

YOUTH

LEAVING YOUR JOB TO WORK IT OUT

New trend emerges as some young people seek a fuller, but less financially rewarding, lifestyle, **Wang Qian** reports.

Swap the alarm clock for the body clock, cook a nutritious meal and read books or surf online. Take it easy. Smell the flowers, figuratively and literally. Taking time out to enjoy the simple pleasures of life has been routine for 29-year-old Zhou Xiaoxing (pseudonym) since August 2019. That was when she quit her stable job at an advertising company in Beijing.

"When you step out of the familiar cycle, you have to adapt and realize that with change comes possibilities," Zhou says, adding that, looking back, she was glad she made the decision to slow down and enjoy life.

Prior to quitting the advertising company, she could not imagine life without working full time. Even though she is facing uncertainty and without a safety net, she doesn't think that she can go back to the office routine now. Her last job made her feel exhausted. During the busy period, Zhou would only manage two or three hours of sleep each night. To boost her morale, she even set an alarm function on her phone to ring every afternoon and display messages telling her that she was a special person and she was loved.

"Since stepping off the fast track, I have enjoyed many 'precious' moments, like chatting face-to-face with friends, and buying fresh grapes in the morning and a lack of anxiety about not checking my phone for a whole day," she says with a smile.

To pay her bills, including 2,000 yuan (\$310) a month to rent a small room in the capital, she has various part-time jobs, such as lipstick seller, freelance blogger and usherette. Recently, she started to sell insurance and has herself invested in a policy to mitigate against an old age without a pension.

Zhou's lifestyle is not an isolated one. Chinese 20-somethings have different views about mainstream life goals, such as a stable job, starting a family and buying property. They want to get off the wheel, reject *neijuan*, or involution, a concept that traps participants into fierce and endless competition. They reject the "996" working schedule which encourages people to work 12 hours a day, six days a week. In one sense, of course, as China's economy develops, it is facing issues that other economies have faced — younger workers complaining about the demands of the rat race.

Although there are no official statistics, a group called the "not-working club" has attracted nearly 20,000 followers on social media platform Douban.

On the online community forum Baidu Tieba, a group advocating *tangping*, or lying flat, has attracted about 200,000 users. The forum's statistics suggest that the gender ratio of its users is around

“Work took over my life and I had no desire to socialize. I felt like I was a tool, or a robot, but not a human being. The feeling sucked, so I decided to lie flat and reflect on what kind of life I want to live.”

Wen Bin, 24, from Chengdu, Sichuan province, who recently turned his back on a busy corporate lifestyle

9 to 1 in favor of men.

According to the Quora-like Q&A and knowledge-sharing website Zhihu, lying flat refers to a lifestyle in which people stop striving for a more prosperous future and give up on trying to meet the expectations of mainstream society. The advocates keep their consumption at a minimum and refuse to overwork.

Different perspectives

Xiao Jin (pseudonym) is a long-time advocate for the lifestyle. She has stayed at home for around three years, since the junior year of arts major in college. She graduated online last year, but failed her master's degree entrance exam.

As her peers have followed an established mainstream route, the 22-year-old has taken a less-trodden path. She is staying in her father's home in Nong'an town, Jilin province, and keeps her living costs to a minimum. Her monthly outgoings are normally in the region of about 500 yuan, mainly for food.

Xiao has her own interpretation of the lying flat ethos, which in her words, means "to spend quality time on things that you are interested in or that are meaningful".

"It doesn't mean not working, but it is an attitude to refuse involution and escape the trap of consumerism," she explains.

Xiao has made money from painting silicone baby dolls for clients online. She charges about 60 yuan for each. Her business doesn't only bring her money, but improves her painting skills.

Last month, she spent about 700 yuan, which covered food and two dresses for summer. During her days on campus, she spent more than 2,000 yuan per month.

"Checking my monthly spending over the past few years, it surprises me how little I actually need for life and happiness," she says.

"The ideal life for me is to travel around the country with my lying flat lifestyle, like a modern nomad," she says with a sparkle in her eyes.

Satisfied with her lot, the manga and anime fan has been teaching herself Japanese.

Although content with her status quo, she doesn't think the lifestyle fits everyone. For the first half year staying at home, she was quite nervous about the uncertainty of it and set up her own schedule. Xiao knows that one day she has to make plans for old age.

For Wen Bin (pseudonym), 24, who worked for an internet company in Chengdu, Sichuan province, lying flat, for him, is a difficult choice. He sent a resignation letter to his human resources department early in June without a backup plan.

In his company, working overtime was routine and it took a toll. "Work took over my life and I had no desire to socialize. I felt like I was a tool, or a robot, but not a human being. The feeling sucked, so I decided to lie flat and reflect on what kind of life I want to live," Wen says.

In his eyes, lying flat means a short break from the grueling working environment and restarting a career. In modern terms, it's a way of recharging and rebooting.

Diversity of opinion

As the lying flat phenomenon sparks widespread discussion, scholars and psychologists have examined the social and economic reasons behind it.

In a commentary published in *Guangming Daily* in late May, Wang Xingyu, a dean of student affairs at China University of Labor Relations, writes that on one hand, the slowdown of the country's economic growth and industrial upgrading has led to intensified workplace competition; on the other, fast social development provides diversified lifestyle options.

"Relatively rich in material life, people nowadays can slow their pace and work in a more comfortable way," Wang writes.

However, she admits that an increase in the number of those choosing to adopt such a lifestyle is not good news for the country's youth labor market, as China is fast entering an aging society.

Li Fengliang, an associate professor at Tsinghua University, criticized the attitude of such people as "being extremely irresponsible", adding that "it not only disappoints parents but also hundreds and millions of taxpayers".

His reaction has gone viral on social media platform Sina Weibo and has been viewed more than 400 million times, triggering wider discussion about the phenomenon.

A Sina Weibo user named Bigice-Bing refutes that, saying that every-



LI XIN / FOR CHINA DAILY

one has the right to choose whatever lifestyle fits them, and it is nobody else's business.

Wu Zhihong, a consulting psychologist in Beijing, says that why the lying flat culture has resonated with so many young people is because it meets their need to be seen, to be understood and for people to admit that a healthy society should accept diversified values, not just one — to work hard. "When you talk with young people, you can feel

their struggle with 'learned helplessness', a mental state in which people feel like they have no control over what happens, tending to result in them simply giving up and accepting their fate," Wu explains.

Wang agrees. "It is not the young generation to blame. Authorities could take greater action to stimulate self-employment and entrepreneurship opportunities and create high-quality jobs for young people." Psychiatrist Li Songwei, a former

lecturer at Tsinghua University, posted on his official WeChat account that lying flat is just an optional lifestyle to choose or not, and is no big deal.

"No matter what way of life someone chooses, lying flat or whatever, it's OK," Li says, adding that people should be able to accept a diversity of lifestyles.

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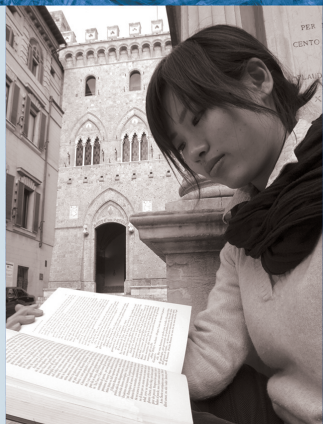
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