

## Beyond 'Rising Tides' and 'Lying Flat': Emergent Cultural Practices Among Youth in Urban China

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**Diego Gullotta and Lili Lin,**

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**Ed. Treasa De Loughry and Brittany Murray**

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**Abstract:** In their article, "Beyond 'Rising Tides' and 'Lying Flat': Emergent Cultural Practices Among Youth in Urban China", Diego Gullotta and Lili Lin examine how Chinese youth are positioned within the dominant culture, how young people appropriate space in their emergent cultural practices, and how they negotiate meaning-making. The article first analyses the *rising tides (houlang)* video, sponsored jointly by the state and the private sector, and argues that it reduces youth to a homogenous subject inscribed into the discourse of "China's rise" (*zhongguo jueqi*) via emotional mobilization. The "lying flat" phenomenon represents young people's negative response to this mobilization, yet it still falls into the dichotomous discourse of "positive/negative energy". Moving beyond this discourse, the article provides three cases of emergent cultural practices among urban middle-class youth to explore to what extent can these practices, characterized by knowledge and fluidity, exceed the logic of the state and the market.

**Diego GULLOTTA and Lili LIN,**

## **"Beyond 'Rising Tides' and 'Lying Flat': Emergent Cultural Practices Among Youth in Urban China"**

### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

In recent times, "China's rise," a discourse derived from the previous discussion on the "Chinese model," has prevailed (Dirlik 277). Since Xi Jinping has come to power in 2013, the party-state has attempted to mobilize youth through the discourse of the Chinese Dream. The dominant ideology of China's rise promises young people a bright and positive future where they not only can achieve their individual dreams of living a good life but can also contribute to the dream of national rejuvenation (Xi, "Qiushi"). The discourse of China's rise has re-positioned the *qingnian* (youth) subject through emotional mobilization, namely through promoting "positive energy" (*zheng nengliang*). "Positive energy" has been welcomed by the market, and functions as a dispositif that is produced by the apparatuses for ideological formulation. The dispositif of "positive energy," analogous to the Foucauldian distinction of normal/abnormal, creates a dichotomy between positive and negative energy. As Chen and Wang point out, "positive energy does not depict a utopian future that requires sacrifice, but tells people that they are living in a utopia, as long as they conform to the 'positive' norm" (217).

China's youth have been responding negatively to the demand of staying positive. After nearly four decades of marketization, they find it increasingly difficult to achieve upward social mobility. They have been experiencing mounting pressures, including a deteriorated work environment, precaritization of work and life, and rising housing prices. Given intensified contradictions and reduced capacity for upward mobility, Chinese youth have created many internet neologisms expressing their frustration in the recent decade, such as "losers" (*diaosi*), "Buddhist-style" (*foxi*), "garlic chives" (*jiuca*), "sang culture," and, most recently, "lying flat" (*tangping*).<sup>2</sup>

Recent studies on youth culture in China have focused primarily on young people's negative or cynical cultural expressions on the internet. For instance, Liu Xinting in her recent article "Why are Contemporary Youth Increasingly Unhappy" investigates the digital culture of *sang*, losers (*diaosi*), and Buddhist-styles in relation to worsening working and living conditions for this generation. She argues that the new "passive" digital culture among youth "displays not the politics of resistance identified by classical subcultural studies, but an adaptation to and enjoyment of the electric shock of the speeding Internet" (107). She concludes that "the youth subject is consciously acknowledging failure and incompetence in advance" through the expression of "sang" and "diaosi," and "the tide of digital neuro-exploitation is leaving a series of cynical footprints and word bubbles on flashing computer screens" (112). Although Liu's study examines young people's response on the internet to the demands of the state and the market, we feel that its adherence to the positive/negative framework limits its analytical reach.

This article aims to explore how Chinese youth are subjectively positioned through analyzing the "lying flat" and the "rising tides" phenomenon, and how youth appropriation of space in their daily practices negotiates meaning-making in a manner that exceeds the demands of state and market. We argue that the *rising tides* video sponsored by the market and the state prescribes a normative subject: a young, educated member of the middle class with the economic capacity to consume. The subject of youth is constructed from above, and is inscribed within the discourse of national rise. Young people are induced to be productive, competitive, passionate, and grateful. Thus, the *rising tides* video reduces the

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<sup>2</sup> The slang term "diaosi" (meaning "loser" in English) first appeared in 2011 referring to young men who come from humble family background with mediocre appearance and work a dead-end job with little prospect of enjoying upper middle-class lifestyle, such as house and car. It is widely used by young Chinese to describe and mock at their own low status, which is similar to the Japanese term, *otaku*. "Foxy," literally meaning "Buddhist-style," is an Internet buzzword used to describe young people born after 1990s and 2000s who reject social competition and tend to be indifferent about money and promotion. "Sang" culture, a popular phrase appeared in 2016, is used to describe defeatism, disenchantment and disconsolation felt by Chinese youth. The term "jiuca" will be introduced in section three.

heterogeneity of youth who are differentiated by class, gender, and ethnicity. Positive energy, as the matrix behind the video, tries to "shape hearts and minds" of youth and transform youth into a positive and productive subject, but is faced with the reaction of the youth who would rather "lying flat." The "lying flat" phenomenon is in fact on the surface a negative online cultural response to the positive energy of the dominant culture; however, if the "lying flat" phenomenon is understood in relation to emerging cultural practices among young people, it reveals itself only as a strategic response of rejection. We argue that both "rising tides" and "lying flat" represent youth subjects in a dichotomous way (either positively or negatively), and fail to recognize the potentialities of the technical composition or biopolitical potentialities of youth.

Therefore, in order to move beyond the dichotomy of positive and negative, it is necessary to examine important changes in the biopolitical condition of Chinese middle-class urban youth over the last decade. As Negri and Hardt have demonstrated, immaterial production has become prevalent in the processes of capitalist valorization (132). The biopolitical turn in economics, namely the predominance of affective and cognitive labor, has placed "living beings as fixed capital at the center of this transformation, and the production of forms of life is becoming the basis of added value." In Negri and Hardt's words: "This is a process in which putting to work human faculties, competences, and knowledge—those acquired on the job but, more importantly, those accumulated outside work interacting with automated and computerized productive systems—is directly productive of value" (132-33).

In this light, China's urban middle-class youth, who have been placed as a normative subject in the dominant representation and have competences that characterize biopolitical labor (such as affective and intellectual talents, the capacity to generate cooperation and organizational networks, communication skills), "exceed work and spill over into life" (157). Based on long-term participant observations of cultural practices among the young middle class in urban Shanghai, this article argues that this "excess" of biopolitical labor that Negri and Hardt have noted opens up possibilities for young people to transform their strategic refusal into fluid practices that are capable of evading the modes of valorization by capital or the state. These cultural practices, characterized by features of excess and fluidity, not only go beyond the "positive-negative" discourse illustrated in the "rising tides" and "lying flat" phenomena, but also challenge the young subject that is constructed from above through normative injunction and emotional mobilization. The excessive and fluid nature of emerging practices among young people that we have observed in Shanghai points to other possible forms of subjectification between and beyond the parameters of state and market. Because the emergent cultural practices examined in this article are still ongoing, however, and are often fluid, fragmented, and divisive, it is still too early to conclude that they constitute counter-hegemonic practice.

This article is structured in three parts: the first part will briefly discuss the various meanings invested into the symbol of youth in China's modernization process; the second part will analyze the "rising tides" and "lying flat" cultural phenomena, and examine how the dominant culture constructs the subject of youth and how youth respond to their designated social position; the third part will examine the cases of the theater troupe Grass Stage, a leftist student group, and Belonging Space managed by two young women, and explore key features of these practices.

### **The construction of Youth in China**

Youth has functioned as a distinct analytical category in China since the beginning of the twentieth century (Chen 53; Graziani 117). Youth was the driving social force behind some of the most significant events in China's twentieth century, from the May Fourth Movement, the Communist revolution, and the Cultural Revolution, to the 1989 democracy movement. It has been a primary sign for the ideal of national rejuvenation (Song 16). In his essay "Young China" written in 1900, Liang Qichao (1873-1929) associated the old with conservatism and identified the young as a symbol of "the future, hope, progressiveness, constant change, adventurousness, and creativeness" (Cited in Cai 146). The figure of new youth, or *xin qingnian*, was central to the New Culture Movement (1915-19), signaling a separation from Confucian values and the old social system, and the promise of alternative futurity. Since then, youth have become the key symbolic figures of almost all social, cultural, and political reforms in modern China. Among many magazines and periodicals catering to the younger generation proliferated during this period, *Xin Qingnian* (New Youth) founded by Chen Duxiu (1879-42) in 1915 was the flagship magazine that popularized a new image of youth as the leading agent of social change in China (Song 4). In the magazine's inaugural issue, Chen Duxiu published an influential article "Call to Youth," referring to youth as "fresh, vital cells inside the human body" (Teng and Fairbank 240-46). Chen Duxiu's article portrayed youth in relation to a biological metaphor of renewal, promising the revitalization of

the social body by eliminating the poisonous germs of tradition (Dikötter 148). The 1919 May Fourth Movement witnessed a new generation of youth entering the central stage of the political protest for the nation's future.<sup>3</sup> In a word, youth in modern China was not limited to biological age, but has referred to a politically and aesthetically sublimated figure "that embodies an array of lofty ideals: newness, progress, and above all, the vision of national rejuvenation" (Hui 2; Song 3).

From 1949 to 1976, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continued to place youth as the central symbol associated with revolutionary idealism, campaigning for creating the socialist "new man." After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, May Fourth was officially instituted as a national holiday, Youth Day (*qingnian jie*). In a speech delivered for Chinese students in the Soviet Union in 1957, Mao Zedong (1893-1976) stated: "the world is yours, and also ours; however, in the final analysis, it is yours [...] we each have our strengths; we, the old ones, have experience. You, young people, abound with the freshness of the morning air and are just at the age of blooming and prospering. You are like the sun at eight or nine o'clock in the morning; [our] hopes rest on you" (Mao 773-74). Comparing youth to the morning sun, Mao highlighted youth as the revolutionary agency defining the nation's future. Answering Mao Zedong's call for the Cultural Revolution, young people, as "Red Guards," became the vanguard of the revolutionary forces. As Cai Xiang notes, the production of socialist "new men" "simultaneously embodies both a futuristic telos of the revolution and a rebellious anti-establishment force" (18). That is, the figure of youth served to symbolize both the state, and the continuing vitality of revolution, in socialist China.

China's new generations, who grew up under the one-child policy, have been invested with new meanings since the introduction of the market economy and China's integration with the global capitalist system in 1978. In order to justify its embracing of market economy and maintain its self-image of socialism, the CCP formulated the ideology of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" that sought to "admit capitalism into its socialism" on the condition that "capitalism serve, rather than subvert, national autonomy and a national self-image grounded in the history of the socialist revolution" (Dirlik 36). After the bloody end of 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, rapid economic growth, the prevalence of privatization, and consumerism bridged the political crisis and further legitimated the developmentalism-oriented official ideology, which has been characterized as the "depoliticized politics" by Wang Hui (686).

Against this background, official ideology no longer emphasized the role of youth as the agents of revolution, but more as human capital driving the economic growth in China. The state-sponsored discourse of *suzhi* (inner quality) prescribed an image of the emergent middle class in the form of a normative subject who was asked to constantly improve its human capital and to compete in the neoliberal market (Anagnost 515; 190). The post-1989 generation was often labeled as the "me generation": individualistic, materialistic, self-centered, pragmatic, apolitical, and "indifferent toward both official ideology and the prospect of political reforms" (Rosen 362; Yan 258; Kwong 252). As scholars (Ong and Zhang 15; Liu 6) have pointed out, post-Tiananmen youth were directed to be self-reliant, self-enterprising, and to pursue individual interests, in alignment with market activities and loyalty to the state. In short, four decades after the initiation of the reform and opening-up policy, youth are no longer associated with revolutionary change and futurity, as in the "morning sun" metaphor; rather, they have symbolized the neoliberal values of free choice, self-development, and competition, in accordance with the political limits set by the party-state.

The positioning of youth aligned with market activities and the authoritarian rule of the party-state has become even more prominent in Xi Jinping's formulation of the "Chinese Dream." Xi elaborated the relationship between the Chinese Dream and youth for the first time in his speech entitled "Realize Youthful Dreams" delivered at a university on May Fourth, 2013. In this speech, Xi re-emphasized that young people represent the future, the hope of the nation, and "the hope of realizing the Chinese dream of national rejuvenation" ("Qiushi"). Meanwhile, Xi asked youth to learn from "the nation's spirit of constant self-improvement through hard work," and urged youth to "work long and hard without letup" in order to achieve the party-state's developmental goals. Thus, in line with the intellectual discourses of youth in the twentieth century, youth has been once again figured as future-oriented and symbolizing national rejuvenation. The official ideology of the Chinese Dream double positioned youth, not only as the driving force behind the national economic development but also as the link between the past and the future.

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<sup>3</sup> For more studies on the May Fourth Movement, see Chow, *The May Fourth Movement*; and Schwarcz, *The Chinese Enlightenment*.

However, four decades after the initiation of reform and opening-up policy, youth is not a homogeneous group, but is differentiated by the categories of class, gender, ethnicity, and rural-urban division. Young people's aspirations, cultural imaginations, and practices are also greatly varied compared with those of the twentieth century. The following section will analyze the popular video *rising tides (houlang)* released on May Fourth, 2020, and the subsequent emergence of the "lying flat" phenomenon to examine how the dominant culture tries to prescribe the subject of youth and mobilize them for the needs of the state and the market, and how the Chinese youth respond to the call from the state and the market.

### **Representing Urban Youth Between "Rising Tides" and "Lying Flat"**

Since 2013, as outlined above, the Chinese party-state has constantly highlighted the importance of youth subjects through the articulation of the Chinese Dream, or China's rise. The discourse of China's rise that emerged from the last decade has changed the positioning of the subject "youth" within the narrative of a strong nation-state, whose project and promise of the future is based on a profoundly ideological conception. This form of "politicization" does not stem from social conflicts nor from democratic participation from below, but is based on forms of emotional mobilization linked to national belonging and the strength of the state in the context of global competition. The positive-energy discourse, as a means of emotionally mobilizing young people, has prevailed both in official statements and popular culture under Xi Jinping's government (Chen and Wang 204). As a dispositif, this positive energy not only "prevents people from testing boundaries" but at the same time shapes the subjectivity of citizens by controlling negative emotions (216). The logic of positive energy resolves the tension between encouraging positive emotions and limiting negative emotions, and makes young people internalize the interests of the state, implying that only a strong, sovereign, and confident nation-state can guarantee collective development.

A day prior to China's Youth Day in 2020, Bilibili, one of China's most popular streaming platforms, released a video entitled "*Zhi Houlang*" (To the Rising Tides), in commemoration of the 1919 May Fourth Movement. The term *houlang*, literally meaning the "rear wave" in English, is a figurative way of referring to the young generation. It derives from the popular expression "As in the Yangtze River the waves behind drive on those before" (*changjiang houlang tui qianlang*), implying that the new generation surpasses the old. In partnership with and sponsored by various state-run media, the video soon went viral on the Chinese internet, receiving millions of views within several hours. The term *houlang* also became one of the hottest buzzwords in China in 2020. It deserves mentioning that the *houlang* video was released during the pandemic, and at a time when young people in Hong Kong, the key social force of the 2019 movement, continued to protest and demonstrate.<sup>4</sup> The video focuses exclusively on channeling positive energy to the youth, and does not mention directly either the pandemic or the Hong Kong young protesters.

Throughout the almost four-minute video, youth is introduced and recognized through a speech delivered by the 52-year-old male actor He Bing, who is a representative of the older generation. The elder actor passionately expresses his appreciation of the young generation, accompanied by footage of smiling and laughing young people against an urban background. At the beginning of the video, the actor refutes the idea that "each generation is worse than the last" (*yidai buru yidai*), and praises the new generation as the best among all previous generations. He considers the young generation to be living their best life, possessing everything that the older generations could only dream of. Then, the actor in an affirmative tone reminds the young generation that "all the wealth, knowledge, intelligence, and art" they enjoy today is given as gifts by the older generations who have worked and striven so hard. He suggests that thanks to the old generation, the young generation are able to "freely enjoy the prosperity (*fanrong*) of technoscience (*keji*), culture (*wenhua*) and the urban world (*chengshi*)". In so saying, the historical course is narrated in a linear and progressive way where the "wealth of humanity" is accumulated and transferred through generations after generations. Young people are told that they are living in an unprecedentedly good time because of the hard work of the previous generations; hence, it is almost demanded that they show gratitude to their elder generations, namely, the party-state. It is also in this context that the young generation can, if not "must," surpass the old generation.

The *rising tides* video prescribes youth as a homogenous group who have enormous freedom and enjoy material comforts in cities that the older generation never had access to. While the affirmative

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<sup>4</sup> For more material on the role of youth in the Hong Kong 2019 movement, see Au, *Hong Kong in Revolt*, especially *The 1997 Generation* in Chapter Two.

and authoritarian voice continues by praising the fact that young people have "freedom to learn a new language and a new skill, to enjoy a movie, and go long-distance travel," images of youth flash across the video: they are smilingly using VR, learning English with an iPad and Apple pencil, building a robot, traveling by car and airplane, and using an expensive camera documenting their life. Thus, youth are represented as a unitary subject via images that refer exclusively to the urban middle classes, who have the economic capacity to consume high-tech products and can afford an urban lifestyle. It is noteworthy that the young people represented are not merely consumers but at the same time producers of the Bilibili platform. In fact, the footage of young people used in the *rising tides* video is produced and uploaded by Bilibili's actual users. These images and videos of urban middle-class youth are presented as authentic and universal experiences of the whole young generation. The construction of youth as a unitary and normative middle-class subject distorts the experiences of youth and also incites "aspiring individuals to adhere to new social norms of middle-class identity often defined around consumer practices" (Anagnost 498). The assemblage of these middle-class representations helps to produce the myth, in the Barthesian sense, of the young subject as the symbol of China's rise. The myth does not obscure young people; on the contrary, it exposes them to a continuum of edulcorated images that alienate and empty the complexity and irreducibility of contemporary youth.

After the actor praises the high skills and capacities of the young, he raises his voice asking the youth to turn their passion, ability, and what they love into a career that can be shared with millions of people. Under the working ideology of "do what you love" (Weeks), Bilibili as a digital platform is mobilizing young people to turn their immaterial knowledge, language and communicative skills, experience and affect into work. As Gorz argues, the process of capitalist valorization in post-industrial society depends primarily not on formal knowledge that can be taught but on experiential knowledge that "is part of the culture of everyday life" (11). That is, educated middle-class youth, designated as ideal workers for Bilibili, are asked to transform their life activities into work. The romanticization of work as fun and happy operates as a self-motivating mechanism that incites middle-class youth to embrace precarity, flexibility, and risk as a norm in China's rising creative economy (Lin 8). The video's association of love and passion with work also accords with the positive-energy discourse that prevents young middle-class workers from expressing negative emotions. In this way, the *rising tides* video is a commercial production that simultaneously caters to the needs of the market and the state-sponsored positive energy. Besides, compelling youth to transform their life activities into work also meets with Xi Jinping's call to "unite youth across the country" and ask them to "make new and greater contributions to the process of building a moderately prosperous society in all respects" ("CGTN").

The video, commercially produced by Bilibili, was immediately relaunched by the official state media, reinforcing its mixed commercial and ideological nature. On the one hand, the word *houlang* immediately became everyday media language referring to the current generation of youth; On the other hand, through promoting this video, Bilibili has gained huge commercial success and reached out to a wide range of audiences, in spite of widespread criticism.<sup>5</sup> The cooperation between the Bilibili and the state-run media shapes a normative *qingnian* subject who is designated to be productive and turn every aspect of life into economic activities contributing to the national goal of building a prosperous society. In short, the self of the young subject is thus inscribed within a discourse that leaves little room for negotiation: the historical telos is sutured to the demands of the market; the subject is able to be free to compete on the market and thus fulfill the historical and epochal mission that the nation-state has set for him.

The young people represented are productive, positive, and grateful, yet are silenced. They are represented as cheerful subjects who do what they love and enjoy an urban lifestyle but they do not have voices. None of them speaks a word in this video; it is always the old generation/ the state/ the market, represented by the actor, who speaks on their behalf. The "youth" subject is constructed from above, subjugated within the discourse of national prosperity and rejuvenation. The only subject who has a voice in the video is the actor, who symbolizes the old generation, the market, and more importantly the nation-state. In this context, the construction of the *qingnian* subject in commercial or official representations is bound to remain abstract and is the product of forces that are alien to it. Whether commercial or political, these forces can only construct and position the *qingnian* subject through a prescriptive discourse, thus generating a distance from the subject to which they appeal. The *rising tides* video reveals more as the state and the market's anxiety over the capacity of the young productive populace to "surge" (*benyong*); it also continuously repeats in a meta-communicative way

<sup>5</sup> For discussions related to "rising tides", see Xu and Zhou, "'Houlang' and 'Houlang' Culture".

that, as a subject, young people are entirely a product of the "dream" of the old generations. The positioning reduces the complexity of the youth subject to the point of abstracting them from socio-historical reality, and represents them as a unitary subject.

In the last minute of the video, the narration changes from the glorification of the young generation's lifestyle, to link youth with the epoch and the nation. In an emotional crescendo, the actor salutes the self-confidence of youth, asserting that only the weak criticize whereas the strong always eulogize and stay confident. By emphasizing the young subject's self-confidence, the video echoes the official discourse of bolstering China's cultural self-confidence so as to "revive the nation" (Xi, "China Daily"). Thus, youth becomes an ideological link between the neoliberal discourse of "do what you love" and the party-state's ideology of building a confident nation. The actor expresses his respect and gratitude to those affluent, confident, and skillful young subjects, who are seen as the products of the strong nation. The positive and bright portrayal of youth ends with a statement: "thanks to you young people the world likes China more because the best landscape of a nation is its youth." In the end, the actor, a symbol of the state and the market, gives his blessing to the young generation, calling out "*rising tides, surge!*"

The *rising tides* video's rosy portrayal of young people has received backlash and been strongly criticized on social media. While young people are asked to "surge" and stay positive in order to pursue a good life, they would rather "lie flat." Although the market, as well as the state, have tried to convey "positive energy" and depict a hopeful future to the youth, youth have been fed up with the "996" overwork culture especially rampant at workplaces in Chinese high-tech companies, where workers are required to work from 9 am to 9pm, six days a week. The workers' deaths and suicide at high-tech companies resulting from intense work culture have sparked outrage and led to widespread criticism in China (Koh).

The "lying flat" movement is a recent example of the young population's resistance to the values propagated by the dominant culture. At the end of May 2021, a 30-year-old netizen published a post entitled "Lying Flat is Justice" (*tangping ji shi zhengyi*) sharing his lessons from two years of joblessness. The post called on young workers and professionals, including the middle-class youth, to live a life avoiding work and consumption, and maintaining life at minimum expenses and desire. The post reads: "You just lie flat. Lying flat at home, lying flat outside, lying flat like the street cats and dogs. [...] I choose to lie flat, and I'm no longer stressed" (Tang and Yang). The post "Lying Flat is Justice" was soon widely circulated on the Chinese internet among young people who were tired of the endless demands for productivity, competitiveness, and constant self-improvement. "Lying flat" is thus a strategy of withdrawal from the state-market's demand of maximizing consumption and production. Although the post and relevant online discussion groups were soon censored in Chinese social media, the call for "lying flat" met with resonance and popularity among youth. The discussions on "lying flat" initiated from below by urban youth themselves thwart the governmental desire to foster a productive young populace. In responding to the "positive energy" sponsored by the state and the market, youth offered their answers with negative attitudes, including refusing to get married, to have children, to buy property, and consuming as little as possible.

Chinese scholars from different disciplines have analyzed the "lying flat" campaign in a roundtable discussion. For instance, historian Xu Jilin considers "lying flat" a cultural phenomenon specific to the post-90s generation, and distinguishes three types of "lying-flat": the first is "spuriously lying flat," referring to "successful young people who have already made it in this new era of competitiveness"; the second is "positively lying flat," referring to those who consciously choose to withdraw from fierce competition in searching for a "self" marked by self-centeredness and hollowness; the last one, also the most common among youth, is "negatively lying flat" that refers to those who consider lying flat "an act of resistance to the dominant value of meritocracy in today's society" (8-11). It indicates the "post-materialist" lifestyle prevailed among the post-90s generation and is characterized by strong resentments against capital, elites, and meritocracy, which Xu believes are destructive to society. Art and literature critic Zhu Guohua believes that "lying flat" demonstrates young people's refusal to rationalize the logic of capital. He argues that for some young people, to lie flat—meaning "the refusal to work, to be promoted, to have a higher salary, and to have a brighter future"—is to thwart the capitalist conspiracy of "exploitation." In his words, "the new generation of youth, unlike the older generations, are no longer willing to submit unconditionally to the compulsions of the market. They can minimize their material or spiritual needs, and satisfactorily place themselves at the bottom of the social hierarchy" (14). Referring to Paul Willis's classic work *Learning to Labour*, Zhu argues that "lying flat" is partially due to the class solidification that working-class youth find it impossible to achieve upward social mobility through hardworking. He concludes, "many people from different groups in [Chinese] society also express their desire to lie flat, even if this desire itself is more a manifestation of emotions



than a prospect for future actions" (14). Cultural studies scholar Tao Dongfeng criticizes the existing studies on the recent social-cultural phenomena, such as "Buddha-like [youth]," "involution," and "lying flat" (27), and maintains that it is necessary to bring in an institutional analysis in order to understand the connotations of the popular buzzwords and offer concrete and effective solutions. Sociologist Cheng Boqing thinks that the popularity of lying flat is due to a "state of meaninglessness" among Chinese youth, and thus promoting justice in the fields of production, distribution, and social participation can "provide meaning and value to the struggle of the individual within the framework of regulatory ideals" so as to encourage youth to not lie flat (20).

A recent article by Hong Kong scholar Pang Laikwan provides significant insights for understanding the *qingnian* subject and the "lying flat" phenomenon. In the article, Pang examines "garlic chives" (*jiucai*)—a popular online expression that came into use before "lying flat" — as a metaphor for "those ordinary Chinese people who are constantly lured to participate in all kinds of economic activities, but whose investments are destined to be consumed by the establishment" (3). Pang pointedly demonstrates that citizens express their frustration, especially the young who see themselves as "garlic chives," in a context where economic sovereignty does not guarantee political sovereignty: these young people see themselves as biological matter waiting to be harvested. The economic subject represented as *jiucai* is driven to embrace entrepreneurship under Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's call for "mass entrepreneurship and innovation" and to increase production under the ideology of labor encompassed by the Chinese Dream, which sees hard work as the "inherent spirit of the Chinese race." Entrepreneurs and indefatigable workers—the *jiucai*—are "trapped in a perpetual present, obedient and submissive to their biological drive" (Pang 14). The link that Pang sees between the biological and the political emerges as the population ages, and consequently, there is less and less *jiucai* to be chopped for economic development. Here official ideology intervenes, as in the case of the *rising tides* video: "[I]n the official ideology the young people are adulated, but in reality, they are *jiucai*. It is also through this bizarre devotion of the sickle to the garlic chives that the latter might be sensitized to regain their political consciousness" (9).

To lie flat is the only way for the *jiucai* to avoid being harvested by the sickle. Lying flat is therefore seen as a passive revolt against the culture of work and entrepreneurship. Although Pang does not view the subject of *jiucai* and lying flat as the agency for social transformation, she does express hope for *jiucai* and lying flat: "I hope to see the Chinese citizens capable of seeing themselves as neither isolated entrepreneurs nor as a unified people, but a plural existence of many individuals different from each other, upon which a political community can be built" (16). Pang is aware that the life power of *jiucai* can be appropriated by the regime, but she believes "it could also become a mighty, resilient force if it could gain intersubjective awareness through its continual becoming" (16).

In a word, the "lying flat" phenomenon reveals the structure of feeling among Chinese youth today under the call to "rise." If the discourse of *houlang* is constructed from above, "lying flat" can be understood as the young population's response initiated from below. Through a strategic refusal, Chinese youth withdraw from the rat race and the bright and hopeful future promised by the discourse of China's rise. However, "lying flat" is *not* a countercultural movement, nor a protest movement. It refuses action, and it eschews action and any identification on which a youthful subjectivity can be anchored. Therefore, it is necessary to move beyond the "positive" and "negative" dichotomy and examine various cultural practices.

### **Emergent Cultural Practices among Urban Youth in Shanghai**

The emphasis on cultural practices and the practices of representation is significant (Hall 25). In China's context, Wang Hui has pointed out, the most important legacy of the May Fourth Movement lies first and foremost in its stress on cultural movement as a method that uses cultural reformation as revolutionary leverage to create a new space to modernize the public discourse (*Dongfang Journal*; see also Xiao 213). While Chinese middle-class youth are exhorted to turn their immaterial labor, knowledge, and energy into the process of capitalist valorization, their knowledge and skills also have the potential to exceed, in Negri and Hard's sense, the demands of the market and the state. Through analyzing three types of emergent practices (including the theater troupe Grass Stage, a leftist student group, and the practice of Belonging Space), we argue that the fluidity of youth continues to exceed the fixed positioning of the dominant culture. In other words, it is exactly because of the fluidity of young subjects that the market and the state can never fix and reduce them into a unitary subject. The emergent cultural practices on the one hand have the potential to exceed the demands of the market and the state, and open up a space for critical engagement and reflection, or even social intervention. The emergent practices characterized by excess and fluidity call into question the very

existence of a subject: it emerges at times but disappears at other times; when it emerges, it is denied, and when it affirms itself, it disperses to find itself elsewhere. Applying R. Williams's classic analysis on dominant and emergent cultures, we do not aim to test out the theoretical validity or aporias of these concepts, but to emphasize the undefined character of "emergent" as "active and pressing but not yet fully articulated" (126). As of today in the context of China, "the scope of penetration of the dominant order" into the entire social and cultural process" is "greater" than it was at the time Williams was formulating these analyses, and the "incorporation" of emergent cultures by the dominant one is faster and more pervasive, and produces an incessant multiplication of "facsimiles"; nevertheless, the dominant never "exhausts, in reality, all human practice, human energy, human intent" (125). Today the dominant is anxiously searching for that "practical consciousness [...] that is unquestionably social" and "that a specifically dominant social order neglects, excludes, represses or simply fails to recognize" (125), because the dominant wants to normalize and "extract" it. In this sense, the emerging practices can be placed along two poles: the impossible exhaustion noted by Williams and the biopolitical "excess" analyzed by Negri and Hardt.

The Shanghai-based theater troupe Grass Stage<sup>6</sup> is one example of the emergent cultural practices initiated by youth from below. Grass Stage was founded in 2006 by several artists who were in their late twenties and early thirties at that time. It provides distinct cultural and social practices within the cultural landscape in Shanghai, as it deliberately distances itself from state and commercial theatre (Connery). Through conducting field research, organizing cultural events, workshops on the body, and theater performances, the theater troupe has dedicated itself to creating a critical space for public and political engagement beyond the logic of the state and the market (Gullotta and Lin forthcoming). The members of the troupe, who have changed since it was first founded, are amateur performers, most of whom are young white-collar workers based in Shanghai. They collectively create plays and performances through lengthy discussions with each other and with the audience.

One distinct feature of Grass Stage is its emphasis on using body practice to problematize and interrogate China's recent socio-cultural transformation. Following the tradition of social theater, the force of Grass Stage derives from its capacity to turn theatrical space into a space for argument, discussion, and social interrogation (Connery). Among a series of productions that they collectively created, *World Factory* (performed from 2014 to 2016) has paid particular attention to the young working class in the Pearl River Delta (PRD) who have contributed greatly to the making of the so-called "Chinese miracle." In collaboration with workers and grassroots workers' organizations in PRD, *World Factory* makes visible workers who have been often invisible in the dominant cultural representation, and gives voice to workers' life and work through theatrical space.

The collaboration with young subalterns has inspired Grass Stage to further investigate the topic of youth in China today. Actually, most members of Grass Stage since 2016 have been highly educated youth born in the late 1980s and 1990s, who were around the same age as their working-class counterparts in PRD. In addition, as discussed in the previous section, the party-state has anxiously prescribed the subject of youth, or *qingnian*, in a normative way in the service of the goals of economic development and nation-building since 2013. In response to both young members' own uncertainties about their position in society and the dominant ideology's anxiety about constructing youth, Grass Stage started interrogating the topic of youth in 2017, and later produced the play *Wild Seeds* (2019).

*Wild Seeds* (2019), created and performed by urban youth, became a form of cultural practice that interrogated and problematized the dominant discourses on youth. Cooperating with a group of urban middle-class youth in Shanghai, Grass Stage began with the questions: who are the Chinese youth today? And what does it mean to be a youth in China? These questions directed the young participants to the May Fourth Movement. They organized weekly reading groups on the May Fourth Movement, trying to connect their individualized lived experience in relation to youth in history (Zhao, *Refeng xueshu*). Unlike the rosy and positive portrayal of youth in the *houlang* video, *Wild Seeds* explored the contradictions and confusions that young people experience in their everyday life, including the issue of class, problems of love and marriage, deteriorating working conditions, and family relationships. As one participant has noted, the workshops on youth were like young people searching for the subject of youth both from history and from the present (Wu, *Refeng xueshu*).

While *Wild Seeds* tried to collectively search for and define the subject of youth, it turned out to offer a rather fragmented and divisive picture of youth. The director and co-founder of Grass Stage, who was born in 1967, revealed that intergenerational communication was almost impossible during the

<sup>6</sup> For a recent discussion on Grass Stage, see Gullotta and Lin, "Grass Stage as a Method."

collective production. According to him, the young participants were reluctant to understand the stories and histories of the older generation, even though they were trying to historicize the category of youth (Zhao, *Refeng xueshu*). Besides, during the collective discussions and workshops, the class differences among the young participants became an unavoidable problem. Although all participants were highly educated, they were divided by their different economic backgrounds. Zhang Ruoshui, a stable member of Grass Stage since 2017, repeatedly emphasized her identity as a woman of rural origin and expressed her dissatisfaction toward other young participants, who, according to her, were from affluent urban families and did not reflect on their privileged social status.

The fragmented and divisive nature of the subject of youth was evident in CJ's performance in 2019. CJ, who was in his late twenties and unemployed at that time, also felt excluded from the group during the production of *Wild Seeds*. As an educated youth from a small town working in a megalopolis, he had changed jobs several times and struggled with developing intimate relationships and establishing a family. Although he was among a group of youth, he found it impossible to share his struggles with his cohort (Wu, *Refeng xueshu*). The difficulties of communicating and connecting with others and with society continuously frustrated him. The co-production of the play on youth did not create a collective and shared solution; instead, CJ's anger, anxiety, and frustration were denied and became his own personal failure. During the performance in an art space in 2019, when other young performers were scattered in different corners trying to express their distinct identity in every possible way, CJ exploded his "unspeakable" anger, anxiety, and frustration by repeatedly hurling his body against a wall. In the end, CJ threw himself down on the ground and among the audience, trying to catch somebody's hand.

According to the director Zhao Chuan (*Renjian Thought Review*), it was in Hong Kong that the subject of youth finally became clearer. Grass Stage organized a workshop on youth in Hong Kong in the first week of October 2019, when the whole city was in revolt. Chinese media labeled young protestors as *feiqing*, or wasted youth, whose involvement and participation in political protests was described as their failure to achieve economic success and upward mobility. In the workshop, the encounter between the youth of similar generations from Hong Kong and mainland China allowed unexpected conversations to emerge. As Zhao argues, young people from Hong Kong were "no longer the strength and future of the market; they have taken the central stage through political involvement and direct action." The categories given as natural are questioned when life overcomes and challenges the theater and the theater's ability to represent and play out reality (*Renjian Thought Review*). The identity of Chinese youth has been relativized and challenged through encounters with young people's "explosive" revolt in Hong Kong, and has rediscovered itself as plural, heterogeneous, and irreducible to the discursive and repressive practices imposed by the nation-state. Chinese "youth," as a sociological and a centuries-old historical category that the state and its modernization project has inscribed and subjugated into its discourse, has been called into question in the Hong Kong of 2019; its historical identity and social reality must be re-interpreted and narrated from this new "edge" of state sovereignty.

The conversation with Hong Kong youth inspired Zhao Chuan to reflect on the frustrating experience of producing *Wide Seeds* with urban youth in Shanghai. He argues that the fragmentation and division among the young generation were due to the historical fractures among different generations. Historical sediments and resources were unavailable to youth, and each generation of youth had to find themselves in historical "chaos." In this isolated and divided situation, Zhao argues that today's youth is not searching for an awaited future or fulfilling grand missions, but is more focused on learning how to "be together" in everyday life, which allows young people to overcome the feeling of passiveness and powerlessness, and develop "mutual support and care". The question of being together, hence, not only problematizes the state-sponsored discourse of linking youth with national rejuvenation and economic development, but also challenges the intellectual and political tradition of Chinese modernization that often frames youth under the question of "what China's future is" (*Renjian Thought Review*).

While members of Grass Stage were using theatrical space as a critical space to connect with each other in a fragmented and divisive society, leftist students from universities were also anxiously searching for a new way of "being together". Some Chinese scholars have argued that young people are turning to identify with socialism and Maoism in China recently because of the rising social contradictions, such as the abovementioned "996" overwork culture. For instance, in an interview (Dong, "Beijing Cultural Review"), scholar Zhou Zhang'an states that young people have increasingly identified with patriotism and at the same time show strong interests in Maoist and Marxist thoughts. Similarly, historian Wang Rui in his three-part media article published in *Sixth Tone* in late 2020 states that the current generation of Chinese youth has finally become "politically mature," because they have freed themselves from the past generation's ideologies based on the negative influence of Western liberalism, and are finally re-evaluating China's Marxist-Leninist tradition to interpret current society and thus

understand their own role. He considers that young people's political transformation is not derived from top-down construction; rather, it is from young people's own capacity to use intellectual and historical resources to criticize social issues, for example, related to labor exploitation and extreme market competition, through a class analysis based on the idea of equality. In short, as Wang argues in his article "Making Socialism Cool Again," he believes that there is "a broader ideological shift among young Chinese, especially those born in the economic boom times of the 1990s and 2000s" (Wang, "Sixth Tone"). In the same article, he maintains that "Simultaneously confident in China's rise and nostalgic for the relative egalitarianism, equality, and revolutionary enthusiasm of the Mao era, they're willing to look past the turmoil of his rule in favor of the work he did laying the foundations of China's resurgence" (Wang, "Sixth Tone").

According to Wang Rui, leftist Chinese youth provide a vision of a defined and mature youth subject, entrusted with the task of contributing to social development thanks to the ability to actively elaborate the resources of the socialist tradition. Wang Rui's articles are not academic and therefore do not go into detail about the different formations that make up the "left" among young Chinese students, but it is very clear that the left he referred to is first and foremost the nationalist left.

However, our participant observation of a leftist student group from an elite university since 2018 has allowed us to have a deeper understanding of the formation and metamorphosis of "leftist" youth subjectivity. The three-year participant observation of their cultural practices shows that these leftist young students did not attach themselves to the fixed identity or set of beliefs that Wang Rui has argued for under the discourse of "political mature" or national belonging. Rather, their practices constantly exceed the normative subject position and move beyond the discipline imposed by higher educational institutions.

The student group was formed in the second half of 2018, and initially followed the traditions of Marxist student associations existing in other elite universities in China. The student group originally had ten to fifteen members, most of whom were male undergraduate students. Key members of the group included a postgraduate student in his late twenties and three to four newly matriculated undergraduate students. The student group initially organized reading groups on Leninism and Maoism, and believed in the student-worker alliance. Marxist student associations drew great attention during the Jasic incident. In the summer of 2018, a small number of student activists from Marxist student associations of several universities participated in protests in Shenzhen and called for greater union representation for workers in the Jasic factory (Lau; Chan; Zhang). In the wake of the 2018 Jasic incident, there were severe crackdowns on student activists and Marxist student associations across the country.

Against this backdrop, the student group was not allowed to be officially registered as a formal student association in the university, which severely limited their activities both inside and outside universities, including organizing study groups on Marxism and Maoism. They had to mobilize and recruit new students in an informal and low-profile way. In the beginning, the group focused mostly on political and ideological growth. That is, they were trying to form a group based solely on political-ideological affiliation, which was based on the belief that the revolutionary subject is the Chinese working class, and students and intellectuals must participate and lead the process of class emancipation. The group's ideological affiliation was supported by similar student associations from other universities. Yet a few months later, some members of the group were pressured by "relevant officers" of the university who were worried about the students' political and ideological activities. The pressures from the university made it even more impossible to organize informal political and ideological-oriented activities within the university. As a result, the student group began to investigate work outside of Maoism and Marxist orthodoxy. Inspired by China's MeToo movement and through communications with LGBTQ student associations, the group started discussing issues relevant to feminism.

After abandoning Maoism and Marxist orthodoxy, the group began to use the knowledge and experience they had accumulated both from school and in their daily life to engage in social affairs. They regularly translated English articles published on Western leftist websites into Chinese, and published on their WeChat account, which had a readership of hundreds. The translations became a way for them to "be together" and at the same time to critically reflect on social issues. Some members of the group dedicated themselves to the production of documentaries; the group also occasionally organized film screenings inside and outside the university, followed by lively discussions. In addition to organizing cultural activities, some members sometimes conducted fieldwork about the working conditions of the logistics workers. The group was also a part of a support network among young activists, who organized voluntary activities for workers suffering during the COVID-19 outbreak in

February 2020 and for citizens suffering from the record-breaking flooding in Zhengzhou, Henan province in the summer of 2021.

There are three points worth noticing. Firstly, despite the constant harassment and direct control from the university, the group was able to use and share the knowledge they learned to organize various activities that exceeded the market logic and the values of the party-state. All the above-mentioned practices (including translating, organizing screening events, and conducting voluntary activities and fieldwork) were based primarily on young students' immaterial knowledge, experience, communication, and cooperative skills. Secondly, after the national crackdown on the Marxist student associations, the group gave up adhering to Maoist and Marxist ideologies, and did not rush to create a fixed and politically defined identity. It is their accumulation of knowledge, organization of activities, and collaboration with various groups that situates them within a broader context of the global left. Thirdly, the internal and external relationships were extremely fluid, with no clear hierarchical order. Their identity was also rather fluid, refusing to fix themselves to any singular gender and ideological identity. The maturity of this youth group, to use Wang Rui's term, consists precisely in *not* allowing itself to be fixed within a discourse that wants young people to be the subject of the essentialist narrative of the nation-state and China's "rise" discourse.

Since mid-2021, the student group has shifted its focus from organizing cultural activities to exploring the question of how to be together. Due to the lack of stable physical space in the university, the group was searching for new forms of interaction and social engagement. Encouraged and inspired by some cohabitation spaces which young people used both for living and organizing semi-public events, the group decided to rent a small apartment near the university. They planned to use the apartment not only as a space for students to cook and gather together, but also for organizing events, such as discussions, film screenings, and sharing. In a word, they wanted to use the space to reconnect with each other and practice how to be together. The problem is that the space is still private, and it is only available to young people from a similar social stratum. That is, only educated youth could have access to the activities they organized. Besides, the students will also need to keep a low profile to avoid drawing any attention from relevant parties from the university. The space was just "opened" in September 2021, marking a new stage of the group's development.

Belonging Space is another example of the production of fluid space where young people try to connect with each other outside the logic of the market and the state. In recent years, given that online speech has been heavily censored on the Chinese internet, there has been a growing need among young people to be together and communicate face to face in physical spaces that are not run under the logic of market and state. It was in this context that the Belonging Space emerged.

At the beginning of 2021, two young women, Z, a journalist, and K, a social worker, decided to turn their living room into a semi-public space for discussions, screenings, and gatherings. They named the semi-public and semi-private space Belonging Space and ran a Wechat account under the same name, dedicated particularly to gender and mental health issues. However, as the journalist suddenly lost her job, she was unable to afford the rent and had to temporarily close the space. In March 2021, they were invited to be a part of a community-building project sponsored by the local authorities. In partnership with the authorities from the district, a social organization transformed an air-raid shelter located in a community in downtown Shanghai into a cultural space for young people, called "free-down space" (*xian xialai hezuoshe*). The "free-down space" is divided into many small open rooms, and each room is used by different parties. Any individual or company was welcomed to use "free-down space" with little rent, but all users were required to organize community-based events for the residents regularly. The organization offered a room to Z and K, and asked them to organize events for women in the community. Z and K decided to continue using the name Belonging Space for organizing events concerning gender and mental health, and explained the reasons behind it in an interview and in some events we participated in ("Gender and Mental Health"). According to them, gender roles were always constructed in a binary way, either female or male; similarly, mental health was also framed as normal/abnormal. They refuted this binaristic and essentialist identity construction, and believed that gender roles and identities were increasingly less stable and more fluid in China now. In this regard, they wanted to create a space where people who did not fit in the binary social norms could develop a sense of belonging. Thus, space has become a form of "belonging in progress" that revolves around participatory practices of cultural and social liberation. This is a spatially fluid belonging. In fact, at the end of the summer in 2021, Z and K left the "free-down space," and moved to another semi-private space in central Shanghai, where they still used the name Belonging Space to organize cultural events ("Gender and Mental Health").

These fluid spatial practices are primarily based on knowledge-sharing and identity-making. The participants of the events that Z and K organized were all educated middle-class youth. The discussions and debates were not around the subject of youth, but more around feminist issues. On two occasions we witnessed this new fluid surplus and its emerging power: shortly after the withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan and with an ongoing debate in Chinese media and social media about the PRC's diplomatic actions with the Taliban, Z organized documentary screening events on the condition of women in Afghanistan. The after-screening debate was very intense. It was not directed against the narrative of the Chinese government, and did not focus on US imperialism either; instead, the discussion focused on women's issues in the world today, with particular reference to women's positions in China today. Although the participants were all young, the subject underlying the discussion was not about the subject *qingnian*, but gender. The absence of the "young" subject and the emphasis on gender issues marginalized the official state discourse regarding both the existence of a young subject embodying the nation's development and its current geopolitical perspectives. Similarly, in another discussion, a group of young people debated about homosexuality and queer identity; without claiming a youth subjectivity, they asserted their own fluid life experience and knowledge that exceeded the binary categories of China's dominant gender culture.

The spaces we have considered are not a representation of fixed group identity. They are rapidly changing spaces, and it is difficult to clearly define whether they are open, public, private, or semi-public. Like the emerging practices mentioned above, these spaces produce knowledge and skills, and become the temporary place for sharing and connecting. They are traversed and signified by groups with an extremely weak hierarchical structure, sometimes entirely horizontal. The ambiguous nature of these spaces and their related groups is based on relationship and not on a principle of inclusion/exclusion on which one can build a stable identity. However, it must be emphasized that these spaces are characterized by the sole participation of urban middle-class youth. As we have argued in the case of the student group, the limits to and the risk incurred by these emerging practices are evident precisely via its strongest characteristic: a heterogeneous class of young people not reducible to the normative character of the *qingnian* subject proposed and pursued by the state and the market, but at the same time homogeneous and separate in respect to the world of subalterns and the countryside.

## Conclusion

To conclude, this article examines the two recent popular cultural phenomena relating to youth on the Chinese internet, "rising tides" and "lying flat," and aims to locate these phenomena in the context of emergent cultural practices among young people in urban China. The *rising tides* video places Chinese youth as a symbolic connection between the market and the official ideology of national rejuvenation. It prescribes a vision of urban middle-class youth as a normative subject who is educated, skillful, and passionately turning their knowledge into productive activities. The video is dedicated to youth, but does not allow youth to have their own voices, except for smiling and showing gratitude to their old generation, the market, and the state who give them enormous freedom. Thus, the video should be understood more as narrating the party-state's anxiety over re-making the Chinese youth as a new normative subject that can be inscribed into China's "rise" discourse. Through depicting a bright present and hopeful future, youth are emotionally mobilized to devote their passion to the market and into national development. In response to the emotional mobilization, young people took the stand of "lying flat," which soon prevailed on the Chinese internet. This article considers that lying flat did partially reveal the young people's structure of feeling, but still fell into the dichotomic discourse of "positive/negative energy." We argue that the passive responses to the state's emotional mobilization is therefore insufficient. It is equally significant to locate these positive/negative expressions in the young subject's everyday life and practice.

In this light, based on our participant observations, we have examined three cases, including the theater troupe Grass Stage, a leftist student group, and Belonging Space. The theater troupe has used the theatrical space to integrate and problematize the unitary subject of youth represented in the dominant culture. Their play *Wild Seeds*, created and performed by a group of young people, shed a light on the possibilities of reconnecting with each other, but it also revealed a fragmented and divisive picture of young people in urban Shanghai today. In the case of the leftist student group in an elite university in Shanghai, while the higher-educational institution wanted to discipline subjects involving any political and ideological activities, these young students were able to move beyond and initiate various cultural activities through cooperation both inside and outside the group. Their practices aimed both to practice how to be together with each other, and to critically engage in social issues. They refused to define themselves in any fixed category, but were rather fluid in terms of their own sexuality,

ideologies, and practices. In the case of Belonging Space, as an example of the production of fluid space, two educated young women have tried to search for a critical space that was designated to discuss topics relating to gender and mental health, and to create a sense of belonging for those who refused to be defined in a fixed and dichotomous term. All these practices were dependent largely on young people's competencies that characterize biopolitical labor, including their cooperative skills, communication skills, affect, and care. It is exactly these competences that the market and the state aim to valorize and extract, as shown in the *rising tides* video. But the fluidity of these practices always exceeded the logic of the market and the state.

The emerging cultural practices as we have examined in this article are characterized by knowledge, cooperation, questioning, the practice of "being together," and fluid identities and relationships, and go far beyond the *qingnian* subject represented in the "rising tides"/"lying flat" discourse that centers around the dichotomy of positive/negative energy. Based on our preliminary analysis, these cultural practices, in Williams' terms (121-27), are still pre-emergent and do not reveal a clear and defined image of young subjectivity. The educated youth we observed in Shanghai were not yet the "multitude" that Negri and Hardt have defined as the new subject of the Empire; yet they were also not the *homo digitalis* who "lack the interiority of assembly that would bring forth a *we*" forming "a crowd without interiority, without a soul or spirit" (Han 11). Instead, although they heavily relied on digital platforms to communicate with each other, they were also trying to create a physical space where they could be together face to face. The analysis we offered is preliminary and focuses mostly on educated middle-class youth in an urban context. In recent years, practices conducted by youth in the countryside and by working-class youth have also emerged. It is also necessary to examine and compare their practices in order to have a deeper understanding of the transformations of the *qingnian* subject in China.

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