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## **Will China's emotional youth choose violence again in the face of educational and employment anxieties?** A blogpost inspired by *Though I Am Gone*

### **1. Introduction**

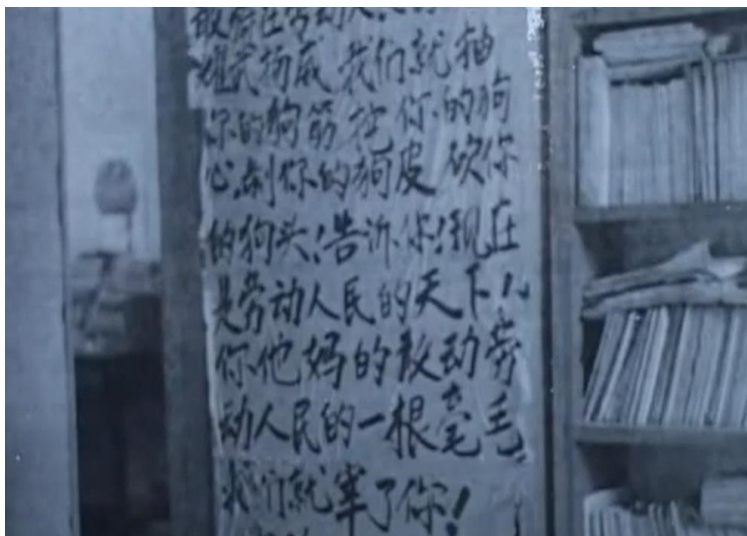
In August 2023, the Chinese Government released a shocking statistic: the urban unemployment rate among Chinese citizens between the ages of 16 and 24 had reached 21.3 percent (BBC NEWS, 2023), which is so bad that it is roughly the same as the rate across the Middle East on the eve of the Arab Spring (ILO, 2011). This has led many young people to complain about the lack of hope for their future, arguing that opportunity for education and employment is full of inequality. (Wakabayashi et al., 2022).

The CCP is well aware of the ability of the educated and unemployed youth population in the big cities to challenge its authority. In the middle of the last century, China's economic crisis, caused by the disaster of the Great Leap Forward and the loss of Soviet aid, led to the graduation of the first generation of urban baby boomers into a deteriorating job market (CASS, 2011). The children of officials were assigned satisfying jobs, while the children of ordinary people lacked sufficient urban jobs (Yu, 1967). In 1966, Mao Zedong launched the Cultural Revolution, which released young people's dissatisfaction with the meaninglessness of education in schools and the unfairness of the jobs assigned by schools (Bu, 2008). The emotional youth were encouraged to participate in violent attacks against the education system that resulted in the deaths of at least 2 million innocent people (Xi & Jin, 1996). (*Note: The Cultural Revolution was a full-scale political movement, and this blog selects only one aspect of its use by youth to attack inequality of opportunity in education and employment*).

Today, some people are worried that the Cultural Revolution will happen again (Peng, 2022). President Xi Jinping has reinforced the cult of the individual and enhanced emotional propaganda for young people (Cook, 2019), which is similar to what Mao Zedong did before he launched the Cultural Revolution (Bu, 2008). This is compounded by the emotional agitation of young people in education and employment, as 'The Second Generation' of officials, the rich, and scholars have outstanding advantages in education and employment opportunities. In the era of globalization, once youth violence returns, it will not only affect the stability of China but also bring panic to the world's economic flows and political security. There is therefore a need to assess whether this is really possible and how it will affect China and the world.

But are things the same as they were sixty years ago? Before analyzing it, a lively option would be to first introduce the documentary ['Though I am Gone' directed by Hu Jie](#). This documentary introduces Bian, the first educator to be publicly beaten to death during the Cultural Revolution, through the memories of those around her.

### **2. 'Though I am Gone'**



The swear-filled paper, which was put up by students at the time who broke into Bian's home, is the representative one of all the papers shown in the documentary. The text reads, *'It's the working people's world now, and we're going to kill you since you've infringed on our interests'*. In fact, Bian did not consciously infringe on anyone's interests and was merely carrying out the orders of her leaders in her educational duties. However, she was considered by her students to be 'counter-revolutionary' in education, emphasizing 'learning first' rather than 'politics first'. Students felt that the stress on marks meant creating inequity in education and employment opportunities and disconnecting from labor practices, which was contrary to their interests and the ideology of Mao Zedong.

The shocking abuse then began. Her husband and colleagues described a group of schoolgirls dressed as the military who beat her with sticks until she died. Her body was covered in blood, with many holes and broken ribs. Her husband documented her body with a camera, but it was probably unwise to put it in this blog because it was too horrible for the public.

Notably, the documentary is from the perspective of the victim throughout, without the perpetrator. Being from the victim's point of view means that group youth violence is vividly shown in contrast to tiny individuals. Thanks to Bian's husband's recordings via camera at that time, these memories can remain forever. However, these memories seem to be forgotten by the perpetrators. Director Hu (2008) points out that it was not that he intentionally didn't include the perpetrators in the documentary, but that they refused to appear in it. It's not just that Bian, a victim, didn't get an apology but was selectively forgotten, it's that the stories of all the victims of the Cultural Revolution were selectively forgotten.

This kind of selective forgotten implies a rewriting of history. In recent years, some young people only remember that the Cultural Revolution appears to have swept away inequalities in education and employment while forgetting the deaths of many living beings (Wang, 2016). This opens up the possibility of their choosing violence again.

### 3. To 'Tang-Ping' or to Violent Attack?

Although many of the conditions in today's China are highly similar to those in China before the Cultural Revolution, under the strict control of the Party, Chinese youth seem to have embarked on an alternative solution, 'Tang-Ping' (lying flat). This means that the

individual rejects the social pressures and grand narrative to over-study, over-work, and over-achieve, just choosing to enjoy the moment (Chen, 2021). The reasons why violent attacks are not possible will be critically assessed next.

The first difference is the attitude of the youth towards the state. In ‘Though I am Gone’, despite their complaints about the education system, young people have great faith in Mao and his propaganda. However, today’s CCP nationalist propaganda poses a risk of self-denial. The youth are pessimistic about their life prospects, feeling betrayed in their patriotic sentiments (Yu, 2021). Three-year COVID-19 restrictions drained momentum from an economy already reeling from a collapse in the property market (Bradsher, 2023). The narrowing prospects have betrayed the expectations of a generation of young people who were told that they could have better employment and a stronger China by studying hard. The truth now is that employment inequity is increasing, not decreasing.

The second difference is the attitude of CCP towards the youth. Unlike Mao Zedong, who wanted youth violence, Xi Jinping prefers social stability (Zhao, 2023). CCP cracked down on youth protests, both offline events and online comments, in ways ranging from restricting personal freedom to blocking online accounts (Carter, 2021). Meanwhile, new technologies such as facial recognition, widely available security cameras, and mobile phone tracking have given governments greater ability to monitor the actions and thoughts of individuals (Qian et al., 2022). This has compelled young people to abandon the idea of violent action and adopt moderate forms of resistance. ‘Tang-Ping’ (lying flat) is this type of new option for young people.

‘Tang-Ping’ (lying flat) is somewhat analogous to passive resistance. That reminds the concept of ‘Weapons of the Weak’ proposed by Scott (1985), which means that people resist by idling themselves away in daily lives in the face of a powerful state. The Chinese emotional youth now rebel against being turned into tools of production and consumption, against the injustice of education and employment caused by the officials, and against all the coercion and discipline that authority imposes on their bodies and minds (Ye, 2022). They achieve their goals by not over-educating, not working overtime, not believing the state’s propaganda, and not having children (Chen, 2021). The images below are some of the emojis about ‘Tang-Ping’ that have gone viral among young people, showing the comfort of lying flat and the rejection of the outside world.



Although ‘Tang-Ping’ (lying flat) is an alternative to violent attacks for young people to release their emotions, this is not guaranteed to be sustainable. On the one hand, the Chinese government is trying to minimize the spread of comments about ‘Tang-Ping’ on the Internet (Chen, 2021). On the other hand, the youth are systematically pushed to stand up in social competition (Ye, 2022). It is impossible to imagine how emotional youth will release their emotions if they lose the opportunity to ‘Tang-Ping’, but this ‘cold war’ between youth and the state is likely to continue in the wake of the economic crisis, the inequality of education and employment opportunities and the intensification of the Party’s power.

## 4. Conclusion

By understanding the employment opportunities for educated youth in China, a huge emotional crisis is presented. In using a documentary to review the violent attacks of youth in the Cultural Revolution, the similarities and differences between the past and the present are compared. Today's youth have to choose 'Tang-Ping' as an alternative to violent attacks, but it is hard to say that it is guaranteed to be sustainable. The cold war between an increasingly dissatisfied youth and a ruthless, insecure government will keep going, which will determine not only China's political path but also its economic future.

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