

"Lying Flat" Movement – The Psychosocial Factors That Underpin the Wide-Spread Rejection of Over-Work Culture in Academic and Professional Marketplaces

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Abstract: In contemporary China, citizens are making radically different lifestyle choices in response to societal pressures. Some people are choosing to compete for limited spots in an increasingly competitive academic and professional market. By contrast, other people are choosing to withdraw from the competition and “lie flat”, sometimes retreating to ‘utopian’ settlements. This paper investigates psychological factors that may encourage people either to engage with China’s strenuous academic and professional competition, or to withdraw from it. The people being investigated in this paper came from cities all over China, include but not limited to Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Shanghai, Beijing, Chongqing. The majority of these immigrants came from large cities that are prominent in stress and have high consumption level. Indeed, many of them have suffered from parental expectations, peer comparison, confusion about their future development, inability to purchase their own housing properties, long working hours, dissatisfaction regard their previous job or simply could not tolerate the intense working conditions anymore. Here, three sets of psychological constructs are evaluated as potential determinants of people’s diverging lifestyle choices: (i.) Stress Mindsets; (ii.) Locus of Control; (iii.) Big Five personality factors and their relation to Academic Motivation. All three of these constructs are argued to be potentially useful for explaining people’s lifestyle choices.

Keywords: Lying Flat Movement, Environmental Psychology, Human Development.

1. Introduction

With the increasing competitiveness in contemporary China due to an increasing work force and limited jobs, it has become common for people to live with a “9-9-6” work schedule (i.e., working from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., 6 days a week). The younger generations are materially well-off but spiritually adrift, which drives their quest for personal growth and freedom. Frustrated by long hours and relentless pursuit of success in cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou, many weary professionals have sought refuge in Dali, bringing exceptional changes with them. Today, Dali’s population of 3.6 million includes around 100,000 “alternative-minded” individuals. These include those who embrace “Tang Ping” or “Lying Flat,” a movement typically involving young people who reject societal pressures to work excessively, purchase overpriced homes, and start families.

However, as Dali has gained popularity, rent prices have surged to three times what they were in the 1990s. Initially attracted by affordable rents, a mild climate, stunning scenery, and a history of relative tolerance, the question remains: how long can Dali maintain its status as ‘Dalifornia’?

Indeed it was in 2021 that the phenomenon “lying flat” emerged. Members of the millennial generation, in particular, are resisting the “rat race” and deciding to “truly live their lives.” [1] Craig, A. R. et al. This phenomenon occurs largely due to the younger Chinese generation realizing that they are being trapped in social immobility and economic stagnation as suggested by [2] Lu et al. With the emergence of the “lying flat” movement, an increasing number of people have been moving to less competitive areas such as Yunnan, Dali, China: a place known for its natural beauty, tranquility, slow pace of living and low costs of living. This phenomenon has been taken place for more than a decade but was recently being exposed to the public. According to my online research and personal fieldwork investigation, it was found that immigrants who move to Dali reported to have an enhanced physical and mental well-being. They were more satisfied and felt accomplished co-existing with nature. Genuinely, Dali is a city very suitable to habitat in. Everything is slow, peaceful, and calming. In my field trip to a local farm called “The Rainbow Farm”, I sincerely felt being connected to nature; the lambs peacefully eating the grass; The fresh sense of vanilla leaves; Blue skys, glamorous green Cang Mountain, and serene Er lake; Everything was therapeutic. I found Dali to be a place friendly to almost everyone, no matter you are rich or poor-----Everyone get on well with nature and were able to find their like-minded community.

This social trend invites the question: What psychological factors cause some people to “lie flat”, while others continue competing in intense working conditions? To find out more about the reasons behind this “lying flat movement”, I conducted 17 interviews with people from varying backgrounds, source areas, age groups and occupations to gain diverse qualitative data. This choice of participants ensures the generalizability of this research finding. During my interviews, there are 48 year-old hotel owner, 55 year-old gardeners, 25 year-old digital nomads, 33 year-old restaurant owner, 38 year-old mother with her 5 year-old son, 58 year-old vegetarian community organizer, 49 year-old vegetarian advocator, 35 year-old tourists and so on... These participants were grouped into three categories: the first group comprised individuals from the vegetarian community Veggie Ark Space of Future; the second group included street vendors and homestay gardeners; and the third group consisted of volunteers at local coffee shops. For the quantitative data, I distributed a consistent questionnaire, adapted from the quality of life scale, to 19 participants aged 18 to 58. This approach ensured the generalizability of my research findings

The present paper will explore three psychological constructs (i.e., Stress Mindsets, Locus of Control, and Big Five personality traits) as potential explanations for people’s diverging lifestyle choices.

2. Stress mindsets

Researchers have identified two contrasting attitudes toward stress, known as *stress mindsets* [3]. Whereas some people view stress as debilitating, others view it as performance enhancements. Adopting a *stress-is-debilitating* or a *stress-is-enhancing* mindset determines whether people believe that stress leads to negative or positive outcomes, how they interpret the hardships in their lives, and what they emphasize on. With a *stress-is-debilitating* mindset, one might focus only on the negative effects of stress, such as its potential to cause insomnia or illness. However, with a *stress-is-enhancing* mindset, one’s attention would focus more on the positives, asking oneself, for instance: “What can I from here? Is there anything I can work on to help myself? Have I build meaningful relationships in this stressful situation?” [3].

People who have a *stress-is-enhancing* mindset tend to be more sensitive to feedback, actively seeking help to enhance their performance, even though the feedback itself can be stressful. On the

contrary, people who have a *stress-is-debilitating* mindset are more likely to avoid stressors. Perhaps surprisingly, mindsets may not affect how people perform in their jobs, but have been found to affect measures of life satisfaction and health outcomes [3].

Stress mindsets may be relevant to understanding people's lifestyle choices inasmuch as many people have no choice but to live in high-stress cities and engage with their stressors — in such cases, having a *stress-is-enhancing* mindset may improve health and life satisfaction compared to people with a *stress-as-debilitating* mindset under identical stressful settings. A defining characteristic of people with a *stress-is-enhancing* mindset is that they activate self-agency in choosing to engage with stress, actively seeking challenges and accepting stressors from the belief that stress may yield adequate outcomes for them; therefore, these people may be more likely to remain under highly competitive environments. By contrast, people with a *stress-is-debilitating* mindset believe that stress leads to inadequate outcomes; these people may be more likely to decide to “lie flat”, moving from larger cities to rural towns like Dali to escape from high level of stress. As an apt illustration, two volunteers aged 25 years old whom I met in Dali's coffee shop demonstrates stress-is-debilitating's characteristics. Through 3 hour in-depth interview with both of them, qualitative data about their perspectives regarding their lifestyle has gained. One of them stated that he escaped from Guangzhou and previously worked in a medicine hall for giving prescriptions to his patients. He left Guangzhou because the economy is in a recession and the medicine hall was downsizing the employees. Unfortunately, he lost his job, which means that he would not be able to support his living, hardly able to pay for high rents and daily meals in Guangzhou. Sick of living such a stressful life, he chose to immigrate to Dali, where he worked as volunteers who was offered living and eating by his boss while there was no salary. Indeed, he was very satisfied with his current living; The current condition can satisfy his basic needs and to survive. From this case, it showcased the concept of “stress-is-debilitating”. This young man cannot withstand the difficulty of losing his job, and he thought stress is not good for him, which prompted him to escape and left Guangzhou. The other young man has been a volunteer for over five years. He really enjoyed helping others and he wanted to continue being a volunteer. After my interview with him, I found the source reason behind this. He suggested that his parents and relatives have always had high expectation on him, so he had to escape from his hometown Guangxi to avoid being stressed all the time by the lectures from his relatives. This escapism demonstrated his “stress-is-debilitating” perspective that stress imposed by other is detrimental to him.

3. Locus of control

Locus of control is a construct that describes the extent to which people believe they can determine the outcomes of events in their lives [4]. People with an *internal locus of control* tend to believe that they can control their lives, whereas people with an *external locus of control* tend to believe that their lives are controlled by external forces. Locus of control has been shown to predict motivation, effort, performance, satisfaction, perception of one's job, compliance with authority, and supervisory style [5].

At first glance, research suggests that people with an internal locus of control should be more likely to take part in academia and the competitive workplace. Internals set harsher goals and have a vehement need for achievement than externals, reflecting internals' stronger intrinsic motivation to obtain ideal outcomes [6]. Internals have the expectation that their effort will lead to rewards, and this expectation leads to greater “career effectiveness” as measured by salaries and promotions. Accordingly, they experience less “job strain” and more job satisfaction than people with an external locus of control [5]. These factors would seem to lead people with an internal locus of control to be more persistent in academia and the workplace, and less likely to “lie flat”.

However, other results suggest a different relationship between locus of control and the decision to compete or lie flat. For example, although people with an internal locus of control are more likely to experience job satisfaction, they are also more likely to quit a job that they find unsatisfying[5]; people with an external locus of control are more likely to stay in an unsatisfying job, presumably because they do not believe they have the ability to change their circumstances. These factors, therefore, may lead people with an internal locus of control to reject jobs that they find unsatisfying and to “lie flat”, given that they understand that they have the ability to make this choice and exert control over their lives.

Although locus of control may indeed be relevant to people’s choice to compete or to “lie flat”, these contrasting findings make it unclear how this aspect of people’s personality will affect their lifestyle choices. On the one hand, having an internal locus of control could lead people to find satisfaction with their stressful jobs. But on the other hand, an internal locus of control could enable people to reject stress and opt for a healthier lifestyle; according to qualitative data obtained in Dali, 95% of immigrants reported living a happier life after making the decision to immigrate and lie flat, as according to an unpublished set of findings that I have acquired through field research in Dali during 2024.

4. Big Five Personality traits

The Big Five Personality traits characterize people’s personalities along five dimensions: consciousness, agreeableness, neuroticism, openness, and extraversion [7]. These traits are claimed to be relatively stable through lifetime, and are reliable across ages and cultures. Agreeableness involves being cooperative, sympathetic, and forgiving. People high in agreeableness avoid conflict and prefer harmony in their interactions. Conscientiousness reflects a tendency to be organized, disciplined, and reliable. Individuals high in conscientiousness are diligent and adhere to rules and goals. Extraversion is characterized by sociability, assertiveness, and high energy in social situations. Extraverts are outgoing and thrive on social interaction. Neuroticism involves emotional instability and a propensity for negative emotions like anxiety and moodiness. High neuroticism is linked to difficulty managing stress. Openness to Experience is associated with intellectual curiosity, creativity, and a preference for novelty. People high in openness are risk takers and enjoy new experiences [8][9].

Among the five traits, only neuroticism is found to be related to negatively associate with well-being. This means that people who score high in neuroticism are more likely to have emotional distress, poor impulse control and have difficulty in coping with academic challenges, dealing with setbacks, and possess debilitating anxiety [7]. The other four traits are correlated positively with achievement and motivation, which are linked to the consensual definition of “success”. Agreeableness is seen as a protective factor against Emotional Exhaustion, isolation from others, and reduced Professional Accomplishment, protecting people from feelings of frustration and burnout. People who engage with stress are likely to have a high level of agreeableness. They tend to offer a positive understanding of others, aligned with interpersonal relationships based on feelings of affection that could protect them from suffering job burnout and greater depersonalization.

Which of the Big Five traits might be relevant for people’s lifestyle choices? People who choose to “lie flat” and flee to places like Dali would be likely to score low in agreeableness. Longitudinal studies suggest that Conscientiousness serves as a protective factor against burnout[8], and may encourage conscientious people to persist in their jobs and resist lying flat. Dali immigrants may be rated lower in conscientiousness compared to those who stayed in larger cities. A negative association between Extraversion and job burnout has been reported [9], suggesting that extraverts may remain in their jobs and resist lying flat. Neuroticism is a predictor of burnout, and of the extent of emotional exhaustion, and also a predictor of low professional accomplishment [8]. Thus, neuroticism may be highly predictive of the decision to migrate to a place like Dali and “lie flat”. Openness has a negative

correlation with burnout, and serves as a protector against stress [8]. Openness may therefore shield people from emotional exhaustion and job burnout, and buffer them against the feelings that lead people to quit their jobs and “lie flat”.

5. Conclusions

Stress mindsets, locus of control, and Big Five personality traits may all contribute to the effort to explain why some contemporary Chinese people are choosing to face fierce academic and professional competition, whereas others are choosing to opt out of the competition and lie flat. These conclusions are based on applying the findings of previous research on these psychological constructs to the recently emerging tendency for people to lie flat; therefore, these conclusions will remain speculative until they can be tested empirically. Previously, most research regarding “lying flat movement” faced the western society and were conducted by western scholars. Indeed, there was a lack of Asian research regarding this phenomenon; In order to learn more about the root reasons behind this phenomenon in China, more researches would need to be done by professionals who have expertise in both environmental psychology and environmental sociology to help explain the motives behind people’s varying lifestyle choices.

Lu et al. developed a scale of “lying down” inclination – which appears to be a synonym for the tendency to lie flat [2] – and established the reliability and effectiveness of this scale with various Chinese samples. In principle, the suggestions advanced in the present paper could be tested empirically by correlating people’s scores on Lu et al.’s scale with their scores on measures of stress mindsets, locus of control, and Big Five personality traits. Based on Lu et al.’s existing scale, other researchers would be able to develop more advanced and insightful scales or measures [2].

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