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‘Rùn!’ (Part 1): Why is China’s urban youth searching for a way out?

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Abstract

China’s urban youth is looking for ways and opportunities to leave the country in search of a different life. They call it ‘*rùn*’ – an escape mobility triggered by unbearable social pressures to produce and reproduce. For these youth, increasing concerns about the future and freedom at home are compounded by gendered inequalities, swift and sweeping national policy changes, and a growing fear that China’s borders are closing fast.

Theme

Reproduction Migration

Keywords

outmigration, stress-induced mobilities, anxieties, social pressure, gender, family, China

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‘I want to *rùn*’

‘I want to *rùn*’ has become a common way to express an urgent desire to leave the country, particularly among urban young men and women of reproductive age who are increasingly worried about their lives and futures in China. Since becoming prominent on Chinese-language social media in February 2022, the idea of *rùn* has largely related to the acute panic and despair triggered by China’s coercive lockdowns, which have dramatically affected life in more than 40 cities and towns. At the same time, longer-term and slow-burning anxieties have been endemic in Chinese social life for years, pushing many to consider other options and dream about ways out of China.

Rùn is the romanised pinyin spelling of the Chinese character 润, and is now used interchangeably with the English word ‘run’ to capture particular moods and ideas about emigration. Aside from sounding similar, there is no connection between run and *rùn*, which can be used as a verb (‘to moisten’) or an adjective (‘smoothness’ and ‘comfort’). As such, *rùn* is often used in combination with two other words – ‘*pao*’ and ‘*paolu*’ – which are literal translations of run or running. At the same time, *rùn* not only sounds more playful and less serious than ‘*yimin*’ (emigration), it may actually help evade online censorship. Today, young urban Chinese also talk less about ‘*chuguo*’ (going abroad) or ‘*yimin*’, instead adopting the terms ‘*rùn le*’ (running now) or ‘*xiang rùn*’ (wanting to run). The terms ‘*rùn xue*’ or ‘*rùn philosophy*’ encapsulate the of a search for an alternative to the choice between taking part in the spiralling rat-race of social ‘involution’ (*neijuan*)² or an admitting defeat by ‘lying flat’ (*tangping*).

To *rùn* is to search for a different future, one with the possibility of “living like a human being and not a slave”, as Annabelle told me via We Chat³ in February 2022. The only child in her family, and originally from the city of Wuhan where we met several years ago, Annabelle is a final year PhD student at an Australian university. She has been silently defying her parents’ wishes for her to return home, find a secure job in the local government, marry, and have children. With her newfound motto ‘*buhun buyu baoping’an*’ – ‘no marriage and no children bring you a blessed life’ –, Annabelle is determined to ignore her family’s pleas and to avoid returning to a life in ‘hell mode’ (‘*diyu moshi*’). As she told me: “In all seriousness, I always try to tell the women I know who are still in China to run fast and run early (‘*kuaipao zaopao*’). Once I’d managed to run from China, there was no way of going back to that unbearable life, where I was nothing but an emotionless machine created to meet the expectations of others.”

Annabelle’s *rùn* raises interesting questions about the motivations of urban youths to leave China – to enjoy life in ‘easy mode’ (‘*qingsong moshi*’)⁴, and to “live like a human being” who can make

² In contemporary China “involution” has become a popular term to describe the cutthroat competitiveness that, in many regards, establishes Chinese social life as a race to the bottom. Originally from the anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s book *Agricultural Involution* (1963), the term “involution” has been appropriated by young Chinese to reflect their lived experiences of “being locked in competition that one ultimately knows is meaningless”. See: Xiang, Biao, quoted in Liu, Yi-Ling. 2021. China’s ‘involved’ generation. *The New Yorker*. 14 May 2021. Available online at: <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/chinas-involved-generation>. Last accessed 26 June 2022.

³ WeChat is China’s most popular messaging app.

⁴ Annabelle explained to me that “easy mode” does not mean living an “easy life” abroad. Young Chinese like Annabelle will have to leave many comforts and privileges behind and adapt to a new environment with very limited social and material support – a hard reality of which many are aware. But the easiness comes from one’s mind when sources of stress, such as age and gender-based discrimination, and feelings of burnout are removed from everyday living and when young Chinese feel they could live a life with relative autonomy.

her or his own decisions. Unlike the generations who left China in 1990s and early 2000s and had a “perpetual fascination” for the outside world,⁵ young Chinese adults today – and young women in particular – are confident that they already know a lot about what the outside world looks and feels like. A May 2022 article in *The Economist*, which offers a first look at the *rùn* phenomenon, argues that for China’s young, urban elite, “to run is not to seek pleasure or profit”.⁶ This seems to ring true for Annabelle, who once told me that if she had just wanted to have a comfortable life, she would have chosen to stay in China and live with her parents. As the only daughter, they would have provided everything for her. And why should she have bothered going to the ‘big countryside’ (*da nongcun*) of Australia to complete a PhD in her 30s? The PhD has not only cost her material comfort, but also ‘personal worth’ on China’s age-sensitive job and marriage markets. While running to Australia does not necessarily lead to the kind of ‘good life’ that previous generations of Chinese migrants might have aspired to, it will be a ‘less bad life’, one which she can maintain a degree of control over, and not worry about the expectations or judgements of others. *Rùn* is therefore an informed decision to free oneself from incessant parental and peer pressure, and from the ruthless rat-race in contemporary China.

Why are China’s urban youth searching for a way out?

Over the years, I have met a number of Chinese students and scholars in Australia and the UK who shared similar desires and sentiments to Annabelle. In the past decade, social competition in China has become fiercer in almost all aspects of life. Today, many Chinese find themselves constantly striving to get ahead, only to find themselves running in circles. From schools to the job market, from marriage to family life, the pressure of keeping up with rising demands and expectations is both heavy and inescapable. Some of the young women I met use continued education as way to deflect mounting pressure to find a job, marry, and have children. As long as they are still ‘studying’, one student told me, there is less social and familial expectation to find work and get married. Young men also complain about the direct and indirect pressures they experience: the cut-throat competitiveness of the Chinese education and job markets, the toxic work culture of ‘996’ or ‘big/small week (*daxiao zhou*)’,⁷ unaffordable housing, and burdensome dating rituals before

⁵ Sun, Wanning. 2002. *Leaving China: Media, Migration and Transnational Imagination*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

⁶ The Economist. 2022. *China’s young elite are considering moving abroad: Online searches for words related to emigrating have spiked*. 5 May 2022. Available online at: <https://www.economist.com/china/2022/05/05/chinas-young-elite-are-considering-moving-abroad>. Last accessed 8 May 2022.

⁷ The ‘996 culture’ means a work schedule of 9am-9pm, six days a week; the ‘big/small week’ is a common practice of alternating five (big) or six (small) working day weeks. For further explanations on the 996 and the big/small week workplace culture. See: The New York Times. 2019. “996” Is China’s Version of Hustle Culture. Tech Workers Are Sick of It. 29 April 2019. Available online at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/29/technology/china-996-jack-ma.html>. Last accessed 25 March 2022. See also: Yang, Yingzhi. 2019. Quantity or quality? China’s “996” work culture comes under scrutiny. *South China Morning Post*. 13 April 2019. Available online at: <https://www.scmp.com/tech/start-ups/article/3005947/quantity-or-quality-chinas-996-work-culture-comes-under-scrutiny>. Last accessed 25 March 2022.

marriage⁸ – all of which seem hopeless and exhausting. LGBT Chinese, struggling with the additional pressures of concealing their sexual identities and those they love, are eager to live in a society where same-sex partnerships are considered ordinary or unremarkable. Running, therefore, is an acute stress response and a potential way out of the compound pressures that many young Chinese face: transnational mobilities offer a potential way out.

While the increasing levels of social pressure affect almost everyone in contemporary China, women of reproductive age face additional stresses, not only in relation to their careers, but also their personal and intimate lives. Mei, a friend of mine who lives alone in Guangzhou, sees these additional stress factors as a result of China's 'yannü culture'⁹ – the structural misogyny that is so deeply embedded in Chinese society that it has become almost impossible to be a woman of her own will. In our conversations, she discussed a number of evident aspects of this culture. I outline these in no particular order below.

Career-related factors:

1) Age-based discrimination in employment: It is common knowledge that those over the age of 35 are considered unemployable in the Chinese job market. While the age cap applies to almost everyone, women in particular are affected by the 'age 35 phenomenon',¹⁰ as they are expected to perform greater caring responsibilities within the family. It is government policy, for instance, that over-35s are not eligible to sit civil service examinations and therefore cannot join the service.¹¹ Other public institutions, such as state-run companies, also openly set an age cap of 35 for new recruits, granting further legitimation to this manifest age discrimination.

2) Gender discrimination at work: Women experience continued gender inequality in the workplace. Female job seekers are less likely to be successful in applications than their male counterparts,¹² and the gender pay gap has been steadily widening over the past two decades.¹³ Some job advertisements

⁸ In China, young men are generally expected to pay for all dating-related expenses. The cost of dating (lian'ai chengben) has been steadily increasing in the past decades. For a typical, urban middle-class date, the basic expenses include dinner for two, a film, shopping, and sometimes a night in a hotel. Flowers and gifts are extra, and are 'mandatory' on special occasions. A typical date can cost 400-500 RMB (60-70 USD) in Shanghai – not a small expense for many young men. Expenses aside, extra time and effort are also expected when young men are 'pursuing' ('zhui') women for a date. Quite often, young men are given the cold shoulder in the early days of romance – this is not because women are not interested; rather, cultural norms dictate scripted performances as evidence of a woman's 'worth' (e.g. the more valuable, the harder to pursue), and a test of a man's patience and commitment. Time, money and effort have made dating a 'luxury' rather than necessity, with many young men in urban China now saying they "would rather have a dog than a girlfriend". See: 半男女不主动恋爱·中国正在经历第四次单身潮. *Pengpai News*. 22 May 2019. Available online at: https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_3490032. Last accessed 8 May 2022.

⁹ While 'Yannü' is literally translated as misogyny, this is a loanword from the Japanese feminist sociologist Chizuko Ueno and her work *Onnagirai: Nippon no misojinī* (2010), which gained wide popularity among Chinese readers following the publication of its Chinese translation in 2015. My respondents even consider this book an 'enlightenment to feminism' (*nüquan qimeng*) on par with classics such as *The Second Sex*.

¹⁰ South China Morning Post. 2022. *China wants its people to work longer, but people over 35 cannot get hired*. 6 March 2022. Available online at: <https://www.scmp.com/news/people-culture/social-welfare/article/3169313/china-wants-its-people-work-longer-people-over>. Last accessed 8 May 2022.

¹¹ See National Civil Service Administration. 2020. Provisions on Recruitment of Civil Servants. Available online at: http://www.scs.gov.cn/zcfg/202001/t20200108_16198.html. Last accessed 30 April 2020.

¹² Zhang, Jian et al. 2021. Gender discrimination in China: Experimental evidence from the job market for college graduates. *Journal of Comparative Economics* 49(3): 819-835.

¹³ Liu, Ye. 2021. As the Two-Child Policy Beckons: Work-Family Conflicts, Gender Strategies and Self-Worth among Women from the First One-Child Generation in Contemporary China. *Work, Employment and Society*. Available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2F09500170211016944>. Last accessed 6 March 2022.

openly state ‘men only’; and in some cases, the age restriction for female applicants is capped at 30 rather than 35.¹⁴

3) Maternity-based discrimination in the workplace: It is no secret that employers are less likely to hire women of reproductive age who are not (yet) married or have not had children. With ‘996’ seen as the norm, pregnancy and maternity leave are treated with strong suspicion and hostility. Unmarried women, women without children, and now women with only one child are often regarded as walking ‘time bombs’ in the workplace. These women, so the narrative goes, could claim maternity leave once, twice, or even three times under China’s new ‘Three-Child Policy’, resulting in a potential drop in workforce productivity and leaving the employer burdened with the costs of paying for maternity leave.¹⁵

Personal factors:

4) The divorce cooling-off period: In January 2020, a new Civil Code of China’s marriage laws came into force mandating a 30-day ‘cooling-off period’ (*lihun lengjing qi*) for couples filing for divorce. The government has celebrated the policy as a success, with China’s divorce rate reported to have dropped by over 70 per cent in the first year. But the real consequence of this policy is that many young Chinese, and women in particular, are refusing to marry in the first place. The young women I have spoken to hold particularly strong objections to the new code, calling it yet another ‘misogynous policy’ (*yannü zhengce*) from the patriarchal state. For many, the 30 days “cooling-off period will do little to save a broken marriage, but will sufficiently diminish individual rights, especially women’s rights, in freely seeking separation without fear or interference. There are already a number of barriers to divorce, including the income gap and division of property, that tend to favour men and disadvantage women. Chinese courts often deny first-time applications for divorce in the name of family harmony and social stability, even where there is evidence of domestic abuse and spousal violence. The social stigma around divorce remains strong in large parts of China, especially in smaller cities and rural regions, and women often have to put up with suffering for years before making a decision to separate. The cooling-off period has no regard for such suffering, instead extending the insecurity and anxiety women must live with; families may put greater pressure on the woman to make compromises, the husband may change his mind, and more abuse may take place within the 30-day period. According to a Beijing divorce lawyer, the code was “unfair” to women because “each day in this waiting period feels like years”.¹⁶ A female student from Anhui told me that it was difficult enough in the past with the pressure from family and society to marry – and now it seems impossible to get a divorce! No woman with a clear head would want to get married these days.

¹⁴ Zhang, Phoebe. 2021. ‘Men only’ job adverts prompt women’s rights group in China to take on employers over gender discrimination. *South China Morning Post*. 18 February 2021. Available online at: <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/article/3121967/men-only-job-adverts-prompt-womens-rights-group-china-take-employers-over>. Last accessed 6 March 2022.

¹⁵ See the comprehensive report from Human Rights Watch. 2021. Take Maternity Leave and You’ll Be Replaced. Available online at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/06/01/take-maternity-leave-and-youll-be-replaced/chinas-two-child-policy-and-workplace>. Last accessed 6 March 2022.

¹⁶ See Liu, Dawn and Adela Suliman. 2021. Frustration among women in China as new divorce law stalls process. *NBC News*. 27 March 2021. Available online at: <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/frustration-among-women-china-new-divorce-law-stalls-process-n1262065>. Last accessed 30 April 2022.

5) Pressure to have three children: With the introduction in 2021 of the ‘Three-Child Policy’ (*‘sanhai zhengce’*) to counter China’s declining birth rate, many women of reproductive age are feeling increasing anxiety about having children.¹⁷ Although there is strong criticism of the lopsided pressure on women to shoulder the main reproductive responsibility, many fear that such criticism will do nothing to change their day-to-day situation. Worse still, the possibility and fear that the policy to control population-levels will be brutally enforced, as was the ‘One-Child Policy’, remains very real. If forced abortions and severe financial penalties were the legitimised means to keep birth rates down in the past, the argument goes, then similar means may one day be adopted to increase birth rates. These could include criminalising abortion, banning birth-control products, and linking childbirth to the punitive diminishment of social benefits (e.g. denying a woman a pension or state healthcare insurance if she does not have the required number of children). Young, single women without children who stay in China may face moral condemnation for their ‘selfishness and irresponsibility’. Some are convinced that a real-life ‘Handmaid’s Tale’ is in the making, and that any young woman could be treated as a ‘walking uterus’ (*‘xingzou de zigong’*), valued only if she is capable of bearing children.

These compound stress factors and anxieties around reproduction and productivity are deeply intertwined and compounding in contemporary Chinese society. But there is also a host of other, broader socio-economic stressors of which young people, both within and beyond China, are acutely aware: the inescapable social ‘involution’ that penetrates Chinese life;¹⁸ the diminishing prospects of upward social mobility through education; a tightening censorship regime where mundane complaints about life can lead to harassment and police interrogation; continued concerns about health and food safety; escalating anti-foreign sentiments within China fuelled by both nationalism at home and rising anti-China sentiments abroad; and the latest fear (at the time of writing) that China may be shutting its doors towards the outside world, at least in the foreseeable future, in the name of pandemic control.

These shared anxieties around careers and personal lives have long been present, but the situation has become noticeably worse since the Covid-19 outbreak in early 2020. This is in part due to prolonged uncertainties around migration and travel, and in part to the many major government policy changes hurriedly introduced since 2020, including the ‘Three-Child Policy’ and the ‘Double Reduction Policy’ (*‘shuangjian zhengce’*). Introduced in 2021, the ‘Double Reduction Policy’ targeted the private tuition industry that has led to millions losing their jobs, and escalating care and education pressures on parents, and mothers in particular.¹⁹ Moreover, China’s uncompromising

¹⁷ See Yeung, Jessie and Steve George. 2021. China wants families to have three children. But many women aren't convinced.' *CNN*. 26 August 2021. Available online at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/08/25/china/three-child-policy-mic-intl-hnk/index.html>. Last accessed 6 March 2022.

¹⁸ For more explanations and discussions of ‘involution’, see interview with Xiang, Biao in Wang Qianni and Ge Shifan. 2020. How One Obscure Word Captures Urban China’s Unhappiness. *Sixth Tone*. 4 November 2020. Available online at: <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1006391/how-one-obscure-word-captures-urban-chinas-unhappiness>. Last accessed 6 March 2022.

¹⁹ Introduced and implemented in July 2021, the ‘Double Reduction Policy’ (*‘Shuangjian zhengce’*) was a total overhaul of China’s \$100 billion private education sector. The aim was in part to ease education anxieties, so parents would be encouraged to have more children. But this drastic and coercive policy led to the sudden collapse of the entire industry, leaving millions unemployed and unable to find new jobs in an economy already slowed down by the pandemic. Parental anxieties have not been relieved by the policy either, as parents (and usually mothers) have to spend more time away from work for child-care and now pay more for private tuition in an emerging education ‘black market’. See: The New York Times. 2022. *China Targets Costly Tutoring Classes. Parents Want to Save Them*. 30 July 2022. Available online at: https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/30/business/economy/china-education-tutors.html?_ga=2.169665121.1720200386.1652109945-24226198.1652109945. Last accessed 30 April 2022.

zero-Covid policy and deteriorating diplomatic relations with Western countries inspire little confidence in the future amongst young people, for whom the prospect for ‘running’ becomes increasingly bleak. Both the pandemic and government policy changes have generated a sense of uncontrollable social ‘acceleration’ (*jiasu*) – and that very much in the wrong direction. Today, young urbanites have discovered that individual passports and foreign visas are becoming increasingly difficult to obtain, that borders can be closed at short notice, and that international travel may not return anytime soon. Prior to the pandemic, when *rùn* still seemed like a readily available option, would-be migrants may not have had a strong desire to leave China. But today, that sense of surety is rapidly disappearing.

When I talked to my friend Mei in Guangzhou again in late April 2022, having exchanged multiple messages on lockdown tragedies in Shanghai and the normalisation of Covid coercion, she had picked a list of potential *rùn* destinations. The list was based on feasibility, affordability, and the costs and benefits of each destination. She had been talking to multiple migration agents and started to look into ways of moving money abroad. But everything had to be done discreetly, Mei explained, because her parents and relatives would not approve, and her colleagues could become jealous and sabotage the plan. In a few months, Mei predicted, being locked in and not going anywhere would become the new norm, and people would soon forget about Shanghai, just as they have forgotten the many tragedies of the past. Now largely forgotten, only a few months earlier there had been widespread outrage at the story of Xiaohuamei, a trafficked mother of eight in Xuzhou who had been imprisoned in a shed at her home with a chain around her neck.²⁰ The chains around Xiaohuamei’s neck, Mei said, were an allegory for the chains around the necks of all women in China. And what had happened to Xiaohuamei could also happen to her and to me. *Rùn*, for Mei and many like her, means waking up to the reality and getting moving; it means searching for a possible future where they are not chained down, not co-opted into a collective amnesia about the sufferings of others; it is about freeing oneself from the ‘iron cage’ (*tie longzi*) welded tight with multi-layered social pressures and gendered discrimination.

²⁰ Xiaohuawei’s case made international headlines in early 2022. See: BBC. 2022. *China claims arrests of human traffickers in chained woman case*. 11 February 2022. Available online at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-60344484>. Last accessed 30 April 2022; The New York Times. 2022. *Seeking Truth and Justice, Chinese See Themselves in a Chained Woman*. 1 March 2022. Available online at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/01/business/china-chained-woman-social-media.html>. Last accessed 30 April 2022.