

Absolute Spirit and Modernity Anxiety: The Generative Logic of 'Lie Flat' Among Chinese University Students

Liu Tuoyu

School of Marxism, Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts, Tianjin, China

Abstract: In recent years, the "lying flat" phenomenon has gradually emerged among Chinese university students, characterized by academic burnout, low-desire consumption, and lowered career expectations. This phenomenon represents both passive resistance to a hyper-competitive society and a psychological coping strategy for youth facing structural pressures. Based on social stress theory, generational difference theory, and psychological defense mechanism theory, this study explores the generative logic, influencing factors, and social impact of the lying flat phenomenon among Chinese university students. Research findings indicate that the causes of lying flat are multidimensional, including macroeconomic downturns, employment challenges, and high housing prices at the macro level; academic involution and conflicts with family expectations at the meso level; and reduced self-efficacy and value reconstruction at the micro level. While the lying flat phenomenon may alleviate individual anxiety in the short term, it could weaken societal innovation vitality and exacerbate intergenerational inequality in the long run. Accordingly, this study proposes multi-faceted solutions, including educational reform, labor market optimization, social security enhancement, and cultural guidance, to build a more inclusive environment for youth development. This research not only deepens the understanding of contemporary university students' psychological states and behavioral choices but also provides a theoretical foundation for relevant policy-making.

Keywords: Lying Flat Phenomenon; University Students; Involution; Social Stress; Generational Differences; Psychological Defense

1. Introduction

The "lying flat" phenomenon, as a widely discussed youth subculture in contemporary China, reflects a behavioral pattern where some university students choose passive strategies to cope with stress amid economic slowdown and intensifying social competition. Distinct from traditional "Buddha-like" attitudes or Western "lie flat" movements, this phenomenon represents a unique socio-psychological response with Chinese characteristics^[1]. Existing studies have predominantly analyzed lying flat from either sociological or psychological perspectives, lacking a systematic examination of university students as a specific demographic. This study aims to construct a multidimensional analytical framework by integrating macro-social structures, meso-environmental factors, and micro-individual psychology to reveal the underlying generative logic of lying flat among university students. By deciphering the complex causes and impacts of this phenomenon, the research not only enhances the understanding of contemporary youth survival strategies but also provides practical insights for optimizing educational policies, employment environments, and social support systems.

2. Overview of the Phenomenon

The "lying flat" phenomenon has emerged in recent years as a distinctive socio-cultural trend among Chinese youth, characterized primarily by passive resistance to and voluntary withdrawal from mainstream competitive social norms. Originating on internet social platforms, this movement gained rapid traction through viral phrases like "the art of lying flat" and "lying flat is justice," gradually evolving into a comprehensive discourse system with shared value recognition. Among Chinese university students, the lying flat phenomenon manifests in unique ways:

academically, it appears as abandoning GPA competition and settling for minimal requirements; career-wise, it translates to deliberately lowering employment expectations and rejecting high-pressure work environments; in terms of consumption, it reflects the adoption of minimalist lifestyles.

At its core, this phenomenon represents a collective response by younger generations to current structural societal dilemmas. Economically, as China's growth rate slows, the diminishing returns of traditional development models have created stark contrasts between exorbitant housing prices, high living costs, and relatively limited career prospects^[2]. Socially, the intensification of educational involution and significant degree devaluation have severely challenged conventional pathways for upward mobility through personal effort. Culturally, escalating intergenerational value conflicts have widened the gap between older generations' narratives of hard work and younger generations' lived realities. These structural pressures collectively contribute to the rise and spread of lying flat culture.

Importantly, the lying flat phenomenon should not be simplistically dismissed as passive escapism, but rather understood as a coping strategy with complex socio-psychological foundations. From an individual psychological perspective, it incorporates elements of self-protective defense mechanisms—mitigating psychological drop through lowered expectations—while also embodying critical reflection on and reconstruction of mainstream success standards. Generationally, as digital natives, Gen Z tends to express dissatisfaction with social realities through such non-violent non-cooperation tactics. What appears to be passive behavior actually constitutes a unique feedback mechanism from youth regarding current social development models.

The proliferation of lying flat also mirrors deep-seated contradictions during China's ongoing social transformation. On one hand, tensions exist between traditional linear development narratives and increasingly rigid social structures; on the other, enhanced individualism clashes with collectivist cultural traditions. The sustained ferment of this phenomenon not only impacts the mental health and development prospects of younger generations but also poses significant

challenges to sustainable social development and innovation vitality. Understanding the nature and causes of lying flat holds crucial significance for building more inclusive models of social development.

3. Analysis of the Formation Mechanism of the "Lying Flat" Phenomenon

The emergence of the "lying flat" phenomenon is by no means accidental, but rather the result of the combined effect of multiple social structural factors and individual psychological mechanisms. From a macro perspective, as China's economy transitions from rapid growth to high-quality development, traditional channels for social mobility have gradually narrowed while the risk of class solidification has intensified^[3]. The economic restructuring process, shifting from labor-intensive to technology-intensive industries, has created a mismatch between the education system and market demands, resulting in some young people facing the dilemma of "high education but low employment prospects." Meanwhile, the continuous rise in living costs - including housing prices, education expenses, and healthcare expenditures - stands in stark contrast to the slow growth of wages, gradually eroding young people's confidence in achieving conventional "success" through personal effort. These structural pressures force some young individuals to reevaluate the cost-benefit ratio of relentless striving, ultimately choosing to withdraw from the intense competition system and adopt a low-desire, low-consumption lifestyle.

The evolution of social culture serves as another significant driving force behind the "lying flat" phenomenon. Against the backdrop of intergenerational value conflicts, the older generation's belief in the linear narrative that "hard work necessarily leads to success" has gradually lost its persuasiveness among the younger generation. The widespread adoption of the internet has flattened information dissemination, allowing young people to more directly observe the uneven distribution of social resources and the entrenched advantages of certain privileged groups. This cognitive disparity breeds a sense of relative deprivation - although individuals may not be in absolute poverty, they experience significantly heightened frustration and perceived injustice when comparing themselves to their reference

groups. Simultaneously, the proliferation of consumerist culture has led to increasingly homogenized social evaluation standards, where templates of success like "owning a home and car" or "earning an annual salary of one million" are endlessly amplified. Young people who cannot meet these standards may choose to "lie flat" as a way to alleviate the anxiety caused by social expectations, even reconstructing their self-worth through self-deprecating humor.

From the perspective of individual psychological mechanisms, the choice to "lie flat" involves complex cognitive and emotional regulation processes. Self-determination theory in psychology suggests that when individuals perceive excessive external control and find their need for autonomy chronically unmet, they may experience weakened motivation or behavioral withdrawal. In highly competitive social environments, some young people discover that even extraordinary effort fails to yield expected returns, and this learned helplessness prompts them to adjust their goals and lower expectations to reduce psychological dissonance. Additionally, social media algorithms tend to amplify extreme cases, with self-mocking labels like top university failures or small-town exam machines gaining popularity, further reinforcing negative self-attributions among certain groups. However, it's important to note that "lying flat" is not entirely passive surrender. Many young people adopt this approach for self-protection while simultaneously exploring new life possibilities, such as transitioning to freelance work or becoming digital nomads, thereby establishing new value coordinates outside the mainstream evaluation system.

Technological transformation and the emergence of new labor paradigms have also provided practical conditions for the "lying flat" phenomenon. The rise of the internet economy has given birth to flexible employment models like gig work and remote employment, enabling some young people to maintain basic living standards with minimal material consumption without being completely dependent on traditional workplace structures. Meanwhile, in the context of globalization, the permeation of multiculturalism has made foreign lifestyles like "slow living" and the FIRE (Financial

Independence, Retire Early) movement resonate with Chinese youth, further enriching the connotations of "lying flat." From this viewpoint, "lying flat" represents not only a passive response to existing social structures but may also contain seeds of new social transformation. Its subsequent development will profoundly influence the future form of China's labor market and the evolution of social values.

4. Impact Assessment of the "Lying Flat" Phenomenon

The "lying flat" phenomenon has far-reaching implications across multiple dimensions of society, economics, and culture, reshaping both individual behaviors and collective norms. On an economic level, the widespread adoption of low-consumption lifestyles among young people could significantly alter market dynamics, particularly in industries traditionally reliant on youth spending, such as real estate, luxury goods, and premium services. If a substantial segment of the workforce opts out of high-pressure career tracks, labor market structures may undergo fundamental shifts, with potential declines in productivity in conventional sectors but potential growth in freelance, gig economy, and digital nomad work models. At the same time, the trend could challenge long-standing corporate expectations of excessive overtime and "hustle culture," forcing businesses to reconsider work-life balance policies to retain talent. However, if taken to an extreme, a large-scale withdrawal from competitive employment could strain pension systems and social welfare structures, as fewer young contributors sustain an aging population.

Socially, the "lying flat" movement reflects and exacerbates existing intergenerational tensions, with older generations often viewing it as a rejection of traditional values of diligence and perseverance. The psychological toll on individuals who feel forced into this lifestyle—whether due to economic disillusionment or mental health struggles—could lead to broader societal consequences, including increased social fragmentation and reduced civic engagement. However, it also represents an alternative form of resistance against rigid success metrics, fostering new subcultures that redefine personal fulfillment outside material accumulation. Some young

people may find greater autonomy in renegotiating their relationship with work, embracing minimalist living or creative entrepreneurship rather than conventional career trajectories. Yet, without structural reforms to address underlying issues like wealth inequality and housing affordability, "lying flat" risks becoming not a choice but a necessity for those priced out of upward mobility.

Culturally, the phenomenon signals a paradigm shift in how success is perceived, potentially weakening the dominance of hyper-competitive narratives while amplifying discourses around well-being, leisure, and self-actualization. The internet has accelerated this transformation by providing platforms for shared experiences of disillusionment, turning "lying flat" into a collective identity rather than an individual coping mechanism. The long-term consequences could include a rebalancing of societal values, where happiness and personal freedom gain prominence over GDP growth and corporate ladder-climbing. However, there is also a risk that this cultural shift could be co-opted and commercialized, diluting its subversive potential—already, some brands capitalize on the aesthetic of "low desire" living while still promoting consumerism in new forms. Ultimately, whether "lying flat" leads to meaningful systemic change or merely becomes another transient trend depends on whether it sparks broader movements demanding policy reforms or remains confined to individual lifestyle adjustments.

5. Coping Strategies for the "Lie Flat" Phenomenon

The proliferation of the "lie flat" movement calls for a multi-dimensional, multi-tiered response that addresses both its underlying structural causes and provides viable alternatives for individuals. At the socioeconomic level, the immediate priority is alleviating the survival pressures on younger generations through systemic reforms in high-cost areas such as housing, education, and healthcare. For instance, expanding the supply of subsidized housing, promoting equitable access to education, and optimizing income distribution mechanisms can reduce the financial burden on young people, preventing them from passively opting out of competition

due to a perceived "hopeless struggle." Concurrently, industrial upgrading and diversification of career structures should be accelerated to create more high-quality job opportunities, particularly in emerging fields like the knowledge economy and creative industries, offering alternatives to rigid definitions of success. Corporations must also reevaluate management practices—reducing meaningless overtime culture, adopting flexible work arrangements, and shifting toward outcome-based performance assessments—to institutionalize a balance between "hard work" and "quality of life." Policymakers should avoid dismissively stigmatizing the "lie flat" attitude; instead, they must recognize it as an early warning signal of societal issues, indicating urgent reforms when young people resort to passive resistance to voice their grievances.

On the cultural and psychological front, fostering a more inclusive value system is essential to dismantle the monolithic narrative equating success with wealth and status. Public media can highlight diverse life paths—such as rural entrepreneurship, freelance careers, or nonprofit work—to broaden young people's imagination of a "meaningful life." The education system, starting from elementary levels, should integrate vocational guidance and mental health education, equipping students with resilience while mitigating the anxiety of hyper-competition (e.g., "test-score obsession"). For those already disengaged, community organizations can build support networks through skill-building workshops, counseling services, and interest-based social groups to restore their sense of belonging and prevent isolated withdrawal from escalating into collective alienation. Companies, too, can innovate HR strategies—introducing sabbatical leave policies or internal startup incubators—to offer burnout employees transitional pathways.

From a long-term perspective, the "lie flat" phenomenon reflects a response to the dilemmas of modernity, necessitating philosophical recalibration. Drawing from Nordic concepts like *Lagom*, societies might promote dynamic equilibrium between ambition and leisure. Yet, romanticizing total disengagement is equally risky, as it may lead to loneliness and social dysfunction. The ideal solution respects individual agency while

sustaining societal vitality, requiring synergy among governments, markets, families, and individuals. Policies must provide safety nets, markets should generate new opportunities, and cultural narratives must redefine values, empowering individuals to navigate constraints and adopt personalized "moderate striving" models. Japan's experience with its "low-desire society" suggests that when material incentives fail, community-based initiatives and regional revitalization projects—which restore youth's sense of purpose—can outperform economic measures. The ultimate goal is not to eradicate "lying flat" but to empower everyone to freely choose their position on the spectrum between tang and juan.

6. Conclusion

The lying flat phenomenon among Chinese university students results from the interplay between multifaceted social pressures and individual psychological defenses, mirroring the real challenges faced by youth during economic transition. While lying flat may serve as a rational self-preservation strategy in the short term, it risks undermining societal vitality and exacerbating structural contradictions in the long run. Addressing this issue requires coordinated efforts across

society: the education system should reduce meaningless competition, the job market must offer fairer developmental opportunities, social security networks need to strengthen young people's sense of stability, and cultural narratives ought to promote diversified success standards. Future research could further investigate the evolution of lying flat and its differential effects across social groups to inform more targeted policy recommendations for building a resilient ecosystem for youth development.

References

- [1]Feng, S. (2025). Rebirth from the shadows: A psychological counseling case study on students' "lie flat" mentality. *Xin Banzhuren (New Class Teacher)*, (7), 38–39.
- [2]Ma, S., Wang, H., Wang, X., et al. (2024). Prevalence of the "lie flat" behavior and its association with depressive symptoms among university students in three Chinese provinces. *Chinese Journal of School Health*, 45(6), 844–848+853.
- [3] Liu, N., & Meng, L. (2023). Approaches to addressing the "lie flat" phenomenon among university students. *Pinwei Jingdian (Taste Classics)*, (21), 48-50.