

Chinese Youth Alienation

written by April Holcombe | October 21, 2026

Young Chinese people use a language characteristic of alienation, exploitation and oppression in a society every bit as capitalist as our own.

Chinese youth in a very shit time of their lives

by April Hocombe

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Certain quarters of the internet are filling with content lauding contemporary China as an advanced, anti-imperialist, even socialist society. Its unrivalled high-speed rail network and its continued use of Communist jargon have encouraged some disillusioned Western youth to declare themselves in “a very Chinese time of my life”.

State-of-the-art infrastructure and Communist iconography have obvious appeal to a section of people living in decaying, imperialist and increasingly far-right-controlled Western capitalism. But there is a big difference between Instagram China, a Potemkin country showcased by influencers at the invitation of the tourism bureau and marketed to disillusioned Western youth, and the real China, a nuclear superpower ruled by bureaucrat-businessmen.

Young Chinese people on social media—students, workers and the unemployed—use a very different kind of language than influencers do. Theirs is the language of alienation, exploitation and oppression in a society every bit as capitalist as our own.

“Involution”: an obscure word for a common problem

Ever heard of “involution”? Me neither. This obscure academic term, translated into Chinese (内卷 *neijuan*), has entered common parlance among young people trapped in the country’s hypercompetitive economy. Literally meaning “inwardly curling”, anthropologists repurposed the term to describe activities that increase in complexity but lead nowhere. Chinese youth decided it captured their social predicament: instructed to work ever harder to stay ahead of their peers, they end up doing much more without being any better off.

Neijuan describes many things: the gruelling hours at Big Tech companies; the notoriously competitive university entrance examinations; the apps pushing food delivery workers to ride ever faster; and the impossible social media-influenced beauty standards. The second character is now used as a standalone verb, meaning “to work or try too hard”.

Many young people who reject the *neijuan* rat race opt instead to “lie flat” (躺平 *tang ping*), a vibe somewhere between “quiet quitting” and “bedrotting”. The Ministry of State Security finds it deeply disturbing that anyone would want to lie flat, claiming in a Douyin (like TikTok) video that “an unnamed overseas organisation heavily funds ‘lying flat’ influencers, mass producing short videos promoting ‘anti-involution equals anti-exploitation’”.

Successive surveys show scepticism and pessimism rising sharply. In 2014, 62 percent of 10,000 respondents agreed that “effort is always rewarded in our country”; only 28 percent agreed a decade later. One-fifth blamed “the unfair economic system” for poverty in 2014; more than one-third did a decade later. Two-thirds agreed their families’ lives would improve from 2014-19, but less than half thought so for 2023-28.

“Graduation means unemployment”

University degrees once guaranteed well-paid government or tech jobs, providing the Communist Party’s dictatorship with a large, stable base of middle-class support. But now, often, “graduation means unemployment” (毕业即失业 *biye ji shiye*). The gradual slowdown in economic growth has intensified competition for entry-level positions (more than 600 people, for example, applied for one basic Beijing office job in November 2025). Stable employment has given way to job flux. “I have family members who, since the early 2000s, never lost their jobs”, labour researcher Kevin Lin told *Red Flag*. “Last year, my cousin was laid off for the first time. Then he struggled to find another job, got laid off again, and is on to his third job.”

Unemployment is roughly twice the official figure of 5.2 percent, according to estimates by economist Li Daokui. “There are roughly 24 million long-term discouraged unemployed people, which is highly unfavourable for social stability”, the Tsinghua University academic told the China Macroeconomic Forum in July. The youth unemployment rate, officially hitting 17.9 percent that same month, has not included students since it soared past 25 percent in 2024, and hides a vast pool of underemployed youth working as little as one hour per week.

For the first time, the Communist Party’s most recent five-year plan includes no job-creation target. On the other hand, the government has a very clear target of 70 percent AI adoption across key industries by next year, inciting fears of layoffs among many IT workers. “I still can’t shake the feeling that I’m getting closer to being replaced”, one data engineer told Reuters in June.

Those on the breadline will be lucky to get crumbs. Fewer than one-quarter of registered urban unemployed received any government income support, a 2024 assessment by the Chinese Association of Social Security found. President Xi Jinping is a vocal opponent of expanding the safety net, warning in a 2021 address that providing “excessive guarantees” to the working class risks “falling into the trap of ‘welfarism’ that encourages laziness”.

Working like “oxen and horses”

Today’s young graduates are increasingly forced into work with app-based employers such as Meituan (food delivery) or Didi (ridesharing). On the eve of this year’s university entrance examinations, an official Communist Youth League social media account joked: “If you don’t get in [to university], you’ll be delivering food in four days. If you do get in, you’ll be delivering food in four years”.

Meituan has turned *neijuan* into a fine art, shaving down the allowable delivery time to reward only the fastest riders, increasing traffic accidents and deaths. “Even flying is not quick enough”, one rider told Chinese magazine *Renwu*. Others complained of being forced to work through typhoons and described the unbearable agony of waiting for elevators as the delivery clock ticked.

More than 250 million workers in the gig economy lack a formal labour contract, according to National People’s Congress Standing Committee member Zheng Gongcheng, which means they have no access to vastly superior employment-based health insurance and pensions. They say they are treated more like oxen and horses (牛马 *niuma*).

In his 2026 memoir *I Deliver Parcels in Beijing*, Hu Anyan described what that meant for him when he developed viral pneumonia. “Since I was still a contract worker, it cost me 50 yuan [the Chinese currency] just for the registration fee, every day that I went to hospital for liquids”, he wrote. “This single period of illness set me back some 3,000 yuan, which was what I earned in half a month.”

The government occasionally voices “concern” for delivery riders. But those concerns would be more credible if it hadn’t imprisoned worker activist Chen Guojiang. An administrator of a WeChat group with 14,000 fellow riders, Chen was arrested twice for attempting to organise nationwide strikes. While he languished behind bars for 10 months in 2021, Meituan’s billionaire founder Wang Xing attended lavish celebrations for the Communist Party’s centenary.

China is suffering from the kind of contradiction only capitalism can come up with: rising levels of overwork alongside growing underemployment. Despite public outcry about the tech sector’s 996 regimen (9am to 9pm, six days per week), and a 2021 court ruling against it, the regimen remains standard. Baidu (akin to Google) head of public relations Qu Jing told workers that 996’s health effects were not her concern. “I’m not your mother. Don’t expect weekends off”, she said in a May 2024 video posted to Douyin, provoking public fury which forced her resignation but has not stopped China from clocking its longest average working week in more than 20 years.

Government suppression of workers’ democratic rights helps bosses rule with the same impunity in the workplace. In August, an office worker called Yang was hospitalised with rhabdomyolysis, an extreme muscular breakdown, after her manager reportedly forced her to perform 200 squats for missing a sales target. “Our objective is to make money, and that definitely requires a certain amount of pressure”, the manager in question later told news reporters.

“No husbands and no babies protects your peace”

Beyond the economy, sexism is a major issue animating young people. With women’s education levels and workforce participation at record highs, the expectation of equal treatment and opportunities rubs abrasively against the continued reality of oppression. Women in China face all the same sexual harassment, workplace discrimination, gender pay gap, online misogyny, impossible beauty standards and conservative “family values” that are pissing off so many women in the West.

Hong Kong-based socialist Lam Chi-Leung told *Red Flag* that anti-sexism began taking an organised form in the late 2000s and early 2010s, mostly by liberal university students and professors. “It was not quite a movement, but it was a public struggle”, Lam said. “There were actions on the street, around public toilets, on campuses, on the subway.”

After a hard government crackdown in 2015, with the closure of dozens of NGOs and the high-profile arrests of five feminist activists, public acts of anti-sexism declined but the mood deepened. “In 2018 and 2019, the #MeToo movement [a US-based campaign bringing to light sexual violence by powerful men] spread to China very rapidly. Attention on the Chinese internet was extremely high”, Lam said.

When women publicly accused high-profile figures of misogyny and sexual assault, China’s ruling class bristled at their nerve. Tennis player Peng Shuai disappeared for years after accusing former Vice Premier Zhang Gaoli of rape. #MeToo was banned from social media, prompting netizens to talk instead about “rice bunny” (米兔, pronounced *mitu*).

With China experiencing an ageing population and plummeting birthrates, the government is dialling up the pressure on women of childbearing age. This year, the 13 percent value-added tax was applied to condoms and other contraception products for the first time. Some local governments

have taken to cold-calling women and asking when they last had their period.

The more the government is seen to press the issue, the more bitter the resistance. Among radical feminist currents, opposition has hardened against ever becoming a “marriage donkey” (婚驴 *hunlu*) or raising children. “No husbands and no babies protects your peace”, they say (不婚不育保平安 *buhun buyu baoping'an*). For those who still want to have children, the costs remain prohibitive. China is one of the world’s most expensive places to raise a child, according to 2024 data from the YuWa Population Research Institute in Beijing.

Much like in the US, South Korea or Australia, women face a sexist backlash from misogynists, online and offline, who blame them for dating troubles and employment struggles. The most aggressive trolls call women’s rights ideology an unpatriotic, foreign import designed to weaken China from within, highlighting that modern-day Chinese nationalism is run-of-the-mill right-wing chauvinism, not progressive anti-imperialism.

In Lam’s view, President Xi is hostile to feminist sentiment not because he is all-in on the manosphere, but because it publicly airs discontent. “The general dissatisfaction of the masses is very great. In this context, President Xi thinks anything that might stir up social conflict is dangerous”. In the eastern province of Zhejiang, the provincial publicity authority has even advised female stand-up comedians against “stirring up gender antagonism” as some take to the stage to complain about mediocre men or abusive ex-husbands.

There’s no slang yet for “rising up”, only lying down

The potential for all this discontent to explode into mass struggle is always present, but several factors mitigate against it in the current moment.

First, Chinese people are not yet experiencing a sharp decline in living standards akin to the austerity inflicted on North America and Europe after the global financial crisis or during the post-COVID sovereign debt crises that have swept the Global South. The dramatic slowdown in China’s real wage growth is offset by near-zero price inflation for most consumer goods.

Kevin Lin compared the situation to that of its neighbour. “In India, it is really a question of survival. If your wages are not going up, you may have to cut down your meals”, he explained. “I don’t think we’re seeing that in China. Of course, the challenge is if you want to buy a house.”

The A\$26 trillion elephant in the room is China’s property market slump since 2021. The government prevented a broader economic crisis, but appears to be at a loss for ways to revive construction. Prolonged stagnation could feed its own kind of desperation, since price deflation worsens mortgage debt and encourages working-class and middle-class households to cut or defer discretionary spending.

Second, state surveillance, censorship and harassment make political organising extraordinarily difficult. The brutal 2019 crackdown on socialist students clearly demonstrated the stakes.

After workers at Jasic Technology Factory in Shenzhen were sacked and arrested for starting a unionisation petition in June 2018, dozens of Maoist-leaning activists converged from across the country to form the Jasic Workers Solidarity Group. City authorities quickly expelled them and a nationwide manhunt of all known JWSG activists and associates ensued.

Ten months later, police were still dragging students out of Beijing University classrooms and toilet cubicles to interrogate, threaten and torture them. Marxist Studies campus clubs were purged of the

left and reorganised under the leadership of the privileged children of elite party bosses.

Another challenge is that China is an enormous country ruled by a sprawling, relatively decentralised apparatus, which makes big-picture political consciousness harder to develop. It is simpler, and safer, to blame corrupt local officials or lawbreaking bosses than to criticise the entire system of party-state capitalism.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided a rare case in November 2022 of a nationwide issue pitting unrest squarely against the central government. What began with calls to end harsh lockdowns snowballed into the White Paper protests, so called because participants held up blank pages to symbolise what they could not say. The protests, which for the first time in generations swept the campuses, included open chanting for press freedom and President Xi's resignation.

"The people involved in the protests, of course, were talking about democracy, authoritarianism, freedom of speech", Lin said. "Underlying that was a kind of economic insecurity: most of the protesters involved are college graduates who feel their lives are stuck."

Lam said that no lasting organisation emerged from the short-lived 2022 protests, although a small layer of students were pushed to the radical left. Lin noted greater interest in anarchism among the activists he has recently spoken with. Within more coherent left tendencies, Maoism is the dominant oppositional current, which makes things difficult for the much smaller but more principled collections of Trotskyists, against whom Maoists are notoriously hostile. But budding young Trotskyists are using encrypted online forums to share ideas.

Since none of these forces is yet in any position to shape politics, the question remains whether future youth protests aim merely for Western-style liberalism or set themselves much more boldly against capitalism. On this score, recent conversations in China have given Kevin Lin hope. "There are fewer illusions in the Chinese system", he said, "and there are also fewer illusions about the US government, what the West can deliver, or what life in America looks like".

Radicalising Western youth should take heed. Instead of exchanging one set of ruling-class lies for another, we need to build a truly internationalist opposition to capitalist exploitation everywhere.

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