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The Angst Behind China's 'Lying Flat' Youth

For young people, the dissent that briefly kindled protests against pandemic lockdowns has settled into a malaise of vague discontent.

By Christina Knight, March 23, 2024, 7 AM ET

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On Halloween in 2022, outside a party the police had just disbanded in Beijing's warehouse district, I saw a 20-something woman in a sparkly spandex suit and bunny ears run into the road. "Freedom, not testing!" she shouted. "Reform, not revolution! Votes, not dictators! Citizens, not slaves!"

Those were familiar words at Tsinghua University, where I was studying for a master's degree. From a bridge near campus, someone had hung a banner emblazoned with the slogans. The banner's maker, who became known as "Bridgeman," had disappeared a few days before Halloween. Now the girl in the spandex suit struggled with her boyfriend in the street as he tried to cover her mouth. The other young people streamed out of the warehouse party in silence. But, moments later, muted voices rose from the crowd: "I agree," "I support you," and even, "Xi Jinping has a small penis!"

Then a police officer took out his phone to start filming. Everyone dispersed.

Within a month, China would erupt in its largest street demonstrations since 1989. At Tsinghua, where one of the tamer protests occurred, students sang the Chinese national anthem and the socialist song "The Internationale" outside the main canteen, and chanted "Democracy and rule of law! Freedom of expression!" Some held placards featuring the Friedmann equations (symbolizing a "free man" and an open universe), rainbow flags for LGBTQ rights, and the blank pieces of paper that gave the movement its name: the White Paper Protests.

The protests may have been a response to the country's zero-COVID policy, but my

conversations with young people in China last year suggested that their disenchantment had outlasted the pandemic. In my Chinese peers, I saw one persistent commonality: a preoccupation with personal struggles accompanied by apathy toward political change. The frustrated energy that zero-COVID once incited has transformed into a malaise of discontented resignation.

In early December 2022, about a week after the protests, Lihua and I sat in an empty university classroom, slurping noodles at a metal table under flickering fluorescent lights. (I have granted every person cited in this story a pseudonym or anonymity to protect them from potential retaliation.) She and I had originally met in a foreign-policy class but then had to keep rescheduling meetings because our dorms were continually under quarantine. When we finally gathered, China's government had stripped away its zero-COVID policy, dismantled testing sites, and let the virus spread.

Lihua scrolled WeChat, China's most popular social-media messaging app, and asked, without looking up, "Hey, did you see the protests?"

Her question surprised me. We were only acquaintances, and I recognized that the subject was sensitive—especially to discuss with a foreigner. Yes, I told her, cautiously; I had watched from afar.

Just the week before, she continued, her entire WeChat had been full of "freedom," "democracy," and criticism of the government. "But now," she said, "there is nothing." She showed me her phone: photos of colorful desserts, her friends' selfies, and travel videos lit up the screen. "Some of this is because the censors have gotten better," she explained. "But people know how to avoid their posts being taken down. It's as if everyone forgot overnight."

The Chinese Communist Party had stifled the protests with authoritarian measures, particularly on campuses. At Tsinghua, classes shifted online and students were offered free bus and rail tickets home. In Beijing, police hunted for protesters by scrutinizing the phones of entire subway cars of people and questioning passersby on the street. Officers even went to the homes of people whose phones' geolocation records placed them in the vicinity of protests.

On X (formerly Twitter), videos posted via VPN circulated of protesters being shoved into police cars, handcuffed, even beaten up. But repression may not have been the only factor in the movement's demise. The disbanding of testing sites and the removal of quarantine requirements dissipated much of my peers' passion. Days earlier, when students were in full revolt, Tsinghua had advertised a rare town-hall meeting to answer questions previously submitted by community members about the university's COVID policies. Only 50 spots were available. My friends talked about how quickly the seats would fill with students eager to speak out. But even though the changes in restrictions had not yet been implemented, only 30 students showed up.

The brief flowering of activism in the fall of 2022 was driven by broader discontents than anti-zero-COVID sentiment. But once that policy's strictures loosened, few Chinese youth I knew seemed willing, let alone eager, to keep fighting. Many saw themselves as having limited autonomy, predetermined futures, and few opportunities. An underlying detachment and cynicism now tempered their desire for change. In its place, a subdued but pervasive weariness took hold.

On January 1, 2023, less than a month after zero COVID ended, I sat in the lobby of a hostel in Xishuangbanna, an autonomous prefecture in China's Yunnan province, discussing the lasting effects of the three-year lockdown with two young women.

For the first time since 2020, they and countless other Chinese Millennials and Gen Zers had flocked to the southwestern city to vacation. The city resembled a hodgepodge of Las Vegas, Hong Kong, Thailand, and Disneyland—with

Chinese characteristics, of course. Skyscrapers with castlelike turrets and rainbow lights lined wide streets where bright, rocketship-shaped golf carts zoomed past, ferrying dogs and children and retirees among amusements. Along an artificial river, vendors sold coconuts and durian fruit to young tourists dressed in the traditional costumes of ethnic minorities.

"People were jumping out of buildings, killing themselves," one of the women said as we drank tea at the lobby's large, oak table. "Now things have improved," she said. "But many people are still unhappy."

The other woman agreed. She compared life in China with the life she imagined "*guowai*" ("abroad").

"It's the difference between *huozhe* ['living'] and *shenghuo* ['life']," she said. "Most young people in China are just going through the motions, working every day to save up for a car or a house, so that they can get married and keep on working until they retire. They're depressed. And they don't know what they are missing out on, because they've never known anything else." She paused. "People *guowai* are actually experiencing life."

Her friend weighed in. "You all don't have as many people," she said. "There are too many people, too few opportunities within China. But outside, things must be different. They have to be."

These young women were not the only Chinese peers who spoke with me about closure and stasis, and about the hard limits curtailing their dreams.

Several months later, in May, I left Tsinghua for a work-stay at a hotel in Zhaoxing, a Dong-minority village in Liping County, Guizhou. One afternoon, after completing our chores—cooking, sweeping, and tending to our two high-maintenance cats—my co-worker, Pengxi, and I went on a hike. As we wove our way up the rice terraces, I asked Pengxi about his career. From a robotics engineer who had studied in the United Kingdom, his melancholy response shocked me. "For people our age, our ambitions can't be that high," he said. "We have nowhere to move up."

The problem, as he saw it, was generational. "Before us, everyone could see what they accomplished," he said. "My grandfather took a hungry family and gave them food. My father took a poor family and gave them comfort, education, money." But now, he said, "everything has already been done. All of the money has already been made. We just have to stay where we are and hope things get better."

For some young people, that meant taking a break or, in the popular phrase, *tang ping* ("lying flat"). Others accepted China's intense career culture, which friends typically described to me as *neijuan*, which loosely translates as "stress and pressure." Pengxi, like many other young people in the village, identified as somewhere in between "lying flat" and accepting the burden of everyday life, not invested in the rat race but pragmatic about social constraints. Working as an *yi-gong* ("volunteer") for free room and board in a new travel location, as Pengxi and I were doing, offered a welcome reprieve from life's drudgery without checking out entirely.

A few days later, we gathered with three other *yi-gong* workers at a Western-style café whose owner, a woman in her 30s, was a good friend of Pengxi's. Pengxi told the group that he had a scholarship offer to go back to London to do postgraduate research in robotics, a rare opportunity for someone like him, who grew up in a remote province and didn't come from wealth or power. The group discussed the pros and cons and concluded that staying in China would provide more comfort and stability. Pengxi already had a job, after all; what more did he want?

I chimed in, suggesting that he should go. They asked me why.

"Well, in terms of his career and future success," I said, "it seems like the best decision."

They laughed. Pengxi nodded in agreement. "I don't care about success," he said. "I just want a regular job."

The following month, I joined 13 Chinese tourists from various provinces for a guided tour of Inner Mongolia. Halfway through our trip, we had lunch in a Russian-style log cabin, at a restaurant whose staff were officially defined as "Russian ethnic minority Chinese citizens"—people of Russian descent who were living in China when Mao decided to categorize all Chinese people into 56 ethnicities. Someone in our group mentioned the recent death of the former leader of China Jiang Zemin, who had been the republic's president in the 1990s through to the early 2000s.

A business-school student married to a Communist Party official looked visibly uncomfortable and got up to get another "Russian" yogurt. A fashionable couple from Shenzhen took out their phones to peruse the pictures we had taken the night before. The rest of the group picked at their food in silence.

Later, I asked my closest friend on the tour what had happened. She shrugged. "We shouldn't be talking about these things anyways," she said. "It's not our place to get involved."

I generally heard mixed views of the CCP during my time in China. I talked with young people who said that the party "was their religion," and with anti-regime youth who hosted weekly showings of banned movies in Beijing and wanted to move to Berlin. Studies are inconclusive. Some suggest that young Chinese are fiercely nationalistic and optimistic about their country's future, labeling them "Generation N"; others, that they are more critical of the government than previous generations were.

Today's Chinese youth are not living in the "Age of Ambition" that the *New Yorker* writer Evan Osnos documented in the early 2000s—the frenzied scramble to invent, create, and change. Instead, my peers seem to be lying flat, or at least half flat, under Xi Jinping's rule. Friends told me that young people's attitudes toward the government were *xuwuzhuyi*, or "nihilistic." One slightly more bullish student, a Ph.D. candidate at the Tsinghua School of Marxism, told me that he felt optimistic about China's future but pessimistic about his own.

The trend undoubtedly reflected material anxieties: Youth unemployment, which went unreported for six months, reached 18.4 percent in 2022 and now, with adjusted calculations, sits at 14.9 percent. According to the World Bank, China's gross domestic product per capita has stagnated at about $12,700 (compared with more than $76,000 in the United States). For my thesis, I interviewed Chinese students at elite engineering schools about technological competition with the United States. Most told me that even though they viewed U.S. technology policy toward China as "bullying" and China as out-competing the U.S. over a core strategic interest, they would still take a well-paying job that aided the United States in preference to one with a lower salary in China.

On the day that Xi claimed a third term in office, October 22, 2022, I walked around Beijing with a Chinese friend. The city was unusually tranquil, its glass towers gleaming beneath the blue "20th Party Congress" sky—a joke in Beijing because the coal-powered factories in and around the city had been closed during the party plenary to reduce pollution. My friend glanced uneasily at the passersby who talked and laughed around us.

"My generation doesn't have the energy to fight the way people did in 1989," he said, as we meandered through Beijing's *hutong*s, the ancient stone structures that have been transformed into trendy stores and cafés. "I watched a forbidden documentary about Tiananmen the other day, and I almost cried," he said, sighing. "Our generation complains, but we don't do anything."

Christina Knight's writing on China has been published in East Asia Forum and on Lawfare.