

Drifting Generations in Xi Jinping's New Era: Navigating between Rat Race, Lying Flat, or Runxue?

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Abstract

The widening wealth gap and the solidification of social classes that emerged over the four decades of the reform and opening-up policy have already resulted in diminishing opportunities for children from lower-class families or rural backgrounds to achieve success in Chinese society. Yet, after enduring three years of stringent COVID-19 lockdowns, together with ongoing trade tensions and technology battles with the United States, China is currently facing a highly challenging youth unemployment crisis. Many young people have chosen to “lie flat” due to their disillusionment with the highly competitive work environment, aspire to become civil servants, or even contemplate emigrating. This not only poses challenges to social and political stability in China, but could ultimately undermine Xi Jinping’s “Chinese Dream,” which is to be achieved by the mid-21st century.

Keywords: Lying Flat, Runxue, Unemployment, Chives, Xi Jinping

I. Introduction

For many years, people had high praise for the “wolf-like” mentality (狼性) of young individuals in China, attributing to them a strong drive and motivation for ambitious success in life. Comparatively, some people ridiculed youth in Taiwan, suggesting they were only content with pursuing small, simple pleasures (小確幸) and lacked “progress.” In recent years, however, both domestic and international circumstances have increasingly eroded the once-vaunted “wolf-like” attitude among Chinese youth. Instead, some have adopted a more submissive and accommodating

demeanor (奴性), driven by the dire need for survival, while others have opted for a “tangping” (躺平, lying flat) approach or a lifestyle that closely resembles it — *i.e.*, “bailan” (擺爛, letting it rot, a synonym for giving up).

On April 17, 2021, an internet post titled “Lying flat is justice” (躺平即是正義) on the platform Baidu Tieba (百度貼吧) suddenly became popular, causing heated discussions both online and offline in Chinese society. In less than a day, all statements about “lying flat” were blocked by the Chinese media authorities. Two months later, on June 16, 2021, an American named “beks@wonderhag” tweeted, “i do not want to have a career. i want to sit on the porch,” gathered nearly 400,000 likes. Now, the concept of “lying flat” also appears in the English vocabulary — the goblin mode — which means “a type of behavior which is unapologetically self-indulgent, lazy, slovenly, or greedy, typically in a way that rejects social norms or expectations.”¹



Figure 1. China’s Wolf-Like Culture

Source: Lin, “What is Huawei’s corporate culture (interpretation of Huawei’s wolfish corporate culture,” *Dachangrenshi*, June 27, 2022, <<https://www.dachangrenshi.com/article-136142.html>>.

1. Imogen James, “Oxford word of the year 2022 revealed as ‘goblin mode’,” *BBC News*, December 5, 2022, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-63857329>>.

This has even become Oxford's 2022 Word of the Year. Similarly, on March 21, 2022, in a speech by Taiwanese Vice President Lai Ching-te (賴清德, also known as William Lai) at Taiwan's National Cheng Kung University, 42% of students said they chose to "lie flat." As a result, young people's choice to lie flat in high-pressure working conditions is not just a problem unique to China. Taiwan, the United States, Japan, South Korea, and many other countries seem to be facing a similar situation.

Why is the "lying flat" phenomenon such an issue in China? Back in 2019, Jack Ma (馬雲), founder of the Chinese tech giant Alibaba (阿里巴巴), said that he admired the so-called "996 system," the culture whereby people work six days a week from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Ma said he believed that "996" was a necessary means of survival in the competition for work. To him, "996" *per se* was a huge blessing; if you wish to join Alibaba, you will have to be prepared to work 12 hours a day, otherwise what are you going to do here? He even said that he is not only "996," but also more than "1212," *i.e.*, 12 hours a day for 12 months.² Faced with strict study pressure since childhood, Chinese youth have to confront pressure of the workplace after graduation, and other pressures such as buying a house, getting married, having children, taking



beks
@wonderhag

i do not want to have a career. i want to sit on the porch

9:46 AM · Jun 16, 2021

79.5K Reposts 2,760 Quotes 384.7K Likes 2,819 Bookmarks

Figure 2. Young People Choose to Lie Flat

Source: beks, "i do not want to have a career. i want to sit on the porch," June 16, 2021, X, <<https://twitter.com/wonderhag/status/1404978773347475460>>.

2. Serenitie Wang & Daniel Shane, "Jack Ma endorses China's controversial 12 hours a day, 6 days a week work culture," *CNN*, April 15, 2019, <<https://edition.cnn.com/2019/04/15/business/jack-ma-996-china/index.html>>.

care of their parents, and so on. These pressures are coupled when, especially in traditional Chinese culture, family, and society often have higher expectations for young people, hoping they will achieve excellent results in their careers and life more generally. China's past one-child policy led to many young professionals growing up as only children without siblings, which has further intensified many young people's perceptions of peer pressure.

The pressure on young Chinese is arguably even worse due to the poor economic recovery after the pandemic. More directly, China's economy is facing a wave of collapse of private enterprises and in the real estate sector, such as the major crisis of the two real estate giants of Evergrande (恆大) and Country Garden (碧桂園), whose accumulated debt is believed to stand at more than 2 trillion renminbi and could be compared to national debt.³ In addition, whereas foreign-owned enterprises continue to withdraw from the Chinese market, domestic investment has also shrunk sharply, alongside inadequate domestic consumption, declining imports and exports, bursting regional debts, and deteriorating local public finance. These have altogether led to the closure of many Chinese companies, triggering salary reductions and layoffs of employees. Especially for numerous young individuals working in the IT sector, due to the government's crackdown on private enterprise owners and tech giants, along with the policy of prioritizing state-owned enterprises over private ones (國進民退), the employment prospects for China's youth have been further aggravated, and to some many now appear hopeless.

Not only has demand for daily temporary labor dramatically decreased, but there are reports of dire situations with hourly wages as low as 9 renminbi. Reportedly, more than 20% of master's graduates and bachelor's graduates are unemployed. These either choose to adopt a "lying flat" approach or take up positions as low-skilled workers in fields like delivery or takeout services. As a result, a sense of insecurity, anxiety, and helplessness permeates China's young generation regarding the future prospects of their society.

3. Chin-ho Hsieh, "Chin-ho Hsieh Warns: China's Real Estate Crisis Will Impact the Financial System," *Wealth Magazine*, August 9, 2023, <<https://www.wealth.com.tw/articles/367f2ae5-7a82-4448-8488-e4ba710cc9ae>>.

II. The Dire Unemployment Situation among China's Young Generation and Official Countermeasures

In recent months, China's National Bureau of Statistics (國家統計局) has officially announced that youth unemployment among China's population aged 16 to 24 has been rising, from 17.3% in January 2023, 18.1% in February, 19.6% in March, 20.4% in April, 20.8% in May, and to 21.3% in June. China's youth unemployment rate since April 2023 exceeded 19.9% in July 2022, a new high since statistics began in 2018.⁴ This compares with 7.5% in the U.S. and 14.1% in the EU in June 2023. However, Zhang Dandan (張丹丹), an associate professor at Peking University, reported that if about 16 million "lying flat" and parasite singles (啃老族) were

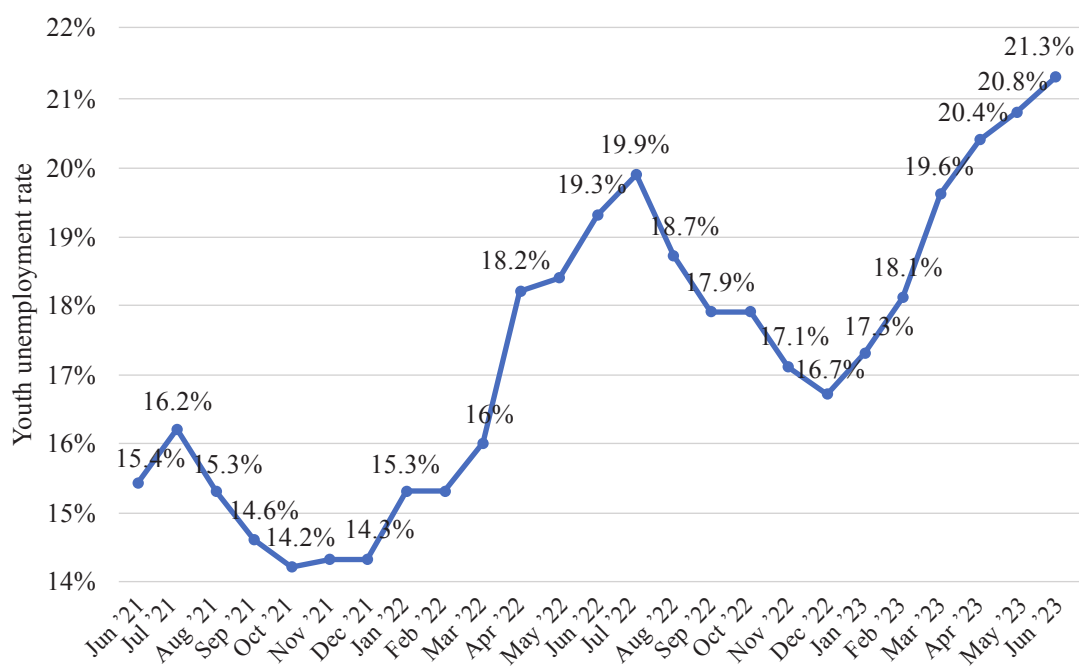


Figure 3. Youth Unemployment in China (2021.6-2023.6)

Source: Yen Huang, "Behind the high unemployment rate, China's youth go home to be 'full-time children,'" *TechNews*, July 27, 2023, <<https://technews.tw/2023/07/27/china-young-people-lost-hope-to-fight/>>.

4 "Unemployment Rate: China ceases to release youth unemployment data, reaches historic highs this year," *BBC News Chinese*, August 15, 2023, <<https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/trad/chinese-news-66506966>>.

considered unemployed, China's actual youth unemployment rate in March was actually 46.5%, much higher than the official 19.7%.⁵

However, in August 2023, the National Bureau of Statistics suspended the release of the national urban youth unemployment rate. While acknowledging that the statistical work is not yet perfect, Chinese authorities seem to be covering up a serious problem. This inevitably gives the outside world the impression that China is engaging in deception, and that the problem in China is in fact much bigger.

Regardless of the general shortcomings in China's official unemployment surveys, such as looser employment standards than international ones, and employment rates that survey only urban but not rural populations, official countermeasures to address youth unemployment seem to have been ineffective. Since the expansion of a higher education enrollment policy adopted in 1999, the

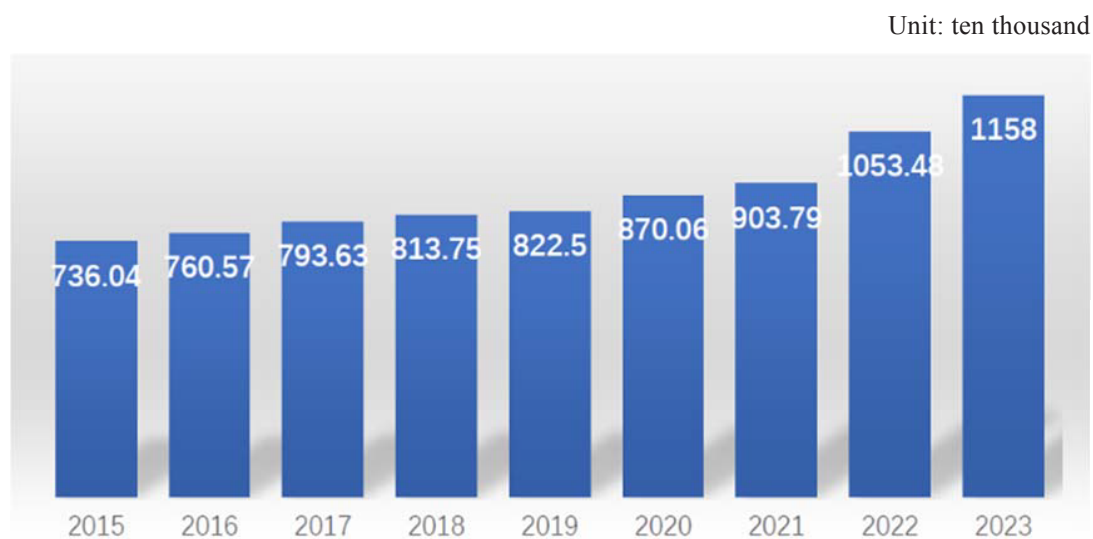


Figure 4. University Graduates in China (2015-2023)

Source: Dandan Zhang, "Potentially underestimated youth unemployment rate," *China Digital Times*, July 19, 2023, <<https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/698406.html>>.

5. Dandan Zhang, "Potentially underestimated youth unemployment rate," *Caixin Net*, July 17, 2023, <<https://opinion.caixin.com/2023-07-17/102076568.html>>.

current generation of young people in China is surely the most highly educated in Chinese history. According to data from the Chinese Ministry of Education, the number of university graduates nationwide in 2022 exceeded 10 million for the first time. In 2023, the size of university graduates reached 11.58 million, marking another historical high in the number of graduates.

Faced with extremely harsh employment conditions and intensifying work pressures, an increasing number of young Chinese have opted for the “lying flat” approach. For example, an intriguing phenomenon has emerged in Chinese society – the rise of “full-time children.” (全職兒女) Some young people find themselves toiling away daily in a grueling “996” work schedule, yet their monthly take-home pay does not measure up to that of their elderly relatives. Consequently, a few young individuals opt to resign from their jobs and become “full-time children” at home. They may take on household chores and care for the elderly, receiving corresponding financial compensation from their families in return.

However, the emergence of “full-time children” highlights the severe economic downturn in China. Essentially, it represents unemployment. Without a doubt, this “lying flat” philosophy obviously contradicts Xi’s advocacy of the “roll up sleeves and work hard” (撸起袖子加油幹) slogan, leading to swift condemnation from official mainstream media. For example, an article titled “‘Lying Flat’ Is Shameful. Where Is the Sense of Justice?” from *Nanfang Daily* (南方日報), reprinted by *Xinhua News Agency* on May 20, 2023, asserts that “choosing to ‘lie flat’ in the face of pressure is not only unjust but also disgraceful.”⁶ An article in *Guangming Daily* (光明日報) also criticizes the “lying flat” trend, stating that the “lying flat tribe” (躺平族) has many adverse implications for economic and social development. In contrast to the trend fostered by the unique context of “aging before affluence” (未富先老), the subjective inclination of “lying flat before prosperity” (未富先躺) demands vigilance.⁷

6. Qingfeng Wang, “‘Lying Flat’ is shameful? Where is the sense of justice?” *Xinhua News Agency*, May 20, 2021, <http://www.xinhuanet.com/comments/2021-05/20/c_1127467232.htm>.

7. Xingyu Wang, “Guiding the ‘lying flat’ tribe to cherish their youth and strive for success,” *The Guangming Daily*, May 20, 2021, <https://epaper.gmw.cn/gmrb/html/2021-05/20/nw.D110000gmrb_20210520_2-11.htm>.



Figure 5. University Graduates Looking for Jobs in China

Source: Depositphotos.

Against this backdrop, to prevent the potential outbreak and worsening of a renewed wave of unemployment among college graduates, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) introduced “Document No. 1 of 2023” at the beginning of 2023. This document marks the first time the CPC has proposed the concept of “accelerating the construction of an agricultural powerhouse” and aims for a comprehensive push for rural revitalization.⁸ Additionally, the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League (CYL) also launched the 2023 CYL Action Plan for Promoting College Student Employment - College Student Employment Navigation Program (大學生就業引航計劃), with the hope of guiding students to proactively “eat bitterness” (自找苦吃) at the grassroots level.

⁸ “Opinions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on Effectively Advancing Key Tasks in Rural Revitalization in 2023,” *Xinhua News Agency*, February 13, 2023, <<http://politics.people.com.cn/BIG5/n1/2023/0213/c1001-32622948.html>>.

On May 4, 2023, China Youth Day, state media reported that Xi had emphasized that “young students should make contributions to the big stage of rural revitalization and make good use of youth strength to accelerating agricultural and rural modernization and comprehensively building a modern socialist country.”⁹ On July 10, 2023, the *People's Daily* followed suit with a commentary emphasizing that Chinese young people must have the spirit of seeking hardships for themselves and need to go to the places where the motherland and the people need it most, such as the countryside, mountain areas, or the military.¹⁰

These developments suggest that the CPC is addressing the acute contradictions in domestic employment by redirecting young people toward rural areas and/or armed services. Young people are effectively urged by the Chinese government to go to the countryside to revitalize the agricultural sector and help solve the problem of China's dependence on food imports, all in response to Xi's mention on several occasions in recent years that in the face of the continuous containment and sanctions by Western countries in trade and technology, they must take the road of self-reliance. At the same time, the unemployment problems among young people are thought to be alleviated or even solved in rural areas and the military. This approach bears some resemblance to the “Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside” (上山下鄉) initiative during the Mao Zedong era and highlights the grim socioeconomic conditions in present-day Chinese society.

III. The Rise of *Sibu Qingnian* (四不青年) in Xi Jinping's New Era

As mentioned above, some young people identify strongly with and find consensus in the concept of “lying flat-ism” (躺平主義). The “lying flat tribe” calls on young people to refrain from buying houses and cars, getting married, having children, and avoiding excessive consumption. The main idea is to maintain a basic

9. Xi Jinping, “Reply from Xi Jinping to Students of the Science and Technology College at China Agricultural University,” *Xinhua News Agency*, May 3, 2023, <http://www.news.cn/politics/2023-05/03/c_1129586451.htm>.

10. Jiwei Wang, “Establishing a Correct View of Career,” *People's Daily*, July 10, 2023, <<http://cpc.people.com.cn/BIG5/n1/2023/0710/c64387-40031638.html>>.



**Figure 6. Chinese Youth’s Frustration:
Chives Waiting to be Harvested by the Rulers**

Source: Dao Feixiang, “Lie Flat in China: seething discontent amongst the youth bursting to the surface,” *In Defence of Marxism*, June 17, 2021, <<https://www.marxist.com/china-lie-flat.htm>>.

standard of living and reject becoming a mere money-making machine for others or an exploited slave in a worsening crony capitalist society. Chinese internet users jokingly refer to it as “lying flat”: not bending the waist, not kneeling down, adopting a lateral form of standing, and maintaining a straight spine. (躺平，是為了不彎腰、是為了不下跪、是橫向的站立、是挺直的脊梁) As long as you lie flat, you will not be harvested as “chives.” (韭菜) In other words, the “lying flat” mentality reflects mounting dissatisfaction, passive resistance, and non-cooperative sentiment among the youth toward the widening wealth gap, inequitable social distribution, and the lack of proportional rewards for efforts made at the grassroots level in Chinese society.

In China's online ecosystem, two corresponding words have become peculiarly popular: “*sibu qingnian*” (四不青年) and “*juan tang run xian*” (卷躺潤獻). “*Sibu qingnian*” vividly captures the fact that young Chinese nowadays do not fall in love, do not get married, do not buy a house, and do not have children. Because of the fierce competition between people, Chinese youth either adopt a mentality of giving up and doing nothing, or they choose to emigrate abroad. Some young people have even gone to the extreme of indiscriminately attacking others to vent their feelings of resentment.

This highlights the fact that under the CPC rule, the polarization of Chinese society has intensified, with the elite and plutocrats becoming hereditary, resulting in a large number of young people without the necessary background to move up the social ladder through individual efforts. China's young people born after 1990 and after 2000 consequently face limited choices for their future careers. Many young people are discovering the grim situation of graduating only to become unemployed. In particular, when China's economy continues to decline and private enterprises are stagnant, the advantages of being a civil servant become all the more evident. Hence, young people aspire to enter the public sector, holding onto this coveted “iron

Unit: ten thousand



Figure 7. Number of Applicants for Civil Service Examination (2015-2023)

Source: Dandan Zhang, “Potentially underestimated youth unemployment rate,” *China Digital Times*, July 19, 2023, <<https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/698406.html>>.

rice bowl” (鐵飯碗) job. This is not only a relatively well-compensated and stable position, but is also sought after due to the favorable benefits and perks within the system, including a comprehensive social security net, medical coverage, and pension schemes, while conferring a certain social status. In so doing, they can escape the high-pressure life of “996” and the excessive overtime expected in the private sector.

Inevitably, official media have attempted to steer the narrative in a more direction (“positive energy” 正能量), aiming to make young people regard Chinese society under Xi’s leadership as great, honorable, and correct (偉大、光榮、正確), and instilling a sense of hope for their future. For this reason, on August 17, 2021, when Xi presided over the 10th meeting of the Central Financial and Economic Affairs Commission (中央財經委員會第十次會議), he reiterated the importance of promoting “common prosperity.” In his words, “We must prevent the solidification of social hierarchies, ensure unobstructed upward mobility channels, create wealth-building opportunities for more people, foster a development environment that involves everyone, and prevent ‘internal coil’ and ‘lying flat’ behavior.”¹¹

Although it is difficult to ascertain whether the common prosperity policy can genuinely diminish China’s wealth disparity, foster social equality and justice, and provide more employment opportunities to achieve shared prosperity for all Chinese citizens, a sense of helplessness has arisen among a certain segment of modern Chinese youth. They find themselves unable to secure ideal jobs and are unwilling to engage in “low-end labor” work. The trend of “Kong Yiji Literature” (孔乙己文學) has emerged within the Chinese online community and resonates deeply with many young individuals. They liken themselves to Kong Yiji, a character depicted by the famous writer Lu Xun (魯迅) in 1918 as impoverished and unable to let go of his identity as an educated person. Through self-deprecating writing, they express their discontent with the current state of affairs.

Kong was an educated scholar, but could not pass the imperial examination and thus was incapable of finding a livelihood. Nevertheless, Kong persisted in wearing

11. Xi Jinping, “Steadily advancing common prosperity,” *Qiushi*, No. 20, October 2021, *Qiushi*, <http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2021-10/15/c_1127959365.htm>.

a dirty and tattered gown, as it symbolized his identity as an educated person. More than a century later, this pitiable intellectual resonates with the pain of many Chinese young people, who have become a self-deprecating modern version of Kong Yiji. Some Chinese netizens humorously lament, “They say education is the key to success, but I have slowly realized it is also an unattainable pedestal for me, a gown I cannot take off like Kong Yiji’s.” “If I had not gone to university, I’d be contentedly screwing bolts in a factory, but there are no ‘ifs.’” “If I had not pursued education, I could find other work, but ironically, I pursued education.”¹²

Young people in China are realizing that they are living through one of the bleakest periods in the country’s recent history. Not only is the economic outlook grim, but social control is also deepening, marked by various forms of political repression and government censorship. Terms like “run philosophy” (*run xue*) and the “last generation” have been becoming cries of despair for many Chinese individuals in their 20s and 30s, expressing their disillusionment with the nation and its future. When people widely come to recognize that the grassroots are like chives, tirelessly growing upwards but inevitably destined to be harvested, some choose to seek prosperity abroad.

“Run,” (潤) in this regard, has appeared on the Chinese internet in recent years, referring to an increased number of people who feel the social environment has become more unfriendly and wish to flee the country. The number of searches for “immigrant” has effectively skyrocketed on the Chinese WeChat. Due to the stringent zero-COVID policy and arbitrary nationwide lockdown measures, the term “run” has become popular among young people and the middle class, reflecting the fact that many young people who are suffering the various squeezes in social life are now emigrating, or planning to do so.

Some wealthy Chinese have managed to legally emigrate to the West. Meanwhile, except for a lucky few who study abroad to achieve the goal of legal

12. Lu Ye & Lin Kai, “News Buzz: ‘Kong Yiji’ Anxiety Syndrome – Can There Be a Golden House in the Book?” *Ta Kung Pao*, March 24, 2023, <<http://www.takungpao.com/news/232108/2023/0324/832520.html>>.



Figure 8. Chinese Taught on TikTok How to Cross from Central America to the United States

Source: Depositphotos.

emigration after graduation, others are resorting to illegal means to emigrate. Recently, there has been a rise in illegal emigration, widely addressed as “going off the grid” (走線) in Chinese language, particularly through transcontinental routes across Europe and Asia, involving clandestine border crossings from Central and South America into the U.S. Tutorials on TikTok, for example, show how to navigate an unconventional route through mountains and valleys from Latin America to reach the U.S. For many of the individuals who choose to do so, mostly from the middle and lower socio-economic strata, embarking on this long, arduous journey to the U.S. signifies the shattering of their “Chinese Dream.” It seems that “going off the grid” has become their last hope in life.

When a society witnesses a substantial unemployment rate among its youth, coupled with limited hopes for the future, the choices often become either to adopt

a passive attitude (lying flat), aspire for secure government positions, or consider emigrating for a better and prosperous life. Under such conditions, can the grand vision of China’s national rejuvenation, the “Chinese Dream,” be achieved, as Xi pledged as early as 2012?

IV. Conclusion

In the stock market, there is a classic term: “chives.” It is often used to describe individual investors who are oppressed by institutional investors, as chives are resilient to cold and can regrow after being cut, providing sustenance to those who harvest them. In the current Chinese cultural context, “chives” metaphorically refers to the “exploited,” extended to represent the marginalized lower strata of Chinese society who are being relentlessly squeezed. Apart from the “Zhao family members” (趙家人) of the privileged red aristocracy, for most Chinese people, in particular



Figure 9. White Paper Revolution

Source: Date20221127, “Some students at Southwest Jiaotong University lit candles to mourn the victims of the Urumqi fire and held white paper in protest,” November 27, 2022, *Wikipedia*, <<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=126001919>>.

the younger generations, there is a pervasive sense that everyone is akin to “chives” within the framework of the Party-State system. Arguably, these vested interests — the actual wielders of power encompassing high-ranking officials, wealthy magnates, internal system executives, as well as their relatives and offspring — can cut these chives whenever they deem necessary, as they are essentially the masters, treating the others as subjects in this crony capitalist society.

Notwithstanding the inequality and injustice, one cannot forget that young people have played a pivotal role in modern and contemporary China. From the May Fourth Movement in 1919 to the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989, intellectuals and young people have consistently played significant roles in driving China’s historical changes. The most recent “White Paper Revolution” (白紙革命), or “A4 Revolution,” that occurred in cities across China in November 2022, was a concerted and vivid example of college student mobilization, this time calling on citizens and workers not only to protest against the zero-COVID policy, but to also aim at awakening ordinary people and standing up against various unreasonable measures. In fact, Xi himself said in 2019 that “the May Fourth Movement, which erupted 100 years ago, was a great patriotic revolutionary movement characterized by the vanguard role of advanced young intellectuals and the participation of the broad masses of the people in a thorough anti-imperialist and anti-feudal struggle.”¹³

A Chinese proverb accurately illustrates this phenomenon: “Water can carry a boat, but it can also overturn it” (水能載舟，亦能覆舟). Chinese youth could be a key force in Xi’s centennial struggle goal to “comprehensively build a socialist modernized strong nation” (全面建成社會主義現代化強國) by the middle of this century. Conversely, they could also be the driving force behind genuine democratic change in present-day China. After all, one thing seems clear: when the ladder to a better life and upward social mobility is being shortened or taken away altogether, the disillusioned younger generations could ultimately pose a profound threat to Xi’s

13. “Xi Jinping presided over the 14th collective study session of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and delivered a speech,” *Xinhua News Agency*, April 20, 2019, <https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2019-04/20/content_5384742.htm>.

“Chinese Dream.” As *The Economist* warns, “The party needs to offer its disenchanted young new paths to peaceful prosperity. The alternatives, including the stoking of angry, militaristic nationalism, would pose a threat to China and the world.”¹⁴

14. “The disillusioned generation,” *The Economist*, August 19, 2023, p.10.

