Australia-China Relations Institute
澳中关系研究院

Opinion

The one word that captures the pulse of urban China

Wanning Sun
October 18 2023

Note: This article appeared in *Crikey* on October 18 2023.

The first impression upon landing in Shanghai a month ago was that the buildings were taller, the lights were brighter, and everyone was in a hurry. Once on the ground, it didn't take more than a couple of days to appreciate that more than ever, China is a country that prizes speed, efficiency and convenience.

Consider the following everyday scenario. You organise a reunion with schoolmates who are scattered in different parts of China. You take snapshots to mark the happy occasion, select a few and send them to be printed and framed in a style you choose, and then have them couriered to the home address of each of your friends — all within 24 hours, and without having to physically run around between photo shop, framing shop and post office.

When you witness first-hand the sheer scale of such activities, it's hard not to marvel at how digital platforms, combined with an extremely vibrant courier service throughout China, have transformed the way people live.

But when you start talking to people, you start to sense a pervasive anxiety.

Although the term 'lying flat' (*tang ping)* has captured the imaginations of both those caught in the rat race and China watchers in the West, the word heard most frequently when you talk to people on the ground is '*nei juan*' (内卷), or more commonly '*juan*' (卷).

Nei juan translates literally into the English term 'involution'. It refers to the relentless yet increasingly senseless competition in all walks of life and work.

A common analogy to demonstrate the senseless logic of *juan*-type competition can be found at a football match. To get a good view from the stadium, some spectators sitting in the second row decide to stand up, thereby forcing everyone sitting behind them also to stand up. Consequently, everyone's viewing experience is diminished.

Another example often mentioned to me as a common manifestation of *juan* is in the workplace. An employee gets praise and bonuses for taking initiatives and putting in extra work, so everyone decides to work late — nobody wants to go home before the boss. In this way, *juan* leads to more hours in the office, which doesn't necessarily create inherent value or productivity; it merely turns competition away from business competitors and inwards towards peers.

Public servants no longer just work 9 to 5; IT professionals are now part of the '996 tribe' (9am to 9pm, six days a week), and many employees — white- and blue-collar — belong to the '007 brigade' (working all the time, seven days a week).

Juan is not limited to the workplace; it's also widespread in parenting. One parent told me:

I want my kid to have a happy childhood, so I don't want to enrol her in too many extracurricular activities. But every other parent seems to be signing up their children to do art, music, English and sport, as well as extra academic tuition, so I feel anxious that my daughter will fall behind unless I do the same. But since everyone is doing this, the chances of success have not really improved. So the kids end up being unhappy and stressed, and so am I.

I notice that *juan* has been effortlessly blended into everyday conversation, as a verb, a noun and an adjective. For instance, a parent told me: 'We're not only *juan*-ing ourselves; we're also *juan*-ing our children.'

One IT professional said: 'There's too much *juan* in my workplace. I'm expected to respond to work-related WeChat messages from my boss and colleagues on weekends and outside office hours.'

A young university lecturer in a prestigious university told me universities are one of the most '*juan*-able' sectors in the workforce:

Nowadays they put us on a three-year contract and our performance is reviewed on the basis of how many journal articles we publish. Unless you meet your KPIs, you'll actually lose a fraction of your salary.

It's not surprising that anthropologist Li Zhang thinks anxiety has become a 'powerful indicator of the general pulse of contemporary Chinese society'.

A social science researcher outlined three common strategies in response to the relentless pressure of *juan*. The first is to 'lie flat' (*tang ping*躺平), opting out of the rat-race and doing the bare minimum in order to survive. The second is to join the rat-race and be a consummate '*juan*-er'. The third is to 'run away' (*run*润), often by migrating to a country hopefully less competitive and with a better welfare system.

Some people told me that unless you've retired with a good pension, own some investment properties or are fabulously rich, 'lying flat' is mostly wishful thinking: 'After all, we all need to eat and have a roof over our heads. For those who have children, opting out is simply not an option.'

Although the third option is tempting, it is open only to those who have the resources to migrate, and those who have the necessary capability to carve out a new life in an unfamiliar culture. In other words, it sounds good in theory, but is much harder to pursue in real life.

This has led one social scientist to make the following observation to me:

Based on my conversations with young people around me, I get the feeling that everyone is moving back and forth among these three options. Most people want to lie flat but can't afford it. They want to run away but don't have a place to go to, so they just have to keep *juan*-ing, but they're so exhausted.

While anxiety is felt across the board, people from different socioeconomic strata have differing capacities to cope. Sick and tired of paying exorbitant rent, some young IT workers are leaving big cities and joining other digital nomads in rural and more affordable communes.

In recent years, some stay-at-home mothers in well-to-do middle-class families have taken their children out of the city to join like-minded parents in far-flung (and usually more natural) environments for brief or extended stays, so the children can enjoy a more carefree childhood, at least for a while. Home schooling, private schools and alternative learning communities have started to emerge in some cities to accommodate parents who want to give their children an education outside the mainstream system.

And while more and more middle-class urbanites take to Western-style psychological counselling, many in the urban lower social strata are discovering myriad online and off-line services in the hope of getting some relief from mental distress.

Of course, the stress of modern urban life is not unique to China. But a number of things conspire to make the situation there much more pronounced: an under-developed social welfare system; a worryingly high level of inequality; increasingly precarious working and living circumstances, and a governmental discourse that

actively promotes the illusion that as long as you try hard enough and work tirelessly, you will achieve personal happiness.

As a statement from President Xi Jinping more than a year ago makes clear, the government wants to 'avoid' both the 'lying flat' ethos and the reality of *juan*. The question is: how?

Professor Wanning Sun is Deputy Director at UTS:ACRI and a Professor of Media and Communication in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at UTS.