



China's frustrated millennials turn to memes to rail against grim economic prospects

Ji Siqi

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* Chinese youth are venting their disillusionment with bleak job prospects and widening inequality with new memes and buzzwords online

* The stinging online sentiment jars with the government line that China's economic boom is creating opportunities for young people

The phrases "involution", "Versailles literature" and "working man" are gaining enormous popularity across Chinese social media platforms from Weibo to [WeChat](#) as millions of youth make psychological adjustments to cope with a rapidly changing society.

For young Chinese, especially those with a college degree, there is a growing perception that their career prospects are darkening, their social mobility shrinking and the country's wealth gap widening - although this point of view diverges sharply from the government narrative.

The disconnect has given rise to buzzwords like nei juan, or involution. The term was originally used to explain a process in which additional input cannot produce more output. In the case of a farmer tilling a paddy field - no matter how much additional labour he puts in, there is a limit to how much rice can be produced.

For China's youth jostling for limited job opportunities - the country had [8.7 million fresh college graduates](#) this year - the word has come to symbolise that a higher education degree or additional skills do not guarantee better career prospects.

Yan Fei, a sociology professor at Tsinghua University, said the term represented a kind of helplessness felt by many young Chinese.

"They expend so much effort but still can't improve [their lives]," Yan said in a video published on Pear Video, a popular short video platform.

In October, Xiang Biao, an anthropologist at Oxford University, warned an excessively competitive work environment among younger generations reflected broader social problems.

"Involution is not just about fierce competition, it also expresses a sense of competing for nothing," Xiang was quoted as saying by Thepaper.cn, an online news organisation.

"Even though you know there will not be anything to gain in the end, you have no choice but to compete ... people fail to meet even their most basic expectations after so much competition."

China faces historic test as pandemic stokes fears of looming unemployment crisis

The underlying sentiment jars with the government line that China's economic boom and rapid development is opening up fresh opportunities for young people.

Skyrocketing property prices and a widening social wealth gap are disadvantaging young Chinese, and many feel unable to break free from their socioeconomic status or independently attain wealth.

As a result, the term, *dagong ren*, or a worker who subsists on a wage provided by others, has also gained popularity online.

It first appeared on a video on Bilibili, a Chinese version of YouTube, in which two labourers in a cartoon complained of being overwhelmed by their jobs, saying sarcastically "as long as we work hard, our boss will soon be able to live the life he wants!"

It became an immediate hit with more than 3.7 million views and over 3,000 comments, with many sharing their frustration about having little time outside work for themselves.

In China, *dagong* was first used to describe a [migrant worker who was forced to leave their hometown to take odd jobs in sweatshops across the country](#). But that sense of diminished personal agency is spreading rapidly to white-collar workers.

"Office work like programming is increasingly characterised by long hours and poor benefits in a cost-cutting environment," said Jenny Chan, an assistant professor of sociology at Hong Kong Polytechnic University. "White collar workers join various online groups or forums to share their work pressure and seek support."

Other young Chinese have used social media to vent their frustration at the country's wealth gap, flocking online to satirise people who brag about their luxurious lifestyle in monologues derided as "Versailles literature".

A favourite target has become Meng Qiqi, a novelist and mother of two from Beijing, who on Weibo flaunts her luxury purchases or the fact she employs nannies who speak "both English and French", all the while pretending not to be aware of her sumptuous lifestyle.

In an interview with Weibo last week, she said she only became aware of her humblebragging after her husband reminded her that some 600 million Chinese earned an average monthly income of 1,000 yuan (US\$152) - a figure that was widely reported after Premier Li Keqiang mentioned it in May.

Her comments have drawn a barrage of criticism online.

"How can my body weight be one kilogram heavier than yesterday?" asked one disgruntled social media user in a popular post. "Oh, I have forgotten to take off my jewellery."

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