

Listening to China

How a New
Generation
Sees China
and the World



China and the World Fellowship – an initiative by Asia Society Switzerland and MoneyMuseum Zurich.

Qing Wang is an award-winning Chinese journalist, podcaster, and influencer with over a decade of global reporting experience. Co-founder of *The Weirdo Podcast*, she shapes debates on social justice, feminism, climate, and globalization, edits political-economy platforms, teaches, and researches China's contemporary cultural and emotional transformations.

Ti Wondrak Liu, friend of Qing Wang and artist. Curious about nature, art, and technology, Ti is passionate about creating, exploring fresh ideas, and finding better ways forward. She enjoys an active, outdoor lifestyle and has a keen interest in innovation, design, and the ways technology is shaping our world.

Asia Society Switzerland is an independent nonprofit organisation fostering Asia Competence in Switzerland through insight, dialogue, and networks. Bringing together diverse perspectives and expertise, Asia Society Switzerland creates opportunities to build knowledge, strengthen relationships, and deepen understanding of the region.

MoneyMuseum Zurich supports the China and the World Fellowship, of which the collection of these essays is a part. It also organizes the ChinaForum. Together with its Sunflower Foundation, MoneyMuseum Zurich documents the history of monetary systems and their socio-cultural and social dimensions.



Listening to China

How a New
Generation
Sees China
and the World

Content

6

About the Fellowship
Michaela Malenchini

8

From the Fellow
Qing Wang

13

Essay 1
How young Chinese see the world

27

Essay 2
China's Falling Birth Rate:
a Crisis or a Revolution?

47

Essay 3
From Madman to Lying Flat

About the Fellowship



We often read about China. But how often do we hear from within China?

China takes up ever more space in the headlines. Its economy, its politics, its technological ambitions and its role in a changing international order occupy an increasingly prominent place in public debate. These are necessary conversations, but they often leave a notable blind spot by overlooking the perspectives and experiences of people within China.

The China and the World Fellowship, launched by Asia Society Switzerland in partnership with MoneyMuseum Zurich, was created to help address this gap in Switzerland. It seeks to bring more perspectives from within Chinese society into the public debate and, in doing so, move the conversation beyond talking about China towards something closer to a dialogue.

At the heart of the Fellowship is the work of journalist and podcaster Qing Wang, whose curiosity and ability to look beyond the headlines draw attention to the experiences and questions people themselves are grappling with in China in an age of rapid social transformation that reaches into every corner of everyday life.

Throughout the first year of the Fellowship, Qing has explored these questions in the essays collected here and in the conversations that grew out of them. She looks

at how young Chinese understand a world increasingly encountered through screens, how attitudes towards marriage and motherhood are changing, and how younger generations are developing new ways of speaking about anxiety, pressure and mental health.

Taken together, these stories bring the human dimension of contemporary China into view. For us at Asia Society Switzerland, this is an essential part of fostering Asia Competence. Meaningful engagement with Asia starts with curiosity about the region in all its complexity: its politics and economies, but also its people and perspectives.

We are grateful to Qing Wang for bringing these perspectives into the conversation, and to MoneyMuseum Zurich for partnering with us on the Fellowship. Together, we aim to deepen understanding of China and contribute to a more informed and meaningful dialogue between Switzerland and Asia.

In this spirit, we wish you a great read and hope this collection opens new perspectives and leaves you wanting to hear more from within China.

Michaela Malenchini

Executive Director
Asia Society Switzerland

From the Fellow



This year marks the fifteenth anniversary of what has become an unremarkable fact of my biography: I left China and moved to Europe. I could not have anticipated, back then, that this fact would one day license something like the present exercise—an attempt to explain, in the form of a booklet, the country I come from to a European readership that has decided China is worth understanding.

Fifteen years isn't a huge stretch of time, but it's long enough that I, as a storyteller shuttling between China and Europe, have watched the relationship between the two shift up close.

On the one hand, Europe's interest in China has only intensified. Trade between the two continents has reached record highs. More Europeans go to China to work, study, and live. More European outlets station correspondents on the ground when they can, and China coverage occupies more front pages than ever. At conferences, at work, over dinner, I get asked about China by curious European friends and colleagues, more than ever.

And yet, on the other hand, I often feel a frustration I can't quite shake. The volume of coverage keeps rising, but the angle stays narrow. Geopolitics, trade friction, tech rivalry, military risk—China gets discussed, but mostly as a power player, rarely as a society made up of actual people. The daily joys and struggles of the people who live there, the

changes quietly unfolding inside Chinese society—these tend to be treated as not important enough to mention.

Western think tanks will tell you, with great confidence, what China will or won't do. But I keep coming back to the fact that China has 1.4 billion people, each one different from the next. Almost any claim you make about the country can find supporting evidence somewhere within it—evidence that often contradicts other equally valid claims. Any sweeping conclusion, once set against an actual, specific person, starts to look crude.

I've come to believe that the most important revolution happening in China right now is an inner one. Over the past half century of rapid, wrenching change, the interior lives of Chinese people have shifted just as dramatically. How has their idea of a good life changed? How do people here love, work, grow old? Where do they find meaning? None of this is easy to see from outside. I'm fortunate to run a popular Chinese-language podcast and an active personal Weibo channel, each now followed by over a million subscribers, most of them based in China. Through in-depth conversations with the people I interview, and through close contact with my followers both privately or publicly, I get a glimpse—at least a partial one—into the inner lives of some of these people.

The Weirdo Podcast, or Buheshiyi (不合时宜), is a show three Chinese journalists—myself included—started seven years ago. It's an unconventional name, no question, and people often ask us about it. We think of it as a quiet tribute to those who don't quite fit the mainstream, who've always felt like outsiders looking in—to the odd, the eccentric, the offbeat, the peculiar, even the mad. Seven years in, we're still at it, trying to keep a record—of this moment, and of history.

Thanks to the China and the World Fellowship, I've had the freedom to explore my voice in English—a language that is not native to me—and to bring my understanding of China to readers here. I don't consider myself a "China watcher"; China is simply where I come from and where I've lived. All I hope to do here is this: take the stories I've actually lived through, the people I've actually come to know, and write them down as honestly as I can.

Finally, some thanks. To Jürg and Heidi, for their generosity and curiosity—two wonderful living examples of how to live a full, meaningful life. Getting to know them is truly a gift. To Ti, my chosen family, for her unconditional support, her smart ideas, and her creative energy. Co-producing this booklet with her feels like a wildest dream come true. To Ruohan, my podcast co-host and my dear friend, for seven years of great episodes and for making the whole ride worth it. To everyone at Asia Society Switzerland I've had the pleasure of working with—Rebecca, Michaela, Nico, Rosina, Madelaine, and especially Remko, for his thoughtful, meticulous and patient editing. And to Adam, my partner, for making the excellent lunches and dinners that kept me going while I wrote this.

I hope this booklet can offer something about China that goes beyond the headlines—something of the specific, granular texture of life that resists being flattened into a single conclusion, something that might, in the end, resonate with you.

Qing Wang (王 馨)

How young Chinese see the world

13

For seven years and counting,
Qing Wang has been speaking
with them to find out.

Text and photos: Qing Wang

Published: March 30, 2026



A Question I Could Not Answer

In early March 2022, days after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, I traveled to the Polish–Ukrainian border on a reporting trip. Refugees were arriving day and night.

One of the people I met was a British volunteer who had driven his own car across Europe to help. For days he had been shuttling back and forth, picking up families at the border and bringing them to nearby shelters.

At first, he agreed to do an interview with me. But the moment he realized I was a Chinese journalist he removed the microphone and handed it back. “Sorry, I don’t give interviews to Chinese media,” he said. “I hear there’s a lot of information warfare online in China right now.”

I paused, then tried to explain I understood where he was coming from, and I decided to come here precisely to address that question. I had traveled thousands of miles to the Ukrainian border to witness what was happening here and bring those reports back to Chinese readers. Him refusing to speak with me would only serve those who initiated the information warfare from behind their keyboards, far away.

The Brit softened. After thinking about it for a moment, he agreed to the interview. He spoke about the exhaustion of the past few days: driving through the night, carrying children across muddy fields, listening to refugees recount what they had left behind.

At the end, he asked me a question: “Can you tell me, what do people in China actually think about this war?” I realized I could not answer him. I didn’t have a clear view of what people in China thought of this war.



Ukrainian refugees on the Polish border in 2022.

Public opinions in China – a black box of mystery

Figuring out how ordinary Chinese people view the world is structurally difficult. China lacks a culture of credible public opinion polling — the infrastructure, the trust, and the methodology have never fully taken root. What Chinese people actually think, as a collective, has long been something of a mystery: rich in anecdote, thin on data.

Also: China is simply vast. The population is large enough that evidence can be found for almost any argument. And for any argument, you can find supporters.

Taking the war in Ukraine as an example, one small fact captures this complexity better than any survey: Chinese nationals allegedly have been fighting on both sides of this war. Some joined the Russian military. Others enlisted in the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

When differences in action can be this stark, divergences in opinion are almost beyond measure.

To understand why these differences exist, one number is worth dwelling on: 160 million. That is roughly how many Chinese citizens currently hold passports. It's not a negligible figure, but it's also just 12 percent of the entire population. For the vast majority of Chinese people, the world beyond their own country is encountered not in person, but through screens.

In the digital age, worldviews are no longer formed primarily through direct experience. Globalization is mediated rather than lived. The world arrives through your phone. People construct their understanding of distant events not through travel, but through narratives in news feeds and other social media.



Live recording of *The Weirdo* in Beijing, 2021

My own window onto Chinese public opinion is inevitably imperfect, but it offers a unique and valuable vantage point: *The Weirdo*, my podcast.

Since its founding seven years ago, we have produced more than 300 episodes, hosting over 200 Chinese guests from across the intellectual and cultural landscape: scholars, journalists, artists, filmmakers, entrepreneurs, and policy-makers.

Taken together, these conversations trace an evolving picture of how China's contemporary intellectual community makes sense of the world.

At the same time, the show has built an audience of more than one million followers, most of them between the ages of 18 and 35. They are well-educated, urban, outward-looking people, deeply curious about the world. They gather in the comment section, responding, debating, and often arguing with one another.

In those exchanges, a revealing picture emerges, showing how ordinary Chinese, especially younger generations, interpret global events in real time.

I have, over the years, found myself in continuous and direct conversation with this large, highly engaged community in China. This allowed me to develop a sustained, real-time sense of what people are thinking, arguing about, and quietly reconsidering.

To shine a light on how China's intellectual community talks about the world, and on how young Chinese people see it, let me turn to a selection of recent episodes from *The Weirdo*.

This is not an academic study or a policy report, but a personal record, built from fragments gathered through the podcast, and shaped by my own perspective and limits. It aims to contribute to a broader picture, not through data or survey, but through lived experience and individual stories.

Young Chinese Discuss World Events

1 Trying to make sense of the Ukraine war, four years on

On February 28, 2026, *The Weirdo* released a special episode marking the fourth anniversary of the Russia-Ukraine war, featuring two Chinese journalists who have long followed Russia. Since the war began, we have produced eight Ukraine-themed episodes, each sparking heated debate in the comments.

19

In China, three positions tend to dominate when discussing this war. One supports Russia, often driven by anti-American and anti-Western sentiment. It frames NATO's eastward expansion as the root cause and Russia's actions as "legitimate self-defense."

Another opposes the war on humanitarian grounds and in defense of sovereignty, viewing it as aggression and supporting Ukraine's resistance.

A third takes a more pragmatic stance, focusing less on the outcome and more on how the war affects China's development, U.S.-China rivalry, and the Taiwan question.

At the start of the February 28 episode, both the guests and the hosts acknowledged that, four years in, none of these positions capture what they primarily feel. One guest noted that 2025 was, after the first two months of the full-scale invasion in 2022, the deadliest year for civilians. This has received almost no international attention.

People are still dying every day, yet fewer and fewer are talking about it. It is no longer anger, but a sense of absurdity and emptiness.

After four years, we have all felt the shift. The rage, grief, and moral clarity of 2022 have given way to exhaustion and emotional numbness. This media fatigue is not just personal. It is structural.

The news cycle has been consumed by Gaza, Trump, Iran, and an endless succession of crises, while coverage of Ukraine has steadily receded. We found ourselves asking: when an anniversary episode for a war becomes routine, is it still an act of resistance against forgetting or simply a comfortable form of self-absolution?

This sentiment resonated with listeners. The most-liked comment read: “Make refusing to forget the battlefield itself a form of resistance.”

One guest pointed to the most important shift in year four: fractures in the political will sustaining the war. The United States is pulling back; Europe lacks capacity; and Russia is exploiting these gaps to expand its strategic room.

Meanwhile, information warfare has become central. The narrative has shifted away from territorial control toward highly personalized, performative media politics centered on leaders: Zelensky, Putin, Trump. At times, the war feels almost like spectacle.

The Weirdo has been advocating that the most meaningful way to understand a war is not through geopolitics, but through its impact on ordinary lives, keeping people at the center of the focus. A significant part of the fourth anniversary episode focused on questions such as: How do young Ukrainian men cope with conscription? Why do working-class Russian youth enlist?

Then there was an uncanny coincidence. Near the end of the recording, one guest remarked: “Maybe by the time this airs, the U.S. will be bombing Iran and we’ll have a whole new war.”

As it happened, on February 28, the day the episode was released, the United States and Israel indeed began striking Iran. The comments flooded in: “He predicted it,” “Oh my God.”

This shared recognition of absurdity captured a broader mood among our Chinese listeners: the world is changing faster than our ability to make sense of it.

2 Merz’s China Visit: Anxiety Paradox in a Changing World Order

In February 2026, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz visited China with a large business delegation. He toured the Forbidden City and watched robots dance at Unitree. In a widely circulated video, he expressed admiration for China’s pace of development, suggesting that Germany’s work-life balance culture might be undermining its competitiveness.

The visit triggered a wave of reactions on Chinese social media. Many joked that even the German Chancellor had come to China to “learn the secret.”

The response itself was revealing. It echoed a narrative that has gained traction in recent years: *dongsheng xijiang* (东升西降) — the East is rising, the West is falling.

The Weirdo devoted an episode to the visit, featuring three guests who regularly move between China and Germany. They began by examining Merz’s itinerary. Compared with earlier German visits, often framed around values and political messaging, this one appeared notably pragmatic and less ideological. The composition of the delegation sent a clear signal: business first.

The visit can be read as a test of Europe’s strategic autonomy. Under the shadow of Trump 2.0 and renewed trade tensions, Europe is recalibrating its relationship with China. But

it remains unclear whether this reflects a genuine strategic shift or simply short-term pragmatism.

The episode also addressed key issues in China–Germany relations, particularly concerning the auto industry: China’s rise in electric vehicles is reshaping supply chains, while German brands are losing market share in China and debates over industrial policy and fair competition are intensifying.

One guest pointed out that Chinese people often look at Germany through their own experience.

The episode was titled: “After Merz’s Visit, Is Germany About to Enter ‘Involution’?” The term *neijuan*, or “involution,” describes a state of relentless, high-intensity competition that produces diminishing returns. It captures both the lived reality of many young Chinese and one of their primary ways of making sense of the world.

Their relationship to it is ambivalent: they are exhausted by it, yet when they see China’s rapid development praised, many also feel a surge of national pride.

One of the most striking moments came in the guests’ comparison of two kinds of anxiety. German anxiety, they argued, is collective and identity-based: a resistance to change that nonetheless feels inevitable, producing a sense of helplessness.

As one guest put it, “Germany is the land of the automobile.” This makes the crisis of the auto industry not merely economic; it touches employment, unions, local government finances, and national identity. Its decline signals the unraveling of an entire industrial model.

Meanwhile, Chinese anxiety, by contrast, is individual and existential: the fear of being left behind in a rapidly changing society, pushing people to run ever faster. This contrast resonated strongly in the comments and was widely seen as the episode’s sharpest insight.

Young Chinese people often operate on two parallel tracks when they look at the world. This is something that's easy to miss for the uninitiated.

At the national level, they express confidence: Merz's visit, China's technological rise, folded into a broader narrative of catch-up and eventual surpassing.

At the personal level, they remain caught in intense competition for jobs, housing, and their children's future: anxious and exhausted. The two emotions coexist without contradiction. National confidence and personal strain are neatly compartmentalized, each sealed off from the other.

23

3 Venezuela: Chinese Views on Human Rights versus Sovereignty

On January 5, *The Weirdo* released an episode on Venezuela following the removal of Nicolás Maduro from the presidential palace by U.S. forces. Our guest was Coral, a Chinese journalist long based in Latin America.

The episode began with a central question: how did a country with the world's largest proven oil reserves and one of Latin America's highest per-capita GDPs reach a point where more than a quarter of its population had fled?

The episode also surveyed international reactions. One of the most revealing segments focused on divisions within Latin American intellectual circles.

Drawing on her experience, Coral described how leftist intellectuals grapple with their ambivalent relationship with the United States. Anti-Americanism and left-wing populism have long served as sources of moral authority and identity. But once that discourse becomes entangled with a corrupt and authoritarian regime, like Venezuela's had become, it becomes difficult to sustain.

In the comments on the podcast, a sharp debate emerged over sovereignty versus human rights.

Supporters of the U.S. action argued that Maduro was a dictator who has driven millions into exile. With no prospect of internal change, intervention was justified. Opponents countered that forcibly removing another country's leader violates international law and procedural legitimacy. Even when the target is a repressive regime, due process still matters. To defend procedure, they argued, is not to defend wrongdoing, but to uphold the basis of a civilized order.

This split reflects a broader pattern in how young Chinese people think about global affairs. Two moral intuitions often coexist: skepticism toward great-power hegemony, and hostility toward authoritarian rule. Neither side can easily persuade the other. It reveals a deeper tension between consequentialist reasoning and rule-based thinking.

The episode also pointed to a subtler shift: the limits of the traditional anti-imperialist narrative. When a quarter of a country's population has fled, as in Venezuela, anti-imperialism alone no longer provides sufficient moral grounding. Increasingly, young Chinese are asking whether such crises can be explained solely as the result of American intervention.

There was also discussion of China's role. Coral argued that in an era of intensifying U.S.–China competition, resource-rich mid-sized countries like Venezuela are easily used as instruments by great powers. China extended large loans in exchange for oil, while the United States relied on sanctions and military pressure to maintain influence.

In the comments, some listeners brought in data on China–Venezuela debt, suggesting these discussions are not purely ideological. Many are asking more pragmatic questions: what is China's role here, and have its interests been affected?

Global events, it seems, draw closer attention once filtered through the question of what they mean for China.

China's Falling Birth Rate: a Crisis or a Revo- lution?

27

How Chinese Women Are Re-
writing the Rules of Reproduction

Text: Qing Wang Photos: Remko Tanis

Published: June 3, 2026



My Grandmother's Bewilderment

This past spring, I returned to my hometown in Guizhou province, in western China, to visit my grandmother. She is 91, and her health is failing. I sat beside her bed and brought her chocolates from Europe. Her face lit up when she saw me, but behind the joy lingered a shadow of worry.

Before long, she asked the question that had clearly been weighing on her mind: “When are you going to have a child?”

She continued: “Qing, I know you’ve always had a mind of your own. But a woman, in this life, she still needs to have a child.”

I grew up in my grandmother’s arms, and the bond between us runs deep. I left China a decade ago and have lived in Europe ever since, thousands of miles away from her. I see her whenever I can, yet every visit arrives with a knot in my chest. Ever since I turned 30, six years ago, there is one topic she almost always raises: the fact that I still do not have children. It seems not to matter how far I have traveled, or how fulfilled my life feels to me. Without a child, I remain, in her eyes, somewhat incomplete.

For my grandmother’s generation of Chinese women, having children required no justification. You simply had them. It was the main condition for a complete life, a duty pressed upon them by family, society, and the state. But for women of my generation, childbearing is only one of many ways a life can be lived.

Becoming a parent is not the sum of a full life, nor a requirement. Whether to have children should be, and can only be, a



A mother and her son at their home in Shanghai, China

personal choice, free from the demands of family, society, or government.

My grandmother and I love each other deeply but fail to understand each other just as much. The distance between us is not merely personal. It is generational. It is the distance between two versions of what life can be for a Chinese woman.

My grandmother was born in 1935, during the early years of the Second Sino-Japanese War. When Japanese forces swept through her hometown, she fled with her family and tried to imagine a future amid the chaos. Unsure what to study, she turned to an aunt for advice. The answer she got was simple, almost stubbornly practical: obstetrics. War or peace, her aunt said, people will always have babies. It was a craft that would never become useless.

Grandma followed that advice and became an obstetrician during wartime. After the founding of the People's Republic, in 1949, she volunteered to work in some of the poorest parts of Guizhou province and remained there for the rest of her career. In remote mountain villages, she helped countless women bring children safely into the world. On the day she retired, people came from across the county carrying flowers and singing to her: Thank you, Doctor.

But the work was never simple. The final years of her career overlapped with the harshest period of China's one-child policy, and obstetric hospitals like hers became frontline enforcers of it. On one side, she continued doing what she had always done: protecting pregnancies, delivering babies, welcoming new life. On the other, her institution was required to carry out the state's population policy: promoting contraception, performing sterilizations, and, at times, forced abortions.

Like so many of her generation, she carries a wound that never fully healed. She was both the person who welcomed life into the world and a cog in the machinery that took it away. When she speaks of those years, of full-term fetuses forcibly terminated, of mothers crying until their voices gave out, she

falls into a silence beyond words. She hated the policy. And somewhere within that hatred, I think, was also a hatred of herself: for having been there, for having been part of it, for having been unable to stop it.

In 2016, faced with rapid aging and a shrinking future workforce, for the first time, China relaxed the one-child policy and allowed families to have two children. My grandmother felt something loosen inside her. At last, she thought, families who wanted more children would no longer be punished for it.

But the story soon took another turn. After a brief rise in births in 2017, China's birth rate resumed its decline and kept falling. It turns out that, even though the state finally allows it, Chinese people no longer want children the way they once did.

My grandmother cannot make sense of it. Even in wartime, she says, people fought to bring children into the world. And now, when life is easier, and with the government subsidizing families and handing out cash to encourage childbirth, why do young people no longer want children?



Two children in Bayang Village,
Baoshan, China



A crisis? A revolution!

Chinese people are having fewer children. The broad outlines of this story are already familiar in the West.

Over the past half-century, China's population has been the subject of perhaps the most dramatic demographic experiment in human history. Birth rates surged through the 1950s and 1960s, then were forced sharply downward under the one-child policy of the 1980s and 1990s, implemented with a brutality that remains difficult to fully reckon with. Only in the early years of this century did the turbulence begin to settle. Rarely in history has a population been reshaped so radically, so deliberately, and on such a scale.

But over the past decade, the story has taken another turn — one far less understood outside China. China's population is no longer merely growing more slowly. It is now shrinking. And the pace of that decline is picking up.

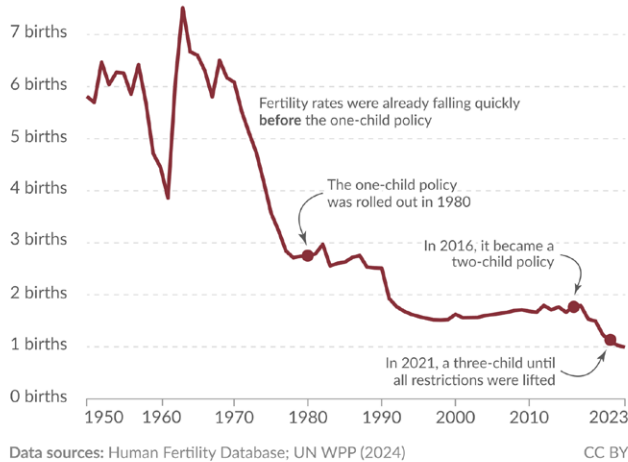
The numbers are stark. China's fertility rate has fallen from more than six children per woman in the 1960s, to 2.25 in the 1990s, to around 1.0 in 2024: among the lowest in the world.

In 2025, annual births fell below eight million for the first time since the founding of the PRC, reaching a historic low. The total population declined by 3.39 million, marking the fourth consecutive year of contraction.

What makes this so striking is: this is not happening in a country ravaged by famine or war. This is present-day China: still humming, still building, still central to the global economy. This generation of Chinese people commands more material wealth than any before it. And yet many no longer want children.

China's fertility rate has fallen to one, continuing a long decline that began before and continued after the one-child policy

The total fertility rate summarizes the total number of births a woman would have, if she experienced the birth rates seen in women of each age group in one particular year across her childbearing years.



Source: Our World in Data

We once assumed this kind of demographic exhaustion belonged to aging welfare states: rich, stagnant societies that had run out of ambition. You know: Europe. Now it is unfolding in the very country that powered global growth for decades.

Economists and demographers warn that the sinking population number could become one of the defining demographic crises of the modern era. Multiple pressures are converging all at once: a shrinking workforce, rapid aging, and a pension system under mounting strain.

The demographic dividend that fueled China's extraordinary rise over the past forty years, that vast labor force that built factories and filled cities, is being spent down with little

to replace it. The decision to raise the retirement age in 2025 is not a solution so much as the first concession to an arithmetic that will not correct itself.

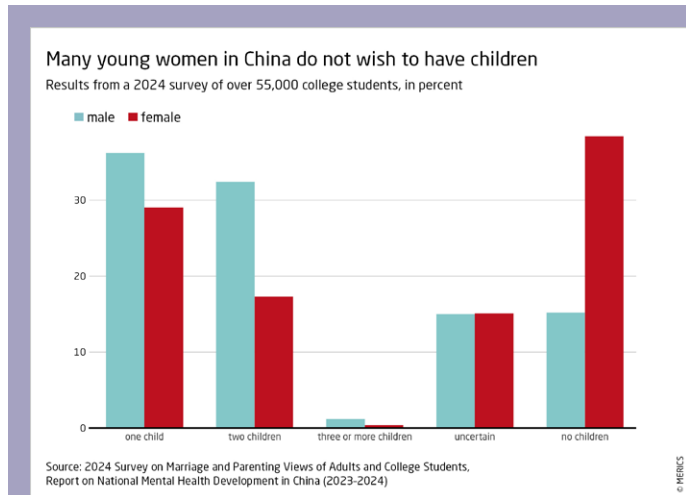
The consequences will not remain within China's borders. The world's largest manufacturer, one of its largest consumer markets, and one of its most consequential geopolitical actors is entering a period of demographic contraction, the effects of which will reverberate globally.

This looks like a crisis. On many fronts, it is. But "crisis" alone doesn't capture what is actually unfolding. Something else is going on: underneath the numbers, a gender revolution is quietly manifesting itself.

For the first time in generations, Chinese women are gaining real agency over the most intimate of decisions: whether to have children, and, if yes, when to have them. The forces reshaping these choices are deep and varied: a growing consciousness of women's rights, rising economic independence, changing expectations around work and domestic labor, and the emergence of communities where such questions can finally be discussed openly. More and more women are questioning the role once assumed to be theirs: as bearer of children. Many are renegotiating it. Some are refusing it altogether.

This is a freedom my grandmother's generation never possessed. It is also something China's policymakers seem unable or unwilling to fully understand. They look at the numbers from behind their desks, reach for subsidies and cash incentives, and conclude that financial encouragement will be enough to raise the birth rate again. But history offers few examples of fertility rates rebounding once they have fallen this far. Money alone cannot solve this.

Which is why understanding the real causes matters. Why do young Chinese women no longer want children? Over the six years I have hosted *The Weirdo Podcast*, an independent Chinese-language podcast for progressive and



Source: MERICS

37

non-conformist voices, I have returned to this question again and again, with guests from vastly different backgrounds. The stories I have gathered sketch a portrait of the Chinese woman of today: how she thinks, what she wants, and what she fears.

Below are excerpts of four of those conversations, selected from the podcast. They feature influencers and academics, physicians and lawyers, voices from across the spectrum of reproductive rights. Together, they document something probably no population statistic can fully capture: Chinese women are not simply refusing motherhood in general. They are refusing motherhood when it comes on someone else's terms. They are, for the first time in generations, asking whether they wish to become a mother, and on what terms.



Man and a child in Shanghai, China

Four Perspectives

1. The Cost of Motherhood

The decision to have a child is, at its core, a matter of money: what it costs, and who bears those costs.

In March 2021, *The Weirdo Podcast* released a conversation with **Rice Cake Mom**, a prominent parenting influencer who had built a large following by questioning China's cultural conventions around pregnancy and childrearing. Her book, published around the same time, carried a telling title: *Your Life Should Not Have to Give Way to Pregnancy*. In the episode, we discussed the cost of motherhood at length. It turns out to be considerable, and not only in financial terms.

Recent studies have found that China is now among the most expensive places in the world to raise a child: the average cost to the age of 18 exceeds six times China's GDP per capita, a ratio higher than in both the United States and Japan.

There are also costs that don't appear in any spreadsheet. On the physical side, Rice Cake Mom speaks candidly about birth injuries: the pain of childbirth itself, the long recovery that follows, the damage that can linger for years.

She also takes on the myths that surround the postpartum period in China: the prohibition on coffee, the expectation of sexual abstinence, the assumption that discomfort must simply be endured. Drawing on her medical training, she fact-checks these conventions one by one, and finds much of them wanting.

On the question of labor, the picture is starker. The episode discusses a phenomenon many Chinese women would

recognize: “widowed parenting”(丧偶式育儿): fathers who are physically present but effectively absent from childcare.

This point deeply resonated with the listeners. One comment captured the weight of this reality: fathers tend to see playing with their children as the full extent of their duty, while the exhausting, invisible labor of night feeds, hospital visits, and managing tantrums falls almost entirely to mothers and other female family members.

In China, without grandparents to step in, two working parents can barely manage childrearing alone. Yet bringing grandparents into the picture introduces its own tensions. Generational differences in values and lifestyle can strain a marriage, and for many young mothers, navigating these relationships becomes yet another burden to carry.

Rice Cake Mom’s conclusion in the episode is unambiguous: a woman’s ability to resist social pressure around childbearing, coming from in-laws, from employers, and from cultural expectations, is inseparable from her financial independence. Economic autonomy does not solve everything, but it is the precondition for reproductive autonomy. Without it, the freedom to choose remains out of reach.

2. The Body as Battleground

Knowing the cost is one thing. But for decades, many women have made decisions about their bodies without actually “knowing”. The silence surrounding childbirth injuries made accurate information hard to find.

Published in May 2023, *The Weirdo Podcast* brought **Mr. Six Floor**, a former gynecologist turned health educator onto the show to discuss reproductive health, birth injuries, medical misinformation, and the social pressures shaping Chinese women’s relationship to their own bodies. It has now become one of the podcast’s most widely circulated episodes.

The episode's title is its sharpest argument: the "golden age" for childbearing, roughly a woman's twenties and early thirties, is also the golden age for professional development, self-discovery, and building an independent life. The framing refuses the assumption that these two things can be neatly sequenced, or that one naturally yields to the other. As the episode's most-liked comment put it: "This is the only twenties I will ever have. I want it to be, as much as possible, about me."

The conversation moves between the clinical and the structural. The guest dismantles widespread myths about reproductive health, from pregnancy restrictions to breastfeeding as a moral litmus test, arguing that many of the "rules" governing women's bodies are rooted not in medicine but in social control.

He also confronts the near-total silence around birth injuries: the physical damage that childbearing can cause, which receives almost no public attention. Motherhood is routinely celebrated; what it actually does to women's bodies is not spoken of.

This silence is part of a larger pattern in which women are conditioned to absorb pain without complaint, a point one listener illustrated vividly, recounting years of agonizing menstrual pain endured without painkillers because family members told her medication was harmful.

What the episode documents is a generation of women who have begun to critically scrutinize the reproductive script. Their aim is not to reject motherhood, but to refuse the terms on which it has been offered up 'til now. One listener wrote: "Being called 'well-behaved' always made me want to cry. Now I understand why. It meant surrender your desires so others can have theirs."



A woman and a child in Shanghai, China

3. The Structures Behind the Fears

Personal experience can illuminate a problem. But to understand its deeper causes, we need a wider lens, one that moves beyond individual stories to the structures that shape them.

In February 2023, days after China announced its first population decline in six decades, *The Weirdo Podcast* released a conversation with two female scholars: **Zhou Yunyun** of the University of Oslo and **Xie Kailing** of the University of Birmingham.

43

They approached the shrinking population not as a demographic puzzle but as a question of power. The very framing of low fertility as a “problem,” they argued, is itself political. It assumes that women’s reproductive choices should serve national and social goals rather than individual desires and wellbeing. They challenged that premise directly. Is low fertility actually a problem? For whom? And who gets to define it as one?

For generations, marriage and motherhood have been wrapped in romantic narratives: marriage as the natural culmination of love, motherhood as the fulfillment of a woman’s life. Yet as more women gain access to education, economic independence, and platforms to share their experiences, they have become increasingly aware of what these narratives leave out: the physical risks of childbirth, interrupted careers, the cost of raising children, and the unequal burden of care work.

Chinese society has changed dramatically over the past few decades. The division of labor at home, however, often has not. Children may be the result of a joint decision, but the work of raising them is still widely seen as the mother’s responsibility. The glorification of motherhood reinforces this imbalance. The more maternal sacrifice is celebrated, the less room women have to express exhaustion, frustration, or regret.

The podcast's comment section offered a vivid illustration of these tensions. Many women wrote that they encountered gender inequality most acutely not in childhood or at work, but through marriage. Romantic relationships can feel relatively equal. Marriage, by contrast, raises questions about property, childcare, eldercare, and career sacrifice.

Beneath these negotiations lie deeply rooted expectations about gender roles. What many women discover is that they are not simply negotiating with a partner; they are confronting a broader social structure.

Economic realities make these concerns even more pressing. In an era of soaring housing costs, rising education expenses, and growing job insecurity, raising a child has become a major long-term commitment. For many young people, not just women, whose own futures already feel uncertain, taking responsibility for another human being can seem overwhelming.

4. The Right to Freeze My Own Eggs

Does this mean Chinese women no longer want children? Not necessarily. Some are fighting for something more specific: the right to have a child on their own terms, outside of marriage, outside of the state's timetable, and entirely by their own choice.

In July 2023, *The Weirdo Podcast* brought onto the show **Xu Zaozao**, who was the plaintiff in China's first lawsuit by a single woman seeking the right to freeze her eggs. The episode documented a legal battle running for nearly five years and illuminated one of the sharpest contradictions in Chinese reproductive policy: a state urgently trying to raise birth rates, while simultaneously preventing single women from preserving their own fertility.

In 2018, Xu, then thirty, single, and in good health, asked a Beijing hospital for egg-freezing services. The hospital refused on the grounds that she was unmarried and had no medical need. She sued, arguing that marriage is a means of achieving parenthood, not a prerequisite for it. The case went to appeal. The hospital's position held.

Beneath the legal drama lies a set of assumptions that run very deep. Chinese policy permits single men to freeze sperm without restriction. Single women cannot freeze eggs. The asymmetry is rarely examined, but its logic is not hard to find. It reflects a view in which women's reproductive capacity belongs not to them, but to the institution of marriage and the social order it sustains.

Xu's own words are the episode's most resonant moment: "What I want is the right to autonomously dispose of a portion of the cells in my own body." The modesty of that claim, she doesn't seek the right to be a mother, but the right to keep open the possibility, illuminates how far Chinese law still is from recognizing women as full reproductive agents.

Her lawsuit is, in miniature, the same argument this article makes at scale: what is happening in China is a story about who gets to decide and about women claiming the agency to decide for themselves.

The world is right to pay attention to China's birth rate. But let's be clear about the full picture of what we are actually watching. What is happening in China is not just a demographic shift. It is a gender revolution: quiet, uneven, deeply personal, and entirely consequential.

From Madman to Lying Flat

47

How China Is Learning To Speak About Pain

Text: Qing Wang Photos: Remko Tanis

Published: September 3, 2026



A note to readers:

This article discusses suicide and mental health difficulties. If you are struggling, or concerned about someone else, support is available.

In Switzerland, call 143 (24/7)

English-language support in Switzerland is available at 0800 143 000, daily from 18:00–23:00

In the United States, call or text 988

In China, call the national mental health support hotline 12356

Readers elsewhere can find verified local services at Find A Helpline



People in traffic in Chengdu, China

One Madwoman, Two Plagues

Every year, as summer slowly stumbles into autumn, my mind is drawn back to a September almost thirty years ago, in the small Chinese town where I grew up. The heat had just begun to break. There was, in the air, the first suggestion of autumn. A woman in her late thirties decided to end her life. She climbed onto the edge of the balcony of her apartment building and jumped.

49

That woman was my aunt, my mother's eldest sister. "She had gone mad," people said. And that was how they explained what she had done to herself.

These were the late 1990s, a turbulent period in China's recent history, when state-owned enterprises were shedding workers by the millions. Initiated under then-Premier Zhu Rongji, the upheaval became known as "breaking the iron rice bowl" (打破铁饭碗).

It was a sweeping set of economic reforms that did nothing less than dismantle a system of guaranteed lifetime employment. In its place came a brutally competitive labor market, one that many struggled to adjust to.

The mass layoffs eventually reached our town, a poverty-stricken county seat in Guizhou, one of the poorest provinces in a country that was, at that time, still poor. Per capita GDP in our town was around USD 200 a year. For China overall, it was about USD 900, with the global average at USD 5,500.

For nearly 20 years, my aunt had worked for a local grain company, part of the vast state-run system that controlled the purchase and distribution of grain across the country. Then,

almost overnight, more than half the staff were let go. With little preparation these newly unemployed, together with millions of other workers across China, were thrust into the young market economy, disoriented and with not much of a safety net to catch them.

For the first time, our town learned a new word: *xiagang* (下岗), literally meaning “to step down from one’s post.” Born of that particular moment in Chinese history, the word quickly entered the national vocabulary. It spread from town to town, carrying with it a sense of panic, almost like a plague.

After losing her job, my aunt quickly sank into despair. Her work had always been much more than just a way to make a living. It had defined her identity. It gave structure to her days, a place in the town, and a sense of who she was.

She struggled to make sense of the loss. “Why me? What have I done wrong?” There was growing anxiety in the family as she became despondent and her mind began to drift. Then, that one day in September, when no one in the family was watching, she stepped onto the balcony and jumped.

My aunt survived but was left permanently disabled. When I arrived at the hospital, family members told me: “Your aunt is possessed. A demon has gotten into her.”

I grew up in the system of traditional Chinese folk beliefs. Sudden changes in a person’s mind or behavior were explained as the work of demons. To be possessed meant that something alien had entered the body and taken hold of the person. As a 10-year-old at the time, I couldn’t understand what this demon actually was, or what exactly had happened to my aunt.

What puzzled me even more was the way my family responded. My aunt was no longer talked about, as if she had ceased to exist. She rarely joined family gatherings. Her children, my cousins, would sometimes stop by our grandparents’ home for food

or money. Without their mother able to work, the family had slipped back into poverty.

My disabled aunt had become a source of shame the family could not name.

Occasionally, I would run into her on the streets of our town, hobbling along on a cane, as neighbors whispered behind her back: "That's the woman who lost her job and jumped off the building. She's gone mad."

People believed that she had been struck by two plagues: the nation's grand reform made her lose her job, while the indescribable demon of the mind made her lose her health.

51

I did not know then that the demon that had driven my aunt to jump was, in fact, a mental illness. That it had a name: depression. That hundreds of millions of people globally live with it. Because in a small Chinese town in the late 1990s, there was little language for mental illness. It was not something people spoke about. It barely had a name. It was a demon, a plague. People who were caught by it were labeled as mad. Reduced to Madwoman, Madman.

My aunt was still alive. But in the eyes of our town and, in some ways, of her own family, she had ceased to exist.



Vegetable shop
in Changsha, China



A Century of Diagnosis

In the summer of 2026, I interviewed **Dr. Jiang Tao**, arguably China's best-known psychiatrist. Only then did I understand my aunt was not alone. Hers was the experience of a generation.

Jiang has worked as a psychiatrist for thirty years. He has seen every kind of patient: those brought in by their families, those who came on their own, rich and poor, and those like my aunt, who had broken under the weight of sudden upheaval like a lost job, a life overturned. People who turned their pain against themselves.

Mental health is undoubtedly a global issue, but China's experience has been unusual in one important respect: the sheer speed of the country's transformation. People's lives changed faster than they could make sense of it. Urbanization, mechanization, digitization: one after the other, transformations that unfolded over a century or more in Europe were compressed into just a few decades in China.

The mind carries the weight of such intense and rapid change. Today, nearly 100 million people in China live with depression, the demon that once caught my aunt.

Jiang is a veteran psychiatrist at Beijing Anding Hospital, one of China's most established mental health institutions. Some still know the institution by its old nickname: the madhouse. Founded in 1908, its history is, in miniature, a history of how China has thought about madness for the past century.

In the early twentieth century, Western missionary doctors brought modern psychiatry to China. Anding Hospital

was among the first institutions shaped by that influence. The very idea of madness was being redefined, negotiated and, in some ways, invented, a process that historian **Emily Baum** traces in her work *The Invention of Madness*.

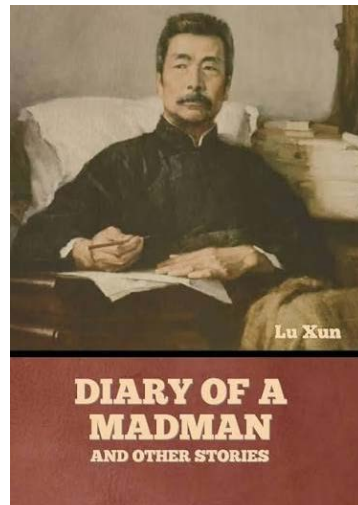
It was also the era in which **Lu Xun**, often called the father of modern Chinese literature, wrote *Diary of a Madman*. Published in 1918, it's the story of a man convinced that everyone around him is a cannibal, turning madness as a metaphor for seeing the sickness of society more clearly than others do.

55

After the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, psychiatric care expanded. New hospitals were built, and community programs emerged, focused largely on severe mental illnesses such as schizophrenia and psychosis.

The Cultural Revolution disrupted and politicized the profession, but psychiatry never disappeared. Hospitals remained open; patients were still treated. After the late 1970s,

Diary of a Madman
by Lu Xun (1918).



the field was gradually rebuilt and reconnected with international medicine. By the 1990s and 2000s, mental health was becoming a broader public concern. In 2013, China's first national Mental Health Law came into effect.

Psychology had a more turbulent journey. Condemned as a bourgeois discipline under Mao, it virtually disappeared during the Cultural Revolution, only to be rebuilt in the late 1970s. Psychological counseling began to take off in the 1990s. Then came the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, which killed around 87,000 people. In its aftermath, psychological assistance reached the public on an unprecedented scale.

In the years since, therapy has slowly moved out of hospitals and into everyday life. Platforms such as *Jiandanxinli* began connecting patients with therapists online. Content channels centered on mental wellbeing such as *Know Yourself* built large audiences around questions of relationships, trauma, anxiety and the self.

During and after Covid, that interest only grew. Mental health was no longer something that belonged only to doctors, hospitals, or the mad. It was becoming something ordinary that people could talk about.

China's mental-health infrastructure has expanded dramatically over the past decades. According to research published in *The Lancet*, from 2000 to 2020, the number of psychiatrists in the country increased by 139 %, and the number of psychiatric nurses increased by 340 %.

Dr. Jiang Tao's own experience reflects that shift. Over his three decades in psychiatry, he has watched diagnosis become far more precise. Neurasthenia, once a catch-all for almost any emotion-related complaint, has given way to distinctions among depression, anxiety, OCD, bipolar disorder and somatic symptom disorder, much as the anthropologist **Arthur Kleinman** had predicted decades earlier.

In a 1980s study of 100 “neurasthenia” patients in Hunan, he found that most also met the criteria for severe depression: the diagnoses differed because the vocabulary did. Neurasthenia, framed as a physical rather than mental ailment, let patients avoid the stigma attached to mental illness. But depression wasn’t absent. It didn’t yet have a name.

Treatment has changed, too. In the past, Jiang recalled, medication was often judged by a simple measure: could it stabilize the patient? Side effects received far less attention. Today, he said, getting someone out of the hospital is only the beginning. The goal is to help a patient return to ordinary life: to work, to relationships, to a life beyond illness.

Public attitudes have slowly shifted as well. People are not only more willing to seek help and talk openly about mental health; there is also a growing recognition that people with mental illness need care and support.

Jiang pointed to one small but telling change. In the past, psychiatry had a reputation in medical schools as a specialty where students with mediocre grades ended up. Today, many talented young doctors choose it deliberately. At Anding Hospital, Jiang now sees excellent graduates joining his department straight out of medical school. Not because they have nowhere else to go, but because they want to be there.

None of this means the stigma has disappeared. Recently, our podcast interviewed bestselling author [Vivian Tam](#), a Hong Konger who grew up in Canada in what looked, from the outside, like a model Chinese family. Yet for decades, her parents kept her brother, who had schizophrenia, hidden from the outside world, almost as if he did not exist. His illness was something the family could neither openly acknowledge nor name. After years of struggling with that silence, Tam finally decided to write about her brother.

The story resonated deeply with readers. She traces part of that silence to *mianzi* (面子), China's deeply rooted culture of face, and to the impulse to hide mental illness, along with the shame attached to it. Tam's story felt painfully familiar. My family had done much the same with my aunt.

I told Jiang about my aunt. He said, not without feeling, that if this had happened today, my aunt probably wouldn't have gone as far as she did.

That is not to say China has won its battle with mental health. Far from it. The challenges remain enormous. But today, there is something people like my aunt did not have back then: places to turn to, people who know how to help, and words for the pain other than simply "demon", as well as words for healing.



People mourning after the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan, China

Neither Mad Nor Normal

China has made real progress in providing clinical support for mental illness. But progress is never a straight line. De-stigmatizing madness may only be the first step.

“How are Chinese people feeling?”

During my years in Europe and the U.S., Western friends have often asked me this at public conferences and over private dinners. It’s a question I’ve spent years trying to answer, using my podcast to track and name how Chinese people actually feel.

Our conventional vocabulary for psychological states has long seemed to have only two settings: sick and healthy. But most people never live at either extreme. They may not have developed a clinically diagnosable illness, but they are far from healthy. They live in a state of diffuse “sub-health” (亚健康).

Life happens in this vast gray zone between mad and normal and, at least until recently, much of that middle ground had no name. Without a name, it could not be seen, spoken about, or given a place to exist.

In China, this gray zone has taken on a particular significance. Rapid development and radical societal change have produced a surplus of complicated, undigested emotions. Emotions that can neither be diagnosed as mental illness nor be voiced, in China’s restricted political environment, as collective political demands. Instead, they have found indirect, coded expression in language itself.

Tangping (躺平), or lying flat, a phrase now familiar to Western readers, is one such expression. It describes a quiet re-

fusal to keep striving, a wish to step away from relentless competition for jobs, marriage, property, status, and to simply do what is necessary to get by. It is not a diagnosis, but a withdrawal, or even: a decision.

Depression happens to you. Lying flat is a life you choose.

In April 2022, our podcast explored this phenomenon. At a moment deep in the pandemic many young Chinese were leaving Beijing and Shanghai for Dali, a small, slow-paced city in western China. Some quit jobs at big companies, walked away from the notorious “996” work culture, working from 9 in the morning to 9 at night, six days a week. They traded ambition for something smaller: a rented courtyard house, a bit of land to farm, days with no schedule at all.

At the heart of lying flat is *juandai* (倦怠), a widespread sense of burnout and powerlessness among young people trying to find an inner anchor in a society of accelerating change. Older generations criticize them for lacking ambition, or for simply not trying hard enough.

In December 2024, we discussed this with **Leung Man-tao**, a prominent public intellectual born in the 1970s. He argued that every generation inherits a world from the one before, while also shaping the world the next generation will inherit.

When young people say they are exhausted, the least useful response is: “We had it harder.” A better question is: what about the world we created that has left the next generation so tired?

The episode resonated deeply with our listeners. It suggested another way to understand lying flat: not simply as an individual decision, but as a question of generational responsibility.

The spirit of lying flat has also reached the most private parts of life. China’s fertility rate has been falling for years.

This year, marriages hit another record low, down by more than half from 2013. Young people are having fewer children, marrying less, and even having less sex.

In August 2024 and July 2026, we recorded two episodes on the sexual recession and the inability to love, speaking with sociologist Yu Jia about why young Chinese are having less sex and increasingly opting out of marriage. Behind this retreat, too, lies a crisis of meaning, playing out on the intimate terrain of sex, love and family.

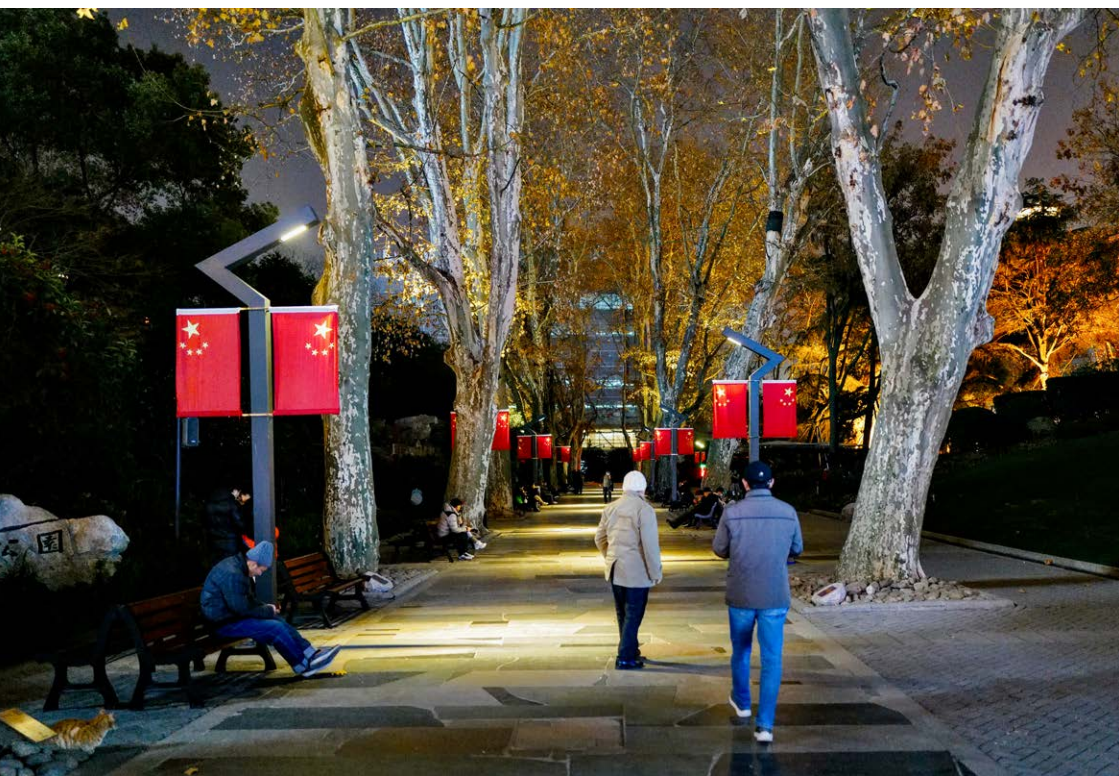
Other terms capturing similar emotions have also gained traction, many coined or brought into wider use by prominent intellectuals. Notable examples include *neijuan* (内卷), or “involution,” and *xuanfu* (悬浮), or “suspension”: both popularized by anthropologist **Xiang Biao**.

Involution, a term borrowed from economics, has come to describe a collective state of mind: an exhausting cycle of ever-intensifying competition in which people invest more and more effort for less and less return, yet feel unable to stop or opt out.

Suspension describes a related but distinct condition: being unable to land, working relentlessly, chasing a better future, life in the present perpetually deferred, like a hummingbird beating its wings just to stay in the air.

Together, these concepts offer a vocabulary for understanding the predicament of a generation caught between relentless competition and a weakening connection to the world immediately around them. They turn what can feel like private frustration or personal failure into something more structural, a way of asking how social change has reshaped young people’s sense of belonging, and agency.

Agency, however, does not always mean opting out, as lying flat suggests. Sometimes it means the opposite: refusing to withdraw, choosing instead to stay and speak.



Jing An Park, Shanghai, China

In March 2024, we recorded an episode with **Zhang Feng**, a well-known writer and bookstore owner, on how writing and public speech can themselves become forms of resistance to systemic powerlessness. In recent years, his bookstore in Chengdu has become something of a spiritual home for young people seeking independent thought and a place to belong. For Zhang, public expression pushes back against what might be called political depression – turning private frustration into words, and powerlessness into agency.

None of these states – exhaustion, retreat, suspension, involution, or even political depression – fit neatly into a box for mental health diagnosis. They are diffuse, era-specific psychological conditions. What connects them is not necessarily illness, but something much harder to pinpoint: a loss of meaning.

© 2026 Sunflower Foundation, Zurich

Published by the Sunflower Foundation / MoneyMuseum, Zurich,
in collaboration with Asia Society Switzerland, Zurich
www.sunflower.foundation · www.asiasociety.org/switzerland

Text: Qing Wang

Editor: Remko Tanis

Design and layout: Claudia Neuenschwander, Zurich · www.werkk.ch

Artwork p. 1: Ti Wondrak Liu

Photos: Qing Wang (Essay 1), Remko Tanis (Essay 2 + 3),
p. 6/7: André Hengst

Cover photo: Remko Tanis

All rights reserved.

The booklet gives voice to a young, urban, and globally minded generation in China. Drawing on conversations from *the Weirdo Podcast*, Qing Wang portrays a multifaceted China beyond simplistic Western or official narratives. Young people interpret wars and global politics through a complex mix of national identity, human rights, sovereignty, exhaustion, and pragmatism. Falling birth rates are seen not only as a demographic crisis, but also as a revolution in women's self-determination. At the same time, attitudes toward mental distress are changing. Depression, burnout, "Lying Flat" and "Involution" give names to experiences that were once dismissed as madness or personal failure. The central message is clear: China's transformation becomes easier to understand when we listen to individual stories, contradictions, and new forms of expression.

Money Museum

