [3], which shakes the mainstream narrative of "success through struggle" and forces the social power structure to reflect on its legitimacy [8]. In this sense, "lying

flat" is a low-cost but strong political expression [4].

It should be emphasized that "involution" and "lying flat" are not two isolated groups [11], but two ends of the same structural dilemma [10]. Many young people are in between, and their strategies are dynamically adjusted with the life cycle, economic situation and personal life. When the economy goes up and personal opportunities appear, the "lying flat" may rejoin the competition; After continuous frustration and physical and mental overdraft, the "involutor" may also slide to "lying flat". This mobility shows that the coping strategies of young people are flexible and situational, and they can't be rigidly understood as labels [7].

7. Conclusion and Prospect

This study systematically analyzes the causes, mechanisms and essence of the phenomenon of "involution" and "lying flat" of contemporary China youth through the theoretical framework of existential milestone [11] and the qualitative method of semi-structured short interviews [3]. The main conclusions are as follows:

"Involution" and "lying flat" are the core strategies for young people to cope with the dilemma of "education-employment-family" [8]. The root cause is the serious break between the institutional support of the traditional life path (such as welfare security and stable employment) and the realization cost (such as house price and education investment) in the rapid transition period [4][10]. Youth strategy choice is the result of macro-structural pressure, meso-situational interaction and complex interaction of micro-subject cognition [13]. Differences in resources, situations and values make individuals respond differently to the same structural dilemma—either "involution" in the system or "lying flat" on their own initiative [7]. Compared with Japan and South Korea [16], China's youth "lying flat" has distinct characteristics in the transition period: under the background of coexistence of economic growth and social contradictions, it presents the characteristics of coexistence of opportunistic anxiety and retreat, individualization and fragmentation in form [9], which is the core of its uniqueness. "Lying flat" has a double meaning: it is not only the adaptive survival wisdom under high pressure [6], but also a gentle and informal resistance to unfair rules [14], revealing the deep contradiction between

efficiency, fairness and meaning under the development model [1].

This study has two main limitations: first, the scale and representativeness of interview samples are limited, and the research findings focus on the revelation of mechanisms and logic rather than overall inference to the whole youth group; second, this study adopts semi-structured short interviews with an average duration of only 15 minutes [3], which leads to the inability to conduct in-depth and multi-round dialogue with the interviewees, and may miss some deep-seated psychological experience and detailed behavior logic information of the young people in the research [1]. In the future, two aspects of research can be promoted: first, on the basis of expanding the sample size, conduct longitudinal tracking research to capture the diachronic evolution of youth mentality and strategy [7]; the second is to broaden the comparative horizon and compare the case of China with the plight of young people under different welfare systems in Europe and America [16], and at the same time adopt a combination of long-term in-depth interviews and participant observation to make up for the deficiencies of short interviews.

In the final analysis, "lying flat" and "involution" are heavy collective moods in the process of China's modernization [4]. It warns us that the ultimate goal of development is human well-being and all-round development. Only by building a more just and inclusive social structure that respects individual dignity and multiple values [10], can young people get rid of the dilemma of "rolling and not moving, lying and lying uneven" and calmly pursue milestones belonging to their own lives [11].

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