Rising Tides: Bilibili's Speech for the New Generation (Bilibili 献给新一代的演讲《后浪》)
PC: bilibili.com.

Disarticulating Qingnian

Chinese Youth beyond 'Rising Tides' and 'Lying Flat'

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This essay explores youth in today's China by analysing Bilibili's widely viewed Rising Tides video and the recent 'lying flat' campaign. To put these two phenomena in context, the essay examines a group of young students who are able to move beyond the confines of the position designated them by the state and the market through knowledge accumulation, cooperation, and network-building, but unable to become an autonomous social force.

The ideas expressed in this essay draw from an article entitled 'Beyond "Rising Tides" and "Lying Flat": Emergent Cultural Practices among Youth in Urban China', forthcoming in the 2022 spring issue of *CLC Web: Comparative Literature and Culture*.

Youth (青年, *qingnian*) as a subject has been a key element in the ideal of national rejuvenation since the beginning of the twentieth century—from the May Fourth Movement to the Communist Revolution, from the Cultural Revolution to the 1989 Democracy Movement (Song 2016; for a discussion of the ambiguity of biological and sociological categorisations of youth, see Lanza 2012). Over the past decade, different but interacting discourses on the history, definition, and role of youth have emerged and sometimes clashed, including the normative-prescriptive discourse of the Party-State, the productive and hedonistic discourse of the market, and the discourse of societal autonomy and heterogeneity. In his article 'World Factory', Christopher Connery (2020) proposed defining the decade from 2005 to 2015 as the 'post-WTO era'—a useful periodisation for

investigating the sociocultural development of China over the past two decades. In that post-World Trade Organization (WTO) era, which Connery believes was a ‘unicum’, it was possible to imagine different futures. The Harmonious Society (和谐社会) discourse of the post-WTO era produced different imaginaries and the visualisation of possible futures through social conflict, intellectual debate, and a relatively open political climate. The origins of this decade were in the radical transformations during the second period of the Reform and Opening Up program inaugurated in the 1990s, which not only produced the ‘economic miracle’ but also generated a profound anthropological transformation. Approaching these transformations from the analysis of youth subjectivity can provide some novel insight into contemporary Chinese society, or at least open a debate about how to disarticulate the *qingnian* subject.

The end of the post-WTO period can be seen in many different contexts—in the cultural field, in capital–labour conflicts, or in the political field—but the force behind the conclusion of this period was the rise of Xi Jinping and his ‘Chinese Dream’. The souverainiste nationalism that now characterises China’s policies, both internally and externally, has progressively sought to reduce the heterogeneity and autonomy engendered by the social ferment of previous years. This ideology was evident in all its force in the confrontations and suppression of the Hong Kong revolt of 2019—another signpost of the end of the post-WTO period. In this Chinese periphery, it became clear, in a negative way, what kinds of definitions of youth are accepted by official narratives: the youth in revolt were referred to as ‘wasted youth’ (废青) and the political motivations of the revolt were reduced to mere economic causes, such as lack of housing and employment (for an analysis of the revolt and the role of young people in the 2019 Hong Kong movement, see Au 2020). The dominant ideology in President Xi’s China has put pressure on and reduced the scope for social autonomy and has opposed heterogeneity with a unifying concept of society, its groups, and its differences. This attempt at discipline appears to be most clearly and contradictorily aimed at young people.

In this essay, we explore the youth subject in the post-WTO era by analysing the recent ‘rising tides’ and ‘lying flat’ phenomena. The essay demonstrates that Bilibili’s Party-State–endorsed *Rising Tides* video presents a unitary youth subject that is almost exclusively of educated middle-class urban background and is expected to turn every aspect of their life into an economic activity for the sake of the country’s ‘national rejuvenation’. While ‘lying flat’ is widely seen as resistance to this state-sponsored prescription for entrepreneurship and hard work, we argue that this phenomenon expresses the structure of feeling among today’s Chinese middle-class youth but still confines itself within the dominant state–market discourse. To better understand the heterogeneous and fragmented youth in China today, beyond analysis based merely on memetic representation, we elaborate on the experiences of a group of young students, exploring the ambiguities, contradictions, and predicaments emerging from the interplay between economics, politics, and biology in their lives.

The essay is structured in four sections: the first examines how the youth subject is positioned in Xi’s formulation of the Chinese Dream; the second analyses how young people are represented through a close study of the *Rising Tides* video; the third presents the ‘lying flat’ movement, discussing it as a passive reaction to the discourse presented in the *Rising Tides* video; and the final section details the development of a student group, based on three years of participant-observation.

Youth in Xi Jinping’s Chinese Dream

President Xi Jinping has emphasised the significance of youth in his formulation of the Chinese Dream on various occasions since the beginning of his term. He first elaborated on the relationship between the Chinese Dream and youth in his speech to ‘outstanding young representatives from all walks of life’ (在同各界优秀青年代表座谈时的讲话; officially translated into English as ‘Realise Youthful Dreams’), delivered on 4 May 2013, China’s Youth Day (Xi 2020). In the speech,

Xi Jinping with participants to the meeting for 'outstanding young representatives from all walks of life', 4 May 2013. PC: Xinhua.

Xi stressed that 'young people represent the future of our country and the hope of our nation' and asked youth to put 'youthful dreams into action in the course of realising the Chinese Dream of the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation'. He urged youth to shoulder 'the heavy responsibilities that the times impose on us' to achieve the Chinese Dream. These responsibilities were encapsulated in the injunctions to: 1) firmly adopt the Chinese Communist Party's ideologies 'as a guideline for your life'; 2) 'orient yourself to modernisation, the world, and the future, have a sense of urgency in updating your knowledge ... enthusiastically develop skills, and constantly enhance your competence and capabilities to meet the development needs of our times and the requirements of our undertaking'; 3) 'dare to innovate and create' to drive 'the nation's progress and [provide] an inexhaustible source of the country's prosperity'; 4) devote oneself to hard work to achieve the nation's development goals; and 5) 'strengthen theoretical improvement and moral cultivation, take the initiative to carry forward patriotism, collectivism, and socialism, and actively advocate social and profes-

sional ethics, as well as family virtues'. In 2018 and 2020, Xi restated that 'a country will have a great tomorrow, and a nation will be full of hope, when the younger generations have ideals, ability, and a strong sense of responsibility', and called on Chinese youth to make greater contributions to China's development (Xinhua 2018; CGTN 2020).

Xi's Chinese Dream positions youth as not only the human capital driving national economic development but also the link between the past and the future, in line with the intellectual discourses of youth in China's twentieth century. The individual 'dreams' of youth are subsumed into the national dream; the category 'youth' is a product of the Party-State's mission of rejuvenation. The English translation of the term *faxing* (复兴), 'rejuvenation', seems to render more clearly the 'biological' role that young people are called on to play on the socialist stage of the Chinese Dream, while behind the scenes, a logic of neoliberal accumulation dominates society. As Ong and Zhang (2008: 15) have noted, post-Tiananmen youth have been directed to be self-reliant, enterprising, and constantly

developing, and to pursue individual interests in alignment with market activities and loyalty to the Party-State.

The emphasis on the valorisation and extraction of the human capital of young people is evident in Premier Li Keqiang's campaign for 'mass entrepreneurship and innovation', which encourages 'key groups, including college graduates and migrant workers, to start businesses and find jobs through multiple channels, and help micro, small and medium enterprises create jobs' (State Council 2021). The political role of Chinese youth from May 1919 to June 1989 has been subordinated to the teleological development of the Party-State, and is not part of the 'entrepreneurial rejuvenation' discourse. This policy of depoliticisation has dominated since the 1990s but in recent years has become even more pervasive. People, young or not, are no longer asked just to eschew involvement in politics; they are also required to join permanent mobilisations initiated from above (as in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic). The spaces of micro-freedom that 'socialism from afar' (Ong and Zhang 2008) usually leaves for individuals and social groups have been filled with prescriptive injunctions, just as urban and media landscapes are filled with symbols of the Party-State—the same symbols that in the post-WTO period were usually hidden from view.

There is a gap between the normative discourse of the Party-State and the daily practices of young people, as the official discourse 'fails to recognize the ongoing social differentiation and segmentation that drive today's youths into another historical maelstrom of unprecedented changes, escalating risks, contingencies, jeopardies, and struggles' (Hui 2020: 3). As Hui Faye Xiao (2020) has recently argued, 'it has become clear that the lives of the [Chinese] youth—their aspirations and apprehensions, socio-economic statuses, signifying systems, and cultural imaginaries—have been conditioned by age, class, ethnicity, and gender-specific socio-economic variables'. The official discourse defines youth within the urban middle and upper-middle classes. As we will see below, these groups of young people are now the ones causing concern in the Chinese media and making social engineers anxious because the official blueprint for

China's future is being undermined. For instance, the prescription for parents to have more children in the face of demographic decline clashes with lifestyles that no longer revolve around traditional family values and gender norms (for a discussion of social reproduction, see Dong 2021). The insistence on a strong work ethic ideologically justifies China's overtime culture, thus reducing the space for creativity and consumption, as seen in the case of the '996' campaign (Li 2019), and triggering opposition. In short, it seems the 'national' interests of the Party-State and the 'individual' interests of post-1990s and post-2000s young people—respectively called the 'Me generation' and 'Z generation'—are increasingly diverging. And yet, according to the dominant instrumental rationality, each side needs the other.

In this context, the prescriptions of the Party-State, imbued with 'positive energy' (正能量) (Chen and Wang 2020), have generated a 'negative' response from young people—a refusal that is limited to the discursive sphere of the state and the market. This refusal, expressed on social media in words and memes, is part of an emerging structure of feeling. However, without an investigation of the daily practices of young people, there is a significant risk of mistaking this phenomenon for what it is not: a manifestation of opposition to the Party, refusal of work, and criticism of capitalism with Chinese characteristics.

Rising Tides

On 3 May 2020, one day before China's annual Youth Day, the popular youth-oriented video streaming and sharing giant Bilibili released a video—created in partnership with various state-run media and platforms—dedicated to Chinese youth, entitled *Rising Tides: Bilibili's Speech for the New Generation* (Bilibili 献给新一代的演讲《后浪》) (Bilibili 2020). Featuring 52-year-old male actor He Bing, the clip soon went viral on the Chinese internet, receiving tens of millions of views on Bilibili and other major social media platforms, including Weibo and WeChat. At the same time, state-run media, such as the *People's Daily* (人民

日报), expressed approval and reposted the video on their official social media accounts (The Paper 2020). This was at a time when China had just managed to control the spread of Covid-19 after the Wuhan outbreak earlier that year and when Hong Kong youth—the critical force behind the 2019 social movement—were still protesting. Yet, the video represented neither the traumatic experience of the pandemic nor the trauma of the young Hong Kong protesters.

In almost four minutes, He Bing, as a representative of the older generation, lectures youth in a masculine tone, accompanied by footage of smiling young people against an urban background. The term *houlang* (后浪), literally meaning ‘rising wave’ in English, is a metaphor for the young generation based on the Chinese idiom ‘the waves of the Yangtze River from behind drive on those ahead’ (长江后浪推前浪). It suggests the new generation surpasses the old. In the first 30 seconds of the video, He first disputes the idea that ‘each generation is worse than the last’ and expresses his ‘envy’ of today’s youth, whom he thinks are living their best lives and possess everything the older generation could only dream of. The actor reminds viewers that it is because of the hard work of the older generation that young people can enjoy the gifts of ‘all the wealth, knowledge, intelligence, and art’ and ‘the prosperity of technoscience, culture, and the urban world’. This description of the position of youth in contemporary history strongly echoes Xi Jinping’s 2013 speech ‘Realise Youthful Dreams’, in which he stated that ‘the closer we are to achieving the goal of the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, the more we should redouble our efforts and not slacken our pace, and the more we must mobilise all young people to this end’. As such, history is depicted as linear and progressive, with the ‘wealth of humanity’ accumulated generation after generation. As an emblem of the Party-State, the actor suggests young people must be grateful to their elder generations for their hard work and should work even harder themselves to ‘surpass their elders’ and achieve national rejuvenation.

After praising the unprecedentedly prosperous epoch in which Chinese youths now live, He Bing depicts young people as those who have ‘freedom

to learn a new language and a new skill, to enjoy a movie, and travel long distances’, and is accompanied by images of youths smiling as they use virtual reality, learn English with an iPad, build a robot, travel, and document their lives using expensive digital devices. The youth presented in the video are almost exclusively middle-class urban subjects who have not only the economic capacity to consume high-tech products and afford urban lifestyles, but also high skills and capabilities. By presenting the experiences of urban middle-class youth as authentic and universal for the whole generation, the video intends to incite ‘aspiring individuals to adhere to new social norms of middle-class identity often defined around consumer practices’ (Anagnost 2008: 498). The video contributes to the myth of the young middle class as the symbol of China’s rise. As Roland Barthes (1957: 181–223) argued in *Mythologies*, myth does not obscure; on the contrary, through exposing the subject of *youth*, myth alienates and empties it, and erases its complexity and irreducibility.

In the second minute of the video, He Bing passionately urges young people to turn their abilities and what they love into a career that can be shared with millions of people. Youth are encouraged to capitalise on and turn their experiential knowledge into ‘part of the culture of everyday life’ (Gorz 2010: 11), into productive activities. In this view, young people become not only consumers but also producers, which is the same mechanism at work on platforms like Bilibili—and, in fact, the footage of young people used in the video was produced and uploaded by Bilibili’s users. The video’s promotion of ‘do what you love’ romanticises work as a self-motivating mechanism that directs middle-class youth to capitalise on their biopolitical capacities, including knowledge, language and communication skills, experiences, and affect, and to embrace precarity, flexibility, and risk as new norms in the creative economy (Weeks 2018; McRobbie 2015). Moreover, the video’s call to turn passion and love into work propels young workers to self-exploitation and prohibits them from expressing the negative feelings resulting from the overtime culture prevalent in China’s tech industry.

Compelling youth to dedicate their lives to work, the *Rising Tides* video as a commercial production caters to the government's call for mass entrepreneurship and innovation. Since 2013, Premier Li has repeatedly asked young people to start their own businesses under the aegis of 'mass entrepreneurship and innovation' (State Council 2021). He has been calling China's 900 million-strong workforce a 'goldmine' that 'provides a constant source of creativity and wealth' for economic growth, and asking young people, especially college graduates, to use their creativity to generate jobs for themselves (State Council 2016). Similarly, Xi Jinping (2020) considers youth 'the most creative group of the country' and has urged them to 'work long and hard without let-up' to contribute to the country's development goals. In this way, the video reinforces its mixed commercial and ideological nature, and shapes a normative 'qingnian' subject that is expected to be productive and to turn every aspect of their life into an economic activity in accordance with the country's modernisation project.

In the final minute of the video, youth are called on to contribute to the epoch and the nation. In an emotional crescendo, the actor claims only the weak criticise whereas the strong always eulogise and stay confident, and praises the 'self-confidence' (自信) of youth, which resonates with the official discourse of bolstering China's cultural self-confidence (文化自信) (Xi 2016). The actor then expresses his respect for and gratitude to those affluent, confident, and skilful young subjects who are seen as the products of a strong nation. Hence, youth become an ideological link between the neoliberal discourse of 'do what you love' and the Party-State's ideology of building a confident, powerful nation. The positive and bright portrayal of youth concludes with a statement: 'Thanks to you young people, the world likes China more because the best landscape of a nation is its youth.' In the end, the actor, playing the role of a symbol of the state and the market, gives his blessing to the young generation with a rousing call: 'Rising tides, surge!' (奔涌吧, 后浪!).

While portrayed as cheerful, productive, and grateful, the youths in the video are silent. They do not have voices of their own; the only subject who has a voice is the actor, who symbolises the older

generation, the market, and more importantly, the 'positive energy' required by the Party-State. This positioning reduces the complexity of the youth subject to the point of abstracting them from socio-historical reality and representing them as a unitary subject. In this context, the construction of the *qingnian* subject is bound to remain abstract as the commercial and official representations produce and position such a subject through a prescriptive discourse. The *Rising Tide* video reveals the state's and the market's anxiety over the capacity of the young productive populace to 'surge' (奔涌). At the same time, it repeats in a meta-communicative way that, as a subject, young people are entirely a product of the 'dream' of the older generations.

Lying Flat and Garlic Chives

In responding to the call of the state and the market to 'surge', young netizens launched a campaign to 'lie flat' (躺平, *tāngpíng*) as a way to resist the rosy and monolithic portrayal of Chinese youth. At the end of May 2021, a 30-year-old netizen published a post entitled 'Lying Flat Is Justice' (躺平即是正义), sharing the life lessons he learned from two years of joblessness. The post called on young workers and professionals, including middle-class youth, to avoid work and consumption, and live with minimum expenses and desires. The post reads: 'You just lie flat. Lying flat at home, lying flat outside, lying flat like the street cats and dogs ... I choose to lie flat, and I'm no longer stressed' (Tang and Yang 2021). Although the post and relevant online discussion groups were soon censored, the article still went viral and was widely shared on the Chinese internet, especially among youths tired of the '996' overwork culture prevalent in China's big tech firms in recent years. To a certain extent, the lying flat movement thwarts the governmental desire to foster a productive young populace. In responding to the 'positive energy' sponsored by the Party-State and the market, youth answered with negative attitudes, including by refusing to marry, to have children, and to buy property, and consuming as little as possible. This 'lying flat' movement, initiated from below, can be seen as

躺平

躺平 *Lying Flat*. PC: enanyang.my.

a strategy of withdrawal from the imperative to maximise consumption and production and a refusal of the endless demands for competitiveness and constant self-improvement.

Reactions to the 'lying flat' movement have been varied. In an extremely hardline stance, the state mouthpiece *Global Times* wrote:

China is at one of the most challenging stages of its long road to national rejuvenation. Young people are the hope of the nation, and neither their personal situation nor that of the country will allow them to 'lie down' collectively. Whether active or passive, they will be the most hard-working and mentally strongest group of people in the world. Let's just say that no matter how late they sleep, and whether the reason for their late sleep is working overtime or gaming, the times will wake them up again and again at dawn. (Global Times 2021)

On the opposite front, Xu Jilin (2021), a well-known liberal historian and public intellectual, took a rather open stance in a video speech on the post-1990s generation on his official WeChat account. In it, he argues that the generations from the 1950s to the 1980s believe 'individual family and country are the same' and are indissolubly linked with the destiny of the nation, whereas the post-1990s generation considers 'the country is the country, and the individual is the individual'. For Xu, members of the young generation, growing up in a virtual world, are individualistic, focused on pursuing their own interests, embrace instrumental rationality, and believe in the narrative of 'successful people' (成功人士). Still, Xu thinks it is

necessary to have a positive attitude towards the post-1990s generation as the fate of China depends on them. To pull young people back from their individualistic virtual world, Xu suggests companies must create space for young people to freely use their creative and imaginative skills to contribute to society. In this way, Xu believes the anxiety (焦虑) generated by the process of 'involution' (内卷化)—which scholar Xiang Biao (2020) describes as 'an endless cycle of self-flagellation, feeling as if you're running in place and constantly having to motivate yourself day in, day out' and 'a highly dynamic trap which consumes a lot of energy'—and the feeling of being trapped in the system (困在系统中) can be alleviated among China's youth. Xu's advice is more like a Chinese version of the subsumption of desire, hobbies, and creativity for capitalist and national productivity. If the 'lying flat' phenomenon to which Xu refers indicates anything to us, it is the suggestion of a different perception and experience of space and time: the horizontal body on a sofa or a bed calls into question the progressive modernising temporality of the nation and the mission that young people are called on to fulfil for their country. It is no longer a question of a disconnection between the individual and the state, but of a different spatial and temporal horizon. As mentioned, the relationship between the two actors is one of pure instrumentality. Misunderstanding, if not indifference and annoyance, reigns supreme.

A recent essay by Pang Laikwan (2021) provides significant insights for understanding the *qingnian* subject and the *tangping* phenomenon through the examination of 'garlic chives' (韭菜, *jiucaī*)—a popular online expression that came into use before 'lying flat' as a metaphor for 'those ordinary Chinese people who are constantly lured to participate in all kinds of economic activities, but whose investments are destined to be consumed by the establishment' (Pang 2021: 3). Reinterpreting Foucault in a Chinese context, Pang considers the garlic chives meme a 'reflection' by Chinese citizens—in particular, young people—on their own condition. In addition to considering the subjectivity of Chinese citizens, Pang's article focuses on China's economic sovereignty. Economic development and success in handling the 2008

Global Financial Crisis, the trade war with the United States, and finally, the management of the pandemic are portrayed by the Chinese Government as proof of China's developmental statism. However, as Pang notes, this development is based on extreme internal competition among towns, cities, and people. This explains the immediate spread of the 'involution' term in recent years in Chinese media and academia. Pang (2021: 6) describes 'the ferocious rivalry and competition Chinese citizens need to face, to the extent where even toddlers in kindergarten are already exposed to a rhetoric of comparison and competition'.

In a context in which economic sovereignty does not guarantee political sovereignty, citizens express their frustration, especially the young, who see themselves as 'garlic chives': biological matter waiting to be harvested. The economic subject represented as *jiucaai* is driven to embrace entrepreneurship under Li Keqiang's call for 'mass entrepreneurship and innovation' and to increase production under the ideology of labour encompassed by the Chinese Dream, which sees hard work as the 'inherent spirit of the Chinese race'. Entrepreneurs and indefatigable workers—the *jiucaai*—are 'trapped in a perpetual present, obedient and submissive to their biological drive' (Pang 2021: 14). The link Pang sees between the biological and the political emerges as the population ages, and consequently there is less and less *jiucaai* to be chopped for economic development. Here official ideology intervenes, as in the case of the *Rising Tides* video:

[I]n the official ideology the young people are adulated, but in reality they are *jiucaai*. It is also through this bizarre devotion of the sickle to the garlic chives that the latter might be sensitized to regain their political consciousness. (Pang 2021: 9)

For the *jiucaai*, the only way to avoid being harvested by the sickle is to lie flat. Lying flat is therefore seen as a passive revolt against the culture of work and entrepreneurship. Pang does not romanticise the agency of *jiucaai* and *tangping*; in her view, it is not this 'subject' that can perform social transformation. However, she does express

hope for *jiucaai* and *tangping*: 'I hope to see the Chinese citizens capable of seeing themselves as neither isolated entrepreneurs nor as a unified people, but a plural existence of many individuals different from each other, upon which a political community can be built' (Pang 2021: 16). Pang is aware the life power of *jiucaai* can be appropriated by the regime, but she believes 'it could also become a mighty, resilient force if it could gain intersubjective awareness through its continual becoming' (Pang 2021: 16).

Between the meme as metaphor and self-reflection, the structure of feeling the 'lying flat' phenomenon expresses, and the daily practice of young people, there is a distance that needs to be bridged by fieldwork. In the case of 'rising tides' and 'lying flat', we are faced with a discourse in which the positive energy of official ideology is answered with negative energy. Chinese youth passively express their reluctance to contribute to the Chinese Dream and the endless rat race it entails. Nevertheless, 'lying flat' is neither a countercultural movement nor a protest movement. It refuses action, and any identification on which a youthful subjectivity can be anchored. The 'lying flat' phenomenon expresses the structure of feeling among Chinese youth today, but it confines itself within the positive/negative discourse. In everyday life, 'negative energy' gives way to practices that not only disarticulate the *qingnian* subject and the future of the nation, but also highlight the possibilities and limitations of a heterogeneous multitude.

It is not a matter of investigating a new social subject that is often positioned within the rhetorical and ideological question of 'Where is China going?' Based on our preliminary analysis, this youthful multitude is fluid, hyperconnected, and hyper-specialised. The knowledge they accumulate and share cooperatively through social media is used in practices characterised by extreme fluidity. Fluidity of identity, sexuality, and social relations protects this variegated multitude from subsumption by power—that is, by the state and the market. Fluidity favours the circulation and excess of knowledge that characterises young people, but at the same time produces continuous divisions within youth social groups as they come into being,

producing ‘sad passions’ and ‘detrimental encounters’ (on the former, see Benasayag and Schmit 2003; on the latter, see Hardt and Negri 2009).

From Marxism-Leninism to ‘Doing Nothing-ism’

So far, we have examined Chinese youth through the discourse of ‘rising tides’ and ‘lying flat’ and pointed out the limitations of an analysis of youth based *only* on online representations. Thus, this section will offer a case study of a student group to explore how educated middle-class young people’s accumulation of knowledge and cooperation enable them to exceed the subject position designated by the state, yet at the same time prevent them becoming an autonomous social force. Since 2018, we have followed a left-wing student group from an elite Chinese university. Most members are male, between 18 and 30 years of age, and their numbers have fluctuated over the years, from 20 down to only three. In the second half of 2018, the group was established with the aim of studying Marxism-Leninism collectively, reading Mao Zedong’s works, translating relevant articles, and conducting political interventions among workers. The initial goal was therefore to set up a student association (学生社团) following the traditions of Marxist societies in several other elite universities, such as Peking University. Yet, following the crackdown on labour activists in the wake of the Jasic incident in the summer of 2018 (for a discussion, see Zhang 2020), Marxist student groups in universities were closely watched and tightly controlled (Lau 2018; Shih 2019). Against this background, the newly formed student group was unable to register and obtain the endorsement of the university authorities, so had to recruit students and meet informally.

Initially, the group recruited new members based on a simple ideological formula—namely, that the revolutionary subject is the Chinese working class, and students and intellectuals must participate in and lead the process of class emancipation. However, after only a few months, as they began receiving attention and pressure from the

university and the relevant authorities, they had to shift course. Without the possibility of taking root in the university, they gradually abandoned their Marxist-Leninist ideological orthodoxy and began paying attention to feminist issues. In this, they were inspired by China’s #MeToo movement and by communications with several groups in other universities, especially with a LGBTQ student association. Without a clear structure, the group was loosely connected through organising cultural events and translation projects. They collectively translated articles on diverse topics, publishing them on their group’s WeChat account. The translations became a way for them to ‘be together’ virtually and critically reflect on social issues. In addition, a few core members also occasionally organised film screenings at the university and conducted fieldwork into the working conditions of logistics workers. The group also paid much attention to building networks with students and activists from different cities. Cooperating with other student organisations and young people in the city, they organised voluntary activities for workers suffering during the Covid-19 outbreak in February 2020 and for the victims of the record-breaking flooding in Zhengzhou, Henan Province, in the summer of 2021. It is worth mentioning most members of the group were from middle-class families, with high cultural and social capital.

Through cooperation, communication, and network-building with different groups, the members of the student group accumulated knowledge they could not learn in their university classrooms, thus *exceeding* the *qingnian* subject position designated for them by the state and the market. One main characteristic of this excess is the fluidity we mentioned above. Partly because communications and networking inside and outside the group were highly reliant on social media, the group was able to develop and explore social, sexual, and cognitive relationships in a relatively fluid way. For instance, unlike a traditional Marxist-Leninist student organisation, the group did not have a strict top-down structure and its internal hierarchy was not based on a fixed political line or ideology. In fact, they had only a *de facto* leader, who decided what to translate, assigned tasks to other members, and decided

who could be included as key members. As the group members mostly communicated through their WeChat group, each could join and quit a project and the group freely. In addition, they created chat groups on Telegram and Signal to escape surveillance by the authorities. Not a few members identified as bisexual, and they discussed and explored their sexuality both within the group and with other LGBTQ groups. Their identity also changed from time to time; they initially branded themselves Marxist-Leninist, then feminists and, as we will explain below, as ‘doing nothing’ or doing ‘small things’. Such fluidity is a resource that protects the members of the group from both the unwanted attention of the authorities and the bitter instrumental rationality prevailing in society. In other words, fluidity can protect the group from the Party-State’s and the market’s attempts to extract value from the biopolitical potentialities of educated middle-class youth.

However, fluidity—of knowledge, experience, sexuality, and sociability—can be valorised by the market and the state. As Xu Jilin (2021) points out in his video, ‘society’ must be able to intercept these young people’s abilities to realise not only individual dreams, but also the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation. That is, Xu’s talk indicates that the state and the market should alleviate young people’s anxiety to better facilitate the establishment’s extraction of a bio-economic subject. For example, the Count, a former key member of the student group, was ‘discovered’ by a Chinese tech giant as soon as he graduated. It was not merely what he learnt from the university, but more importantly the knowledge, experience, and networks he accumulated in the student group that made him an attractive knowledge worker for the current mode of capitalist production based on immaterial capacities. At the Count’s farewell dinner on graduation, another student told him: ‘I can’t believe the guy who introduced me to David Graber’s *Bullshit Jobs* now is working for a tech giant.’

After the Count’s departure, the group entered a period of stagnation when only two or three members remained active. In September 2021, encouraged by the practices of cohabitation initiated by some educated youths in the city who used

their private living space to organise semi-public cultural events, the remaining members decided to rent a room in a flat in a gated community near the university. The students frequently used the kitchen for collective cooking and the 10-square-metre bedroom for sleeping, screening videos, dining, and discussions. Appropriating the name of a chat group, they later called the rented place ‘Doing Nothing Space’ (无所事事). Only those who are invited may enter this space, and most visitors are students whom the two core members know from other universities. ‘Doing nothing’ has different layers of meaning in the context of this group. The first layer indicates the group tries to stay low key and not engage in any sensitive issues to avoid attention from the authorities. The second is related to the group’s reflection on, and mocking of, the grand narratives of both the Chinese leftists and the Party-State. That is, by saying they are ‘doing nothing’, the student group claims they are not interested in big ideologies or big affairs, and would rather focus on doing ‘small things’, including cooking, drinking, dining, and watching films together. The final layer refers to their awareness of the uselessness and meaninglessness of their micro-level activities in such an invisible space.

Although it is small, with a maximum capacity of 10 people, the space is full of slogans and posters. To a certain extent, the ‘doing nothing space’ has itself begun to ‘speak’: on every wall, even in the bathroom, there are images and texts aiming to construct a fixed identity for the group—an identity that refers, sometimes in an exotic way, to a plural and radical young global Left. There is a lot of emphasis on sharing and sociability, particularly cooking and eating together. Even if they are not yet familiar with Ivan Illich, they are coming to understand that conviviality pertains to a social force that the group lacks. Their lack of engagement with society thus leads to their over-emphasis on fixing an identity, as exemplified in the slogans and posters on the walls. In addition, the enclosed space generates the inclusion/exclusion mechanism that divides those who are the owner-organisers from those who are the ‘guests’, leading to ‘detrimental encounters’.

Like many other semiprivate spaces that have proliferated in large cities in recent years, this semi-open ‘doing nothing’ space has advantages and limitations. On the one hand, the space has liberated these students, allowing them to collaborate and share resources. In this space, these young students can be together in person and, to a certain extent, escape from the increasingly tight control and surveillance that have been taking root at the university since the pandemic began. On the other hand, almost all the participants in the space have a middle-class background, with similar high levels of education and social capital. Moreover, the enclosed space has somewhat blocked fluidity as it required organisation and hierarchy, and thus partially introduced forms of instrumental rationality typical of the ‘outside’ society.

With only a few members left in the group, its future and that of the space are more uncertain than ever. We once asked the de facto leader why he did not recruit and foster younger undergraduate students to perpetuate the experience. He replied: ‘What is the point? They’ll graduate anyway.’ As for the future of the remaining three key members, one was planning to find an academic job, one has already been admitted into a postgraduate program, and one was applying for a postgraduate program while also thinking of taking a civil service entrance exam.

Disarticulating the Youth

To conclude, the ‘rising tides’ and ‘lying flat’ phenomena have provided an opportunity for us to explore and (dis-)articulate the *qingnian* subject in the post-WTO era. Since about 2013, the discourse of China’s rise and the Chinese Dream of ‘rejuvenation’ have prescribed a normative subject position for young people that pushes them to embrace the spirit of entrepreneurship and hard work. The future of Chinese youth has already been written by the ruling class, and leaves little room for young people to negotiate. Through an analysis of the *Rising Tides* video, this essay has disentangled the state’s instructions to young people, highlighting how it mixes both commercial and ideological

imperatives. The video presents a unitary youth subject that is almost exclusively of an educated middle-class urban background and is expected to turn every aspect of their life into an economic activity for the sake of the country’s modernisation project. We have argued that the normative appeal sponsored by both the state and the market reveals the anxiety of the Party-State over the *qingnian* subject, who has become so heterogeneous and fragmented it undermines the subject position prescribed in the hegemonic discourse.

In responding to the *Rising Tides* video, young people have initiated the ‘lying flat’ movement as a backlash against the endless demands to maximise their consumption and production. Although ‘lying flat’ expresses young people’s feelings of frustration and exhaustion, it is a reactive and negative response to the positive energy driven by official media and government campaigns. It refuses action and any identification on which a youthful subject can be anchored. In terms of representation, the dialectic between the Party-State’s call to ‘surge’ and youths’ reaction of ‘lying flat’ reveals only a blurred image of a more complex web of power relations intertwined with—as Pang Laikwan (2021) has pointed out—the biological, the political, and the economic. Other than analysing representations, this essay has provided a preliminary analysis of a Chinese student group in recent years. We have shown how these educated young students are able to move beyond the normative position designated by the state, the market, and higher education institutions through knowledge, cooperation, and network-building. From a hyperconnected Marxist-Leninist student group to a group based in a concrete space, they have explored different forms of being together and eagerly searching for their identity. Yet, these are intermittent and fragile moments, not a movement. Once they leave the university, their capabilities are quickly capitalised by the Party-State and the market either voluntarily or involuntarily. ■

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