

# A study on the social psychological mechanism and intergenerational differences of the "lying flat" phenomenon

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## Abstract

This study takes the phenomenon of "lying flat" as the starting point to explore its social psychological mechanism and intergenerational differences. The study found that "lying flat" is not only a passive compromise of young people to high housing prices, involutory employment and intergenerational value conflicts, but also a symbolic resistance to structural oppression. In terms of behavioral representation, young people achieve psychological adjustment through career downgrades, low-consumption life and online self-mockery, but in reality they still participate in "invisible involution", forming a contradictory survival state. In terms of intergenerational differences, the "struggle ethics" of the post-60s/70s and the "self-realization" needs of the Z generation are in significant conflict. The resource transfer of parents aggravates class anxiety, while educational involution strengthens the opposition between instrumental rationality and innovative literacy. The social impact is dualistic: it relieves anxiety in the short term and promotes institutional reflection, but in the long term it may lead to human capital mismatch and weakening of social mobility. Based on the three-dimensional linkage of institutions, culture and individuals, a strategic framework for building a "struggle-friendly" society is proposed. The study emphasizes the need to transcend moral criticism and achieve a balance between social vitality and individual well-being through structural reform and cultural tolerance.

## Keywords

lying flat; intergenerational differences; social psychological mechanism; structural contradictions; symbolic resistance; system optimization.

## 1. Introduction

The emergence of China's "lying flat" phenomenon—transitioning from online subculture to a significant social issue—reflects structural tensions across multiple dimensions. Economically, youth face a tripartite squeeze from soaring housing costs, stagnant wages, and workplace involution, fueling existential disillusionment. Intergenerationally, clashes arise between the scarcity-driven "struggle ethos" of older generations (1960s/70s) and Generation Z's (1995–2009) pursuit of pluralistic values, transforming familial dialogues into ideological battlegrounds. Institutionally, an education system misaligned with labor market demands exacerbates youth frustration, trapping aspirations for self-realization within utilitarian frameworks.

As a resistive practice, "lying flat" manifests through low-desire lifestyles, career disengagement, and withdrawal from competitive hierarchies—simultaneously a pragmatic compromise and symbolic defiance. Distinct from passive "Buddha-like" resignation or the intentional calm of "relaxation culture," it embodies conscious resistance to systemic inequities. This duality necessitates scholarly analysis beyond moralistic critiques to decode its sociostructural roots.

This study addresses two core questions: First, what collective psyche does “lying flat” reveal amid China’s developmental transition? Second, how do intergenerational divides shape its perception and adoption? By probing these issues, the research aims to enrich theories of social mentality while informing mental health interventions, intergenerational reconciliation, and equitable policy design.

## 2. Multidimensional representation of the “lying flat” phenomenon and group differences

### 1. Social representation: Multi-dimensional presentation of the “ lying flat ” phenomenon

The "lying flat" phenomenon presents multi-dimensional characteristics in terms of behavioral representation, including the adjustment of real survival strategies and the cultural significance of symbolic resistance. First , highly educated young people actively withdraw from the mainstream competition path due to "peer crushing" and choose low-pressure occupations (such as coffee shop clerks) to avoid falling into the "involution" trap (Standing, 2011)[1] . Second, young people in first-tier cities "escape from Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou" because they cannot afford housing prices. Third, young people suppress their desire for consumption through minimalism and form a "low-desire survival mode" .

However, the "lying flat" phenomenon also manifests itself as a split between online expression and real-life behavior , further highlighting the complexity of "lying flat". For example, young people often deconstruct the myth of struggle with the joking "lying flat theory" formula in cyberspace, forming an emotional connection in the subculture community ( Han, 2015 )[2]. However, in reality, they still participate in "invisible involution" (such as taking exams for civil servants and postgraduate entrance exams), forming a contradictory state of "lying flat in words, struggling in actions". This split is essentially the result of the coexistence of symbolic resistance and survival rationality: while social media amplifies collective emotions, young people maintain basic survival needs through real actions, reflecting the logic of rational choice.

### 2. Group differences: from individual choice to intergenerational conflict

" lying flat " phenomenon shows significant differences among different groups . The proportion of men "lying flat" is significantly higher than that of women, which may be because traditional gender role expectations (such as the pressure to buy a house) increase the psychological burden on men, while women are more inclined to balance survival and self-realization through "flexible employment". Differences in educational background are also significant: students from ordinary colleges are more likely to lie flat completely due to the "vacuum of goals", while students from prestigious universities adjust their strategies through periodic dormancy.

“ lying flat phenomenon ” is more prominent in intergenerational conflicts . Based on their memories of material scarcity, those born in the 1960s and 1970s regard struggle as a moral obligation, while Generation Z regards work as a tool for self-realization. For example, the contradiction between parents’ expectations for “stable jobs” and young people’s pursuit of “interesting careers” is essentially a confrontation between “survival rationality” and “existential rationality” ( Chua, 2011 )[3]. Although the real estate accumulation of parents provides potential security for their children, it also exacerbates the frustration of “not being able to copy the path of their parents”, leading young people in first-tier cities to choose to “return to their hometowns and lie down”. Education involution also intensifies intergenerational conflicts: the “instrumental rationality” cultivated by exam-oriented education conflicts with the “ innovation literacy” that young people desire . This conflict is particularly evident in workplace management. Managers (mostly those born in the 1960s and 1970s) attribute employees’ “lying flat” to weak willpower, but ignore the institutional oppression of the 996 culture ( Zhang , 2022 )[4].

### 3. Analysis of Social Psychological Mechanisms

#### 1. Psychological defense mechanisms and rational choices

The "lying flat" behavior can be seen as a psychological defense strategy activated by individuals in a high-pressure environment. According to Carl Jung's shadow theory, the resistance of young people to the mainstream struggle narrative is essentially to project the oppressive requirements of social discipline (such as 996 culture and success monism) as "shadows" and achieve psychological balance through self-value reconstruction. For example, some young people lower their goal expectations through "low desire rationalization" and relieve anxiety with defensive pessimism, which is essentially an adaptive adjustment of cognitive dissonance.

From the perspective of rational choice theory, when social mobility channels are narrowed and the input-output ratio is unbalanced, "lying flat" becomes the result of economic rational decision-making. The concept of "preariat" proposed by British scholar Standing (2011) reveals that under structural pressures such as housing and employment, young people actively reduce the intensity of labor participation to avoid systemic risks, which is in line with the optimal survival strategy.

#### 2. Social pressure and group emotional transmission

The social acceleration theory (Hartmut Rosa) points out that the "tyranny of time" in contemporary society has caused young people to fall into a permanent anxiety of catching up. Some Korean scholars' research on the "three abandonment generation" (giving up love, marriage, and childbearing) shows that East Asian youth resist the alienated logic of the performance society by "lying down", and their behavior has a symbolic resistance function. Social media amplifies the "lying down" discourse through emotional resonance, forming a collective healing effect. For example, the viral spread of the "lying down theory" formula "Life success = personal effort - system involution intensity × sadness" is essentially a playful deconstruction of the myth of struggle.

#### 3. Intergenerational changes in the need for self-actualization

Based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory (Maslow, 1943) [5], the phenomenon of Chinese youth "lying flat" reflects the rupture of the path to satisfying high-level needs. Unlike their parents, Generation Z grew up in an environment of relative material abundance, and their self-realization needs emphasize subjective expression rather than external evaluation. When the education system and workplace culture cannot provide a sense of meaning, young people reconstruct the value coordinate system through "career downgrade" or "low-consumption life", such as choosing to work as a coffee shop clerk to avoid workplace PUA, which is essentially the pursuit of "existential rationality" instead of "instrumental rationality".

### 4. Social Impact of the "Lying Flat" Phenomenon

The "lying flat" phenomenon has a significant dual impact on society: in the short term, it has a certain buffering effect as an individual psychological adjustment strategy; but in the long run, it may pose a systemic challenge to social and economic development and intergenerational equity.

#### 1. Positive effects: psychological buffer and institutional reflection

From the perspective of individual psychology, "lying flat" provides an emotional outlet and psychological buffer space for young people in high-pressure environments. By lowering achievement expectations and material desires, young people can temporarily relieve the anxiety caused by "involutionary" competition. For example, in Japan's "low-desire society", young people achieve psychological balance by reducing consumption and social needs. This strategy is manifested in China as "low-consumption life" and career downgrade.

From the perspective of social systems, the "lying flat" phenomenon forces society to reflect on structural defects. Companies have begun to explore reform measures such as flexible working hours and mental health support mechanisms. For example, some Internet companies have begun to pilot the "mandatory no overtime on Wednesdays" system in response to employees' protests against the 996 culture. Such adjustments show that "lying flat" is not only an individual choice, but also a reverse correction signal for unreasonable social systems.

## 2. Negative challenges: waste of human capital and weakening of social mobility

In the long run, "lying flat" may lead to human capital mismatch and declining innovation momentum. Highly educated young people choose low-skilled jobs (such as food delivery riders and convenience store clerks), resulting in a waste of educational resources.

In addition, "lying flat" may exacerbate class solidification and intergenerational inequality. The economic capital of the parents (such as real estate) becomes a potential guarantee for the children to "lying flat", but this also means that it is more difficult for young people from low-income families to break through class barriers through hard work.

The more far-reaching impact is the shrinking of the innovation culture. When young people generally aim to "maintain survival" rather than pursue creative breakthroughs, the overall innovation momentum of society will decline significantly. The experience of South Korea's "three-abandonment generation" shows that young people's passive response to competition may lead to slow technological iteration and stagnant economic growth (Lally, 2022) [6].

## 5. Response Strategies

The complexity of the "lying flat" phenomenon requires that the response strategy take into account both structural reform and individual adjustment, and build a more inclusive social development ecology through the three-dimensional coordination of institutional optimization, cultural reconstruction and individual empowerment.

At the institutional level, we need to focus on social security and education reform to reduce the systematic survival pressure of young people. On the one hand, we need to improve policy tools such as affordable housing and entrepreneurship subsidies to alleviate the economic squeeze on young people in the fields of housing, education and medical care. At the same time, we need to establish a school-enterprise cooperation platform to shorten the gap between education supply and market demand and avoid career downgrades caused by "experience anxiety". On the other hand, we need to promote the transformation of educational goals from "instrumental rationality" to "existential rationality", cultivate innovative literacy and critical thinking through project-based learning and non-cognitive ability assessment, and enable young people to realize their self-worth in the workplace rather than passively adapt.

At the cultural level, we should transcend the binary opposition narrative of "involution-lying flat" and reconstruct the society's perception of "success". The "social acceleration theory" of German scholar Rosa (2013) [7] pointed out that excessive pursuit of efficiency will alienate the individual's sense of meaning, and it is necessary to rebuild the interaction between people and society through the "resonance" mechanism (such as artistic experience and natural connection). The resolution of intergenerational conflicts requires facing up to the rupture of values. Managers and families can use Jung's "shadow work" theory to identify their own obsession with "struggle", accept the young people's demands for flexible work and balance of meaning, and shift workplace assessment from "working hours worship" to results orientation.

At the individual level, psychological resilience and goal management are the key to resisting the passivity of "lying flat". Cognitive reconstruction training can help young people see challenges as opportunities for growth rather than threats to survival; the SMART principle (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound) can break down vague ideals into phased tasks and reduce the confusion caused by a goal vacuum. It should be emphasized that

the stimulation of individual initiative must be based on institutional support to avoid excessive attribution of responsibility to young people themselves.

The above strategies need to form a linkage effect: social security provides a survival bottom line for young people, cultural transformation eases conflicts in values, and individual empowerment enhances stress resistance. Only in this way can we find a balance between criticizing "involution" and being vigilant against "lying flat" and achieve the symbiosis of social vitality and individual well-being.

## 6. Conclusion

The "lying flat" phenomenon is a concentrated projection of the structural contradictions in contemporary Chinese society during its transition period. Its essence is the symbolic resistance of young people to economic squeeze, institutional disconnection and cultural alienation. The root cause of intergenerational differences lies in the dynamic game between values and living environment: the "struggle narrative" of the older generation is rooted in the memory of material scarcity, while the pursuit of "existential rationality" of Generation Z stems from rebellion against the oppression of performance-based society. In the short term, "lying flat" provides a psychological buffer for young people by lowering expectations and forces society to reflect on institutional defects; but in the long term, it may aggravate the waste of human capital, class solidification and the decline of innovation momentum. The response strategy needs to build an inclusive social ecology through the coordination of institutional optimization (social security, education reform), cultural reconstruction (multiple success views, intergenerational dialogue) and individual empowerment (psychological resilience, goal management).

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