



The Psychological Effects of Involution on China's Rising Generation

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Abstract. The academic pressure put on the rising generation in China is increasing as the competition for better resources in China gets more intense. As a result, a phenomenon called involution takes place in China. The Chinese equivalent for involution, “neijuan”, stands for rolling inwards. According to anthropologist Xiang Biao, this is an experience of being trapped in a never-ending competition that one can see is ultimately meaningless. The current trends of “laying flat” and “letting things rot” reflects that the young generation in China is already worn out under the high-stress lifestyle. Some basic needs such as housing and finding ideal occupations have become problems. Constant stress like this causes different problems amongst the young generation, for instance, learned helplessness and generalized anxiety disorder. This research discusses possible methods to help with this issue by analyzing the three different cases of the young Chinese generation.

This essay will show some possible psychological perspectives behind the involution, “laying flat”, and “letting things rot” trends in China through analyzing three different cases. This essay may provide some insight to some psychological mechanisms involved with the involution, “laying flat”, and “letting things rot” trends which could help people understand these trends with further experimental studies.

Keywords: involution, stress, general adaptation syndrome, conditioning, cognitive behavior therapy, meditation

1 Introduction

There is a variety of pressure put on the rising Chinese generation, from the academic stress on campus to the demanding work schedule of “996” which refers to working from nine in the morning to nine in the evening six days a week [1]. A phenomenon called “neijuan”, the Chinese equivalent for involution which stands for rolling inward, takes place in China. Accordingly, hashtags related to involution have reached more than one billion views on Weibo, a popular social media platform in the country, and were also included in a chart of the top 10 buzzwords in China in 2020 [2]. According to anthropologist Xiang Biao, this is an experience of being trapped in a never-ending competition that one can see is ultimately meaningless [1].

Involution causes a rise of several different social trends in China, including the “tang ping” (“laying flat”) trend and the “bai lan” (“letting things rot”) trend. While hashtags related to these topics are banned on Chinese social media [3], these trends continue to spread amongst the young generation in China and may cause some serious detrimental psychological issues in society.

2 Analysis

2.1 Case one: start-ups

The involution has impacted the new generation. As stated by Professor Biao Xiang from Oxford University, the youth in China thought they would be left behind if they did not work hard enough, yet they never see any visible improvements despite their constant hard work [2]. Not only do students, parents, and workers feel the heavy pressure on their shoulders, entrepreneurs feel the same.

As Fan and Yitsing Wang from BBC News wrote in the article “The Buzzwords Reflecting the Frustration of China’s Young Generation”, Sun Ke experienced the despair of involution when trying to start his own company. He tried starting a restaurant business but soon had to shut it down because he started competing in the competition too late and could not compete with the large corporations [2]. According to Sun Ke, to compete with the dominant corporations, he and his business partner had to waive the delivery fees and offer discounts with their own money [2]. They tried for around 2 years and ended up losing 1 million yuan, equivalent to \$156,907 [2].

A situation like this causes stress on people. Stress is the gap between demands and available resources that an individual can assess to meet those demands. Feeling stressed, people will go through the general adaptation syndrome (GAS), where there are three stages, the alarm reaction at the beginning, resistance, and exhaustion [4]. Generally, the alarm reaction is when the body perceives something that occurred in the environment as a threat. Linking to involution, the alarm reaction will be people realizing how intense competition for almost everything has gotten. In Sun Ke’s situation, the alarm reaction will be him realizing that the competition between restaurants and delivery platforms has got so intense that he must offer discounts and waive the delivery fees to compete.

During the resistance phase, physiological arousal remains high, the individual’s ability to handle new stress is impaired, and the stressor is starting to affect the individual’s physical health. Individual needs an effective method to help them alleviate their stress. In Sun Ke’s example, he and his business partner entered the resistance phase when they struggled to maintain their business by taking money out of their own pockets to waive the delivery fees and offer discounts to compete with the dominant platforms.

During the last phase of the GAS, exhaustion, the individual will have a weakened immune system and they would have depleted their body energy. If this continues, there will be physical damage to their bodies such as diseases and or damage to internal organs that may be lethal. At this point, the individual has been through prolonged high physiological arousal and their body is worn out. In Sun Ke’s example, this could be

the second year after Sun Ke and his business partner started their new business. They were already exhausted by not earning any but losing a lot of money.

This two-year experience stress of for Sun Ke and his business partner ended after they eventually decided they cannot keep their business running any longer. The experience even led Sun Ke to conclude that it seemed that while his parents' generation had their challenges, they also had their opportunities whereas it seemed for Sun Ke's generation, there is no opportunity. This is an example of learned helplessness. Learned helplessness is failing to escape an undesirable situation [5]. For Sun Ke, this undesired situation is being unable to compete with other corporations in an industry. Sun Ke and his business partner have tried for two years but still did not achieve a relatively ideal situation. Through this experience, they learned that no matter what they do, they are still stuck with no revenue. For Sun Ke's generation, this could be realizing there is hardly any opportunity if one wants to start a new business. According to Maier and Seligman in "Learned helplessness at fifty: Insights from neuroscience", learned helplessness can create eight out of nine major depressive disorder symptoms- "sad mood, loss of interest, weight loss, sleep problems, psychomotor problems, fatigue, worthlessness, and indecisiveness or poor concentration"- in the laboratory [5]. Expanding it to Sun Ke's generation, learned helplessness means many in this generation could be similar showing symptoms right now.

2.2 Case 2: the "letting things rot" trend

It might sound hypothetical, but learned helplessness is already affecting the rising generation in China. As written by Vincent Ni from the Guardian in the article "The Rise of 'Bai Lan': Why China's Frustrated Youth Are Ready to 'Let It Rot'", Sal Hang explained that many people from his generation have the attitude of "bai lan" ("letting things rot") [6]. Accordingly, Sal Hang moved to Beijing to pursue his music dream [6]. Hang said his boss continuously set unrealistic key performance indicator goals for him and thus resulting in Hang failing to reach these goals [6]. Hang said he soon lost his motivation and "just do [his] minimum" [6]. Just from his descriptions here, Hang is showing one of the nine major depressive disorder symptoms that could be caused by learned helplessness in laboratory settings, the loss of interest [5].

Sal Hang is not the only example, however. As included in the article, Professor Mary Gallagher said that similar to the 'tang ping' ("laying flat") trend, the "letting things rot" trend "is also a rejection against the ultra-competitiveness of today's Chinese society" [6]. According to the article, more than 18% of the sixteen-to-twenty-four-year-olds in China are jobless in April 2022, which is the highest in the official record [6]. Ni stated in his article that the "letting things rot" trend is more concerning than the "laying flat trend" as it stands for embracing a worsening situation, which continues to match with the loss of interest symptom [6].

The negative effects of the "letting things rot" trend does not just end here, however. The young generation in China will be conditioned to the idea that they cannot find an ideal job so they would rather sit back and do nothing. This action does not solve the issue, instead, it is a method to help an individual escape from the issue. Needless to say, as time moves on, people will be facing multiple serious and stressful issues in

reality. “Laying flat” and “letting things rot” are not good ways of coping with this stress.

There are two main ways of coping: emotion-focused coping, which is good for situations that an individual has no control over; on the other hand, problem-focused coping, is good for situations that an individual has the skills to resolve. For the stress caused by not having a job, problem-based coping would be the most efficient method. However, people might be less willing to try the problem-focused coping method as they might perceive unemployment as external, unstable, and uncontrollable based on the three dimensions of control. If no action is taken, the issues that an individual faces will accumulate and this may cause anxiety disorder, the unnecessary fear of a certain object or situation without true danger which may be accompanied by avoidance behaviors [7].

To help people get back to the mindset that they have control over their own employment status, cognitive behavioral therapy may be used. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a treatment that aims at changing detrimental emotional responses by helping the patient change their thoughts, behaviors, or both, which has been proven to be effective for multiple mental health issues, including anxiety disorder [8]. The CBT treatment involves behavior, thoughts, and emotions. Sometimes distorted thoughts can make the patient more stressed. CBT targets the concerns, cognitive biases, imagined catastrophes, and stressful situations of the patient [7]. This may help alleviate the stress Sal Hang’s generation felt from the workforce.

Another method that can be used to help Sal Hang’s generation cope with the stress from the workforce is mindfulness meditation. Most mindfulness meditation-based interventions (MMBIs) are based on Jon Kabat-Zin and his colleagues’ Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction course [9]. MMBIs are proven to be effective in reducing anxiety symptoms through clinical applications [9].

2.3 Case 3: stress in the work force

The phenomenon discussed in the previous two cases is not limited to just residents in the urban areas of China. Sophie Jeong recorded Xiaoming Li’s case in the article “Youth in China, Japan and South Korea are ‘lying flat’ because they’re exhausted and without hope” was written for CNN business [3]. Li, a twenty-four-year-old who grew up in a small town in China, had a typical life experience of his generation in China [3]. He scored in the top 0.37% amongst all test takers that year in his province on his college entrance exam, the Chinese “gao kao” [3]. Studying for his master’s degree at one of the three top law schools in China, Li hoped to find a job at one of the many multinational law firms in Beijing [3]. While Li’s experience shows that he is very intelligent, he still got deferred from 20 different law firms in China and he ended up getting an internship at a domestic law firm, very different than what he hoped [3]. After this experience, Li concluded that the competition between other applicants is too intense and that he now feels exhausted and unwilling to compete in such a competitive way [3].

This exhaustion Li felt is another example of learned helplessness. Li’s experience is similar to the two cases mentioned above, where the individual tried their best but

still did not reach their ideal position. After attempting for a while, they decided it is impossible to achieve their goals. Thus they lowered their standards and managed to convince themselves that they are content with their current situation. Li even stated that he decides to join the “laying flat” trend and just do his bare minimum as his internship [3]. Once again, this is matching the “loss of interest” symptom of the nine major depressive symptoms [5].

However, the young Chinese generation faces way more stress than merely finding an ideal occupation after graduating from university [3]. The work culture at major technology firms in China now values the working schedule of “996”: working from 9 A.M. to 9 P.M. six days a week [3]. Terence Chong, an associate professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, said amongst the workers who stick to “996”, not everyone is a fan of this demanding schedule, they followed it because they felt they would be left behind by their colleagues if they do not [3]. This is another example of the stressors that the young Chinese generation feels. Constant stress like this may cause generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) in an individual. Patients suffering from GAD usually experience somatic anxiety and psychic symptoms [10]. GAD should be treated with psychological therapy or pharmacotherapy individually or as a combination [10]. CBT is the psychological therapy with the most evidence [10].

As previously mentioned, CBT helps alleviate stress by targetting the concerns, cognitive biases, imagined catastrophes, and stressful situations of the patient [7]. CBT may be used to help people realize why they felt anxious. People should also consider trying mindfulness meditation to help cope with their stress.

On top of the over-competitive workforce, the cost of houses in China kept increasing [3]. As Chong from the Chinese University of Hong Kong said, people still cannot afford to purchase a house even though they worked really hard [3]. Chong continued to say that even though people in China worked hard, they still may struggle to afford houses [3]. He said the cost of houses seem to be too high that people just wish to “lay flat” [3]. Once again, this is an example of learned helplessness. Similar to Xiaoming Li's internship application experience, people working extremely hard attempting to afford a house of their own might eventually decide that instead of affording their own house, they will just rent one, which could be much cheaper. After multiple failed attempts of purchasing a house, an individual might come to the conclusion that it is impossible for them to escape the undesirable situation of not being able to afford a house of their own [5]. The individual will expect the results to be independent of the actions they took [5]. Therefore, the individual would see those actions as unnecessary and might cease these actions. Indeed, some people have already ceased doing what they redeemed as useless by “laying flat”, like Li [3].

3 Conclusion

The stress on the rising generation in China increases as the competition for limited resources in China grows more intense. The current trends of “laying flat” and “letting things rot” reflects that the young generation in China is already worn out under the high-stress lifestyle. Some needs such as housing and finding ideal occupations have

become problems. Constant stress like this causes different problems amongst the young generation, for instance, learned helplessness and generalized anxiety disorder. This research discussed possible methods to help with this issue by analyzing the three different cases of the young Chinese generation. The methods discussed in this research are only hypothetical, more clinical trials are needed to show the real effects of such methods. Also, note that the proposed methods are only capable of alleviating some of the detrimental effects of involution. More research should be done to find out ways to terminate involution.

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