

An Analysis of Youth Mentality Within the Discourses of “Lying Flat” and “Involution” and Guidance Strategies for Ideological and Political Education

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Abstract: In the contemporary socio-cultural lexicon of China, the terms “lying flat” (“tangping”) and “involution” (“neijuan”) have transcended their origins as internet neologisms to become pivotal frameworks for interpreting the lived experiences, psychological states, and value orientations of a generation. These discourses encapsulate profound anxieties and adaptive strategies emerging against the backdrop of economic deceleration, intensified social competition, and the massification of higher education. This paper moves beyond superficial characterizations to undertake a rigorous analysis of the socio-structural genesis, psychological underpinnings, and ideological implications of these phenomena. It argues that “lying flat” represents not mere apathy but a complex, non-confrontational response to perceived systemic inequities and diminished social mobility. Conversely, “involution” delineates a state of hyper-competitive stagnation, where increased individual input fails to yield proportional rewards, leading to collective exhaustion and a crisis of meaning. Together, these patterns signify a critical interrogation of dominant “developmentalist” paradigms, a reevaluation of pathways to personal fulfillment, and a search for redefined conceptions of the “good life.” In response, this study advocates for a fundamental paradigm shift within university-based ideological and political education—from prescriptive critique to empathetic engagement, and from abstract idealism to grounded, pragmatic support. The paper proposes a comprehensive, four-dimensional intervention strategy termed “Meaning Healing – Career Reconstruction – Value Clarification – Action Empowerment.” This integrated model aims to equip youth with the analytical tools to understand structural constraints while fostering resilient agency, enabling them to navigate societal pressures, reconcile personal aspirations with collective well-being, and ultimately cultivate a sustainable and purposeful ethos of striving in the new era.

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1. Introduction: Discourses as Symptom and Mirror

The rapid ascent of “lying flat” and “involution” within Chinese public discourse is a culturally significant event (Zhu & Peng, 2024). Far from being transient slang, these terms have crystallized into powerful conceptual lenses through which millions of young people articulate their frustrations, navigations, and existential quandaries. They function simultaneously as a symptom of underlying socio-economic strains and a mirror reflecting the collective psyche of post-90s and post-00s generations navigating a rapidly transforming China.

This discursive emergence is contextualized by several intersecting macro-factors. First, China’s economic transition from high-speed to high-quality growth has recalibrated opportunity structures, with certain traditional avenues for upward mobility appearing to narrow. Second, the expansion of higher education has democratized access but also intensified competition for prestigious graduate positions and elite jobs, creating a bottleneck effect (Marginson, 2016). Third, the pervasive influence of digital media amplifies comparative social evaluation (Festinger, 1954), making visible both exceptional successes and widespread anxieties, thereby heightening perceptions of competition and relative deprivation. Within this crucible, “lying flat” and “involution” have emerged as two sides of the same coin—divergent yet interconnected coping mechanisms for a shared environment of pressure.

For higher education institutions, which serve as the primary congregating and socialization spaces for youth, these discourses present both a challenge and an imperative. Ideological and political education, a cornerstone of the Chinese university system, risks irrelevance if it fails to engage authentically with the

raw realities these terms represent. A pedagogy that merely dismisses “lying flat” as laziness or glorifies relentless “involution” as virtuous struggle will alienate the very constituents it seeks to guide. Therefore, a systematic, scholarly, and empathetic unpacking of these mentalities is not merely academically interesting but a matter of urgent practical necessity. This paper seeks to contribute to this effort by deconstructing the logics of these discourses and proposing a constructive framework for educational response.

2. Deconstructing “Lying Flat”: Beyond Passivity to Strategic Withdrawal

The discourse of “lying flat” is often interpreted in public commentary as a sign of passivity or declining work ethic among young people. Such readings are overly simplistic. A closer examination suggests that “lying flat” reflects a selective disengagement from forms of competition that are perceived as increasingly costly, unequal, or lacking in meaning, within a broader context of socio-economic insecurity (Standing, 2011).

At its core, “lying flat” is shaped by two interrelated psychological mechanisms: relative deprivation and declining effort–reward efficacy. Relative deprivation refers to the frustration that arises when individuals perceive a widening gap between their actual position and socially expected life outcomes, often in comparison with peers or public promises (Smith, Pettigrew, Pippin & Bialosiewicz, 2012). For many young people, the long-standing expectation that hard work and educational achievement will reliably secure upward mobility has weakened. When sustained effort does not translate into housing security, stable employment, or an improved quality of life, frustration and disillusionment accumulate.

At the same time, belief in effort–reward efficacy is weakened. The issue is not necessarily absolute deprivation, but the growing perception that additional effort no longer yields proportionate returns in life chances or social mobility. Under such conditions, continued over-investment in competition begins to lose its legitimacy in the eyes of many young people.

In this sense, “lying flat” may be understood as a form of strategic withdrawal rather than simple resignation. It reflects an attempt to reduce participation in forms of competition perceived as unsustainable or normatively unconvincing. Although this response may involve social and economic trade-offs, it also signals a re-evaluation of dominant success narratives and of the costs associated with constant striving.

3. Interrogating “Involution”: The Trap of Intensive Growth Without Progress

If “lying flat” represents a withdrawal from competitive structures, “involution” captures the experience of being trapped within intensified competition. Anthropologically, involution refers to a process where a system develops increasing internal complexity and sophistication without achieving substantive expansion or breakthroughs. Applied to social behavior, it describes a state of hyper-competition over fixed or slowly growing resources (Huang, 1985), leading to an escalation of input for stagnant or diminishing marginal output. The phenomenon is particularly visible in educational and early career contexts, where competition intensifies without clear expansion of opportunities, reinforcing a meritocratic logic in which individuals are compelled to continuously demonstrate their worth through performance (Sandel, 2020). Individuals are required to invest increasing levels of time and effort merely to maintain their relative position, rather than to achieve substantive advancement (Brown, Lauder & Ashton, 2011). Under such conditions, evaluative standards continuously escalate, reinforcing a cycle of self-intensifying competition (Collins, 1979/2019 ed.).

The consequences of involution operate at multiple levels. At the individual level, it is associated with burnout, anxiety, and the erosion of intrinsic motivation. At the collective level, it results in inefficient allocation of effort, as excessive competition is directed toward positional advantage rather than value creation. More critically, involution generates a crisis of meaning, as individuals struggle to articulate purposes beyond continuous competition (Pascoe, Hetrick & Parker, 2020).

Involution also produces a crisis of meaning. As competitive activity becomes an end in itself, the original purposes of education and work are obscured. Individuals may find it increasingly difficult to justify sustained effort beyond the immediate demands of competition.

4. Synergistic Dilemmas: The Shared Structural Roots

While appearing as opposites, “lying flat” and “involution” are symbiotic responses to a common set of structural conditions. They represent two points on a spectrum of adaptation to perceived systemic constraints. (Avent-Holt, et al., 2020) Together, they illuminate several synergistic dilemmas facing contemporary youth:

- 1). The Meaning Dilemma: The meaning dilemma reflects the erosion of stable value frameworks under conditions of intensified competition, leaving young people uncertain about what constitutes a meaningful life.
- 2). The Opportunity Dilemma: The opportunity dilemma arises from the coexistence of expanded educational access and limited high-quality career pathways, which intensifies competition at key transition points.
- 3). The Agency Dilemma: The agency dilemma reflects a perceived mismatch between large-scale structural forces and individual capacity to influence outcomes, contributing to feelings of constraint and reduced personal efficacy.
- 4). The Value Dissonance Dilemma: The value dissonance dilemma captures tensions between competing value orientations, such as collective

expectations and individual aspirations, or continuous striving and the need for personal well-being.

The four-dimensional strategy proposed below is analytically grounded in the structural dilemmas identified in the previous section. Specifically, the meaning dilemma gives rise to the need for meaning reconstruction; the opportunity dilemma points to the necessity of career reconfiguration; the value dissonance dilemma requires processes of value clarification; and the agency dilemma calls for forms of action empowerment. In this sense, the proposed framework is not a set of abstract recommendations, but a structured response to the conditions shaping youth mentality under the dual pressures of “lying flat” and “involution”.

5. Paradigm Shift in Ideological and Political Education: From Transmission to Translation

Confronted with these complex mentalities, traditional modes of ideological and political education, often characterized by top-down moral exhortation and the presentation of idealized models, are increasingly ineffective. A paradigm shift is essential. The educator’s role must evolve from that of a transmitter of fixed truths to a translator and facilitator who helps students make sense of the dissonance between official narratives and lived experience (Baume & Kahn, (Eds.), 2003). This new paradigm is built on two pillars: deep dialogue and realistic care. Deep dialogue requires creating non-judgmental spaces where students can voice their doubts, fears, and frustrations about “lying flat” and “involution” without fear of reprimand. It involves listening to understand, not to immediately correct. Realistic care moves beyond praising abstract ideals of struggle to acknowledging the concrete difficulties students face—unaffordable housing, precarious employment, mental health struggles. It validates their challenges as real, not merely as failures of willpower.

The goal is not to endorse “lying flat” or condemn “involution” outright, but to use these discourses as entry points for critical thinking about society, self,

and the relationship between them. Education must equip students to analyze these conditions, not just endure or escape them. The following four-dimensional framework operationalizes this paradigm shift.

5.1 Four-Dimensional Guidance Strategy

5.1.1 Meaning Healing: Reconstructing Value Coordinates Through Existential Dialogue

The first task is to address the crisis of meaning. This dimension is theoretically grounded in existential psychology and narrative identity theory, which emphasize the reconstruction of meaning under conditions of uncertainty and disruption. Facilitating Existential Conversations: Courses and workshops can explore fundamental questions: What makes a life meaningful beyond external achievements? How do we find purpose in conditions of uncertainty? How can we balance acceptance of life’s limitations with commitment to valued action? Broadening Success Narratives: Move beyond a monolithic “rags-to-riches” or “serve the nation” template. Introduce students to diverse biographies—artists, community organizers, skilled technicians, caregivers, entrepreneurs—who have found fulfillment on different paths. Highlight the concepts of eudaimonia (flourishing) versus mere hedonia (pleasure). (Ryan & Deci, 2001) Connecting Micro and Macro: Help students build a personal narrative that connects their skills and passions to larger social needs. This is not about grand, sacrificial gestures, but about seeing how one’s unique contribution, however modest, fits into a broader tapestry. Project-based learning that addresses community issues can make this connection tangible, transforming a sense of powerless alienation into one of grounded agency.

5.1.2 Career Reconstruction: Mapping a Pluralistic Landscape of Possibility

This dimension is informed by career construction theory and research on career adaptability, which view career development as a dynamic process

shaped by individual agency and changing opportunity structures. To counter the funnel effect that drives involution, students need a genuinely expanded vision of possible futures. **Systematic Career Exposure:** Integrate comprehensive, longitudinal career education from the first year. This should go beyond annual job fairs. It involves: **Alumni Networks:** Showcasing diverse career trajectories of graduates, not just the most visibly successful. **Industry Immersion:** Short-term site visits, shadowing programs, and project collaborations with a wide range of sectors, including non-profits, cultural institutions, and grassroots innovation. **Deconstructing Prestige:** Critically examine why certain careers are deemed “prestigious” and explore the hidden rewards (autonomy, mastery, balance, community impact) of others. **Cultivating Career Adaptability:** In a volatile job market, the goal is not to prepare for a single job but to develop meta-skills: self-awareness, opportunity recognition, strategic networking, and resilience in the face of setbacks, consistent with career construction theory (Savickas, 2013; Ammons, 2013). Teach students to think of their career as a portfolio of skills and experiences they curate over time, not a linear ladder to climb. **Validating Alternative Rhythms:** Challenge the “social clock.” Educate students about non-linear paths—gap years, mid-career pivots, portfolio careers, social entrepreneurship. Reduce the stigma around taking time to explore or choosing a slower-paced, lower-pressure life if it aligns with personal values.

5.1.3 Value Clarification: Discernment Between Healthy Striving and Pathological Competition

This dimension draws on value theory and self-determination theory, which distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and highlight the importance of internally endorsed goals for sustainable engagement. This dimension involves sharpening critical thinking to distinguish between different modes of engagement. **Conceptual Triangulation:** Lead students in analytically comparing “Healthy Striving,” “Involution,” and

“Lying Flat.” Create definitions: **Healthy Striving:** Goal-oriented, intrinsically motivated, sustainable, allows for recovery, aligned with personal values, and open to multiple definitions of success. (Deci & Ryan, 2000) **Involution:** Extrinsically motivated, compulsive, focused on relative position over absolute growth, unsustainable, leads to burnout and cynicism. **Lying Flat:** A disengagement from specific competitions perceived as unjust or meaningless, which can range from passive defeatism to active pursuit of alternative values (simplicity, autonomy, peace of mind). **Promoting a Sustainable Ethic:** Advocate for a balanced, holistic view of success that integrates professional achievement with physical health, mental well-being, rich relationships, and civic engagement. Critically discuss the “hustle culture” and its human costs. **From Individual Competitor to Civic Actor:** Expand students’ sense of agency beyond personal competition. Introduce them to social theory, political economy, and grassroots organizing. Help them understand that while they must navigate existing structures, they can also be agents in shaping fairer systems. This transforms frustration with “the system” into a motivation for informed civic participation.

5.1.4 Action Empowerment: Micro-Practices for Regaining Agency

This dimension is grounded in theories of agency and experiential learning, which emphasize the role of action, reflection, and situated practice in rebuilding a sense of efficacy. The final dimension translates insight and clarified values into concrete, manageable actions that rebuild a sense of efficacy. **Micro-Impact Projects:** Design curricula that require students to identify and address a small, local problem—improving a campus facility, teaching a skill to community children, creating a public history exhibit. The focus is on the complete cycle: ideation, planning, execution, and reflection. Success is measured by learning and completion, not scale, fostering a sense of competence. **Innovation Sandboxes:** Provide low-stakes platforms for experimentation. This could be a social

innovation fund for student proposals, a makerspace for prototyping ideas, or a digital platform for sharing creative work. The goal is to cultivate a mindset of “doing and making” outside the grade-driven economy. Skill-Building for Resilience: Offer mandatory or widely available workshops on practical life skills: financial literacy, time and energy management (not just efficiency), mindfulness and stress-reduction techniques, and assertive communication. These are tools for managing the pressures of modern life, increasing students’ sense of control over their immediate environment. Reflective Practice Integration: Build structured reflection into all dimensions. Use journals, portfolio assessments, and group debriefs to help students articulate their evolving understanding of meaning, career, values, and agency. This metacognitive process solidifies learning and fosters intentional living (Schön, 1983).

6. Conclusion: Towards a Resilient and Purposeful

Ethos

The discourses of “lying flat” and “involution” are more than complaints; they are diagnostic tools illuminating the fault lines in contemporary social and economic life for Chinese youth. They represent a generation’s groping for authenticity, fairness, and

meaning in a context of high-pressure transition. A punitive or dismissive response from educational institutions would be a profound mistake.

The proposed four-dimensional strategy—Meaning Healing, Career Reconstruction, Value Clarification, and Action Empowerment—offers a constructive path forward. It recognizes the structural origins of youth distress while affirming their capacity for resilient agency. It seeks not to produce a generation of uncritical strivers nor disengaged cynics, but one of reflective agents. These are individuals who can critically analyze social pressures, consciously define their own values and goals, navigate structures with pragmatic wisdom, and contribute to their communities from a place of grounded purpose rather than anxious competition or resigned withdrawal.

This also requires helping youth develop the capacity to understand the structural conditions underlying “lying flat” and “involution,” rather than reducing these phenomena to individual attitudes. It involves supporting the formation of flexible value orientations that balance collective expectations with individual aspirations, as well as achievement with well-being. In this process, educators need to shift from transmitters of fixed norms to facilitators of meaning-making and adaptive development.

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