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‘Rùn or stay?’ - Why young Chinese who want to migrate hesitate

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Abstract

Today, many of China’s urban youth are contemplating ways to leave the country. They call this desire to leave ‘*rùn*’, an impending mobility that brings with it ambivalent motivations and paradoxical temporalities. Facing intense competition and an on-going chronic lack of security, urban youth find themselves confronted with a stark choice: participate in the rat-race (social involution, or ‘*neijuan’*) or withdraw from it by ‘lying flat’ (*tangping*). Many therefore see *rùn* as a ‘way out’, but just what – or where – that ‘way out’ leads to remains uncertain.

Theme

Reproduction migration

Keywords

out-migration, *rùn*, urban youth, stress-induced mobilities, staying, anxieties, social pressure, China

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In the summer of 2020, as the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic was subsiding, I took part in a research project on how migrants and minority communities in the UK had coped with lockdowns and months of isolation. Through this work I got to know a young Chinese man named Joe who had just paid 40,000 RMB (around 6,000 USD) for a flight back to China. Joe, who had studied and worked in Manchester for six years, told me how the journeys back and forth between China and the UK had changed his life in fundamental ways. He had come to the UK for undergraduate studies in 2014, hoping that a Western education would give him not only social prestige but also a competitive edge in the Chinese job market. After graduation, he spent two more years in Manchester working as a travel consultant, all the while lamenting time away from family and dreaming of a potential 'upgrade' in personal net worth if he were to return to China as a *haigui* (overseas returnee). In early 2020, his family reunion for Chinese New Year in a city close to Wuhan turned into a lockdown nightmare. The despair caused by Covid led to a panicked decision to get out of China and he flew back to the UK as soon as possible. Little did Joe anticipate that the rest of the world would also be caught up in the crisis, and that by leaving China he would only run into a lockdown in the UK. Finally, after months of fear and isolation in Manchester, Joe saw that things seemed to be looking up in China. The country appeared to have come out of the pandemic not only unscathed, but more confident than ever thanks to the rapid economic recovery.[2] So Joe made up his mind to pack up his things, buy another expensive air ticket, and to '*rùn* home' (*rùn huiguo*) for good. Two years later – in May 2022 –, Joe was again wavering, and trying to find out if he still had a chance of returning to the UK. Joe's desire to *rùn* once more was partly triggered by China's zero-Covid measures, and partly by a diminishing sense of hope based on his experiences over the past two years. His *haigui* identity had failed to secure him a high-paying job. He was working long hours and had barely any time to spend with his family. Although not yet 30, Joe was already worried about losing his job due to the economic uncertainties which had been exacerbated by zero-Covid policies over the past few months. Joe was regretting "*rùn*ning halfway and returning" (*rùnle yiban huilaile*), when he could have stayed in the UK and secured permanent residency. "I don't feel like putting effort in anything anymore," he told me in a chat. "There is no future and no confidence. If I manage to make a little money, it is offset by the high cost of living. Travelling is basically banned. But if I leave now, I may never see my family again. Living in this state of mind is sapping my motivation."

For many young Chinese like Joe, *rùn* is fraught with both urgency and indecisiveness. In urban China today, *rùn* can be an impetuous decision triggered by an unexpected turn of events, a decision made with emotion and not necessarily with a clear sense of direction. A friend of mine once jokingly compared *rùn* to 'running for the nearest exit' in an emergency; but the reality of *rùn* is more troubled and complicated. Joe's back-and-forth journeys make clear the many dilemmas that can swiftly derail one's plans in life, and in which panic, yearning, and hesitancy inform decision-making. A decision that may seem essential today could soon reveal itself to be half-baked and highly regrettable.

[2] There was a lot of optimism and praise for China's pandemic response 'success', not only among Chinese nationals but among journalists and academic researchers. See: Uretsky, Elanah. 2020. China beat the coronavirus with science and strong public health measures, not just with authoritarianism. The Conversation. 23 November 2020. Available online at: https://theconversation.com/china-beat-the-coronavirus-with-science-and-strong-public-health-measures-not-just-with-authoritarianism-150126. Last accessed 10 July 2022.

Between involution and lying flat

In the first entry on *rùn* (https://www.eth.mpg.de/molab-inventory/reproduction-migration/run-part-one-why-is-Chinas-urban-youth-searching-for-a-way-out), I listed several important factors pushing young urbanites, and women in particular, to look for ways out of China. Over the past few years, China's less optimistic citizens have become increasingly dispairing of their worsening prospects, as well as the tightening censorship regime around a whole host of economic and social problems beyond the pandemic.[3] Many may have tolerated censorship control in the past when the economy was good but now they feel stifled, deprived of a space for venting their frustration in the public domain.[4] Clear signs of economic stagnation, record-high levels of youth unemployment, and growing social and political instability are stripping away people's aspirations and pushing them to imagine a future elsewhere.[5]

At the same time, the will to stay remains strong, even for those who are worried and alarmed, especially when negative impacts of authoritarian control over one's life are not directly felt. Unlike those escaping ongoing conflicts or disasters, where danger is clear and imminent, the underlying anxiety that pushes young urbanites to *rùn* may be less concrete and not as pressing. Anxieties about the future, feelings of restlessness and indecisiveness, or of being torn, characterise ambivalent *rùn* mobilities. *Rùn* requires both an immediate response – getting moving –, and prolonged planning and preparation. It could take years to save enough money, to persuade family, to learn a new language, to switch job fields, and such efforts may not even lead to success. Within the temporal-emotional stretch between aspiring to leave and actualising migration, one's eagerness to *rùn* could be dampened by numerous hesitations or (perceived) barriers: cost, destination, care responsibilities, career choices, the ability to change career path (*zhuanma*),[6] and the sheer uncertainty of gaining permanent residency or citizenship in a foreign country.

Such uncertainties may help explain why some young urbanites in China want to remain hopeful that the current setbacks are only temporary, who argue instead that 'the West' (*xifang*) is in a worse state than China.[7] Their optimism is in part boosted by China's 'success stories' in state-controlled news channels and heavily censored social media platforms, and in part driven by the all-round fearmongering that, in Chinese collective imaginations, associate the West with danger and decline .[8]

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[3] See a comprehensive report by Duckett, Jane, Meixuan Chen, and William Wang. 2022. China's COVID crisis and the dilemma facing its leaders, by experts who have monitored it since the Wuhan outbreak. *The Conversation*. 10 May 2022. Available online at: https://theconversation.com/chinas-covid-crisis-and-the-dilemma-facing-its-leaders-by-experts-who-have-monitored-it-since-the-wuhan-outbreak-182451. Last accessed 10 July 2022.

[4] See Zhang, Tao. 2021. Silenced in China: the COVID 'truth-tellers' and political dissent. *The Conversation*. 16 July 2021. Available online at: https://theconversation.com/silenced-in-china-the-covid-truth-tellers-and-political-dissent-164642. Last accessed 10 July 2022. See also Duckett, Chen and Wang. 2022.

[5] For youth unemployment, see: Bloomberg. 2022. China Youth Unemployment Crisis Leaves Tens of Millions Jobless. 31 May 2022. Available online at: https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-05-31/china-unemployment-rate-for-young-people-hits-record-highsl Last accessed on 10 July 2022. For examples on China's social instability, see reports on a recent case of assault against four women in Tangshan, Chiang Vic and Lily Kuo. 2022. After restaurant attack, authorities continue to gaslight China's women. *The Washington Post*. 23 June 2022. Available online at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/06/23/china-tangshan-assault-violence-womens-rights/. Last accessed on 10 July 2022.

[6] *Zhuanma*, literally 'transcoding', is an expression often used to describe changing careers from 'less employable' fields to IT as many young Chinese aspire to become programmers and software engineers in China, North America and Europe.

[7] See Wong, Tessa. 2021. China: The patriotic 'ziganwu' bloggers who attack the West. *BBC*. Available online at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-58922011. Last accessed 10 July 2022.

[8] For a more detailed analysis, see: Zhang, Chenchen. 2022. Contested disaster nationalism in the digital age: Emotional registers and geopolitical imaginaries in COVID-19 narratives on Chinese social media. *Review of International Studies* 48(2): 219-242.

In the past two years, China's state media has continued to spread 'winning stories' of China's economic and social 'victories' over other major economies in the world. Meanwhile, conspiracy theories and anti-West sentiments propagate freely in online spaces, where horror stories of the West, where people suffer from not only high mortality rate from Covid, but also systematic racism and widespread criminality (especially gun-related violence in the US), circulate widely.[9] Bombarded by these contrasting stories on a daily basis, many are persuaded by the state-directed rhetoric of *dongsheng xijiang*[10]- the East is ascending and the West is declining – despite clear incongruities between different representations of lives portrayed and lives actually lived.[11] At a practical level, optimistic urban citizens are willing to put up with heavy-handed state control for a little longer, and hope for China's eventual 'victory', partly because of a reluctance to relinquish their families, properties, connections and careers, all of which remain important to them, and partly because of concerns that the 'outside' will lead not to a way out but a dead end.

Since 2020, I have been a member of a group called 'Fiveland' on the popular online platform Douban.[12] 'Fiveland' has going abroad as its focus, and has over 30,000 members. In March 2022, user "Aibuaichi doubanjiang" posted this question – "Are there those like me who want to *rùn* but can't let go?"[13] The post continued:

> I want to *rùn* because I'd like to be in an environment without involution. People in different occupations are treated equally, and one is allowed to pursue personal interests. There is no fear that I can't find a job because I am a woman, no worry that my life choices will be narrower as I get older, or that I will be treated as a loser if I end up with an ordinary job. My life now has no direction and no fun. I am too tired to 'roll on' but too indecisive to 'lie flat' (*juan budong tang buxia*). I am totally burned out by my internal struggles. Instead of pursuing a new life, I want to *rùn* to be far away from the life I am living now.

The phrase '*juan budong tang buxia'* – "I am too tired to 'roll on' but too indecisive to 'lie flat'" – captures the dilemma facing many young Chinese today. Shorthand for *neijuan*, or involution, *juan* is often used as a verb to mean rolling or folding inwards. It suggests a constant motion of folding or being folded over, of rolling on in the same direction as everyone else – without purpose, without

[9] For example, the Global Times, owned by People's Daily and part of the Chinese state's propaganda apparatus targeting the English-speaking world, regularly publishes 'news' and commentaries along these lines. See a recent piece by Mark Blacklock. 2022. People or profit first? Comparing the UK and China's COVID response" *Global Times*. 29 May 2022. Available online at: https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202205/1266797.shtml. Last accessed 10 July 2022; Stories published in Chinese are too numerous to list here. For an analysis on the Chinese official discourse, see Yang, Yifan and Xuechen Chen. 2021. Globalism or Nationalism? The Paradox of Chinese Official Discourse in the Context of the COVID-19 Outbreak, *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 26: 89-113.

[10] See Chris Buckley. 2021. 'The East Is Rising': Xi Maps Out China's Post-Covid Ascent. *The New York Times*. 4 March 2021. Available online at: https://cn.nytimes.com/china/20210304/xi-china-congress/. Last accessed 10 July 2022.

[11] For an anthropological analysis on this theme, see: Steinmuller, Hans. 2011. The state of irony in China. *Critique of Anthropology*, 31(1): 21-42.

[12] Douban is a social platform especially popular among young, educated urban women. The group 'Fiveland' takes its name from a self-deprecatory play on the word on 'five' and the similar sounding 'feiwu', or losers. The name translates as 'A land of losers'.

[13] Aibuaichi doubanjiang. 2022. Are there those like me who want to *rùn* but can't let go? *Douban*. 26 March 2022. Available online at: https://www.douban.com/group/topic/263211029/?_dtcc=1&_i=8566813KX2AojQ. Last accessed 27 March 2022.

end. The opposite of *neijuan* is *tangping* – or the act of 'lying flat'.[14] People 'lying flat' have stopped striving for conventional life goals, such as buying an apartment, finding a high-paying job, and getting married. In an environment of toxic competitiveness and consumerism, choosing a 'low desire lifestyle' (*diyuwang shenghuo*) has become fashionable for young Chinese.[15] *Rùn*, as a third option, sits somewhere between the two as a potential way out, albeit one without any clear direction for many.

Both Joe's back-and-forth journeys and doubanjiang's laments illustrate ambivalence and uncertainty towards *rùn* and the future. Both describe their current lives as joyless and hopeless, yet they both remain somehow stuck. Many young urban Chinese today are facing the sobering reality that they are unable to gain greater control over the direction of their lives, and yet they cannot pull out of the rat-race. Joe's panicked moves, and doubanjiang's ongoing reluctance to *rùn* are opposing coping strategies. One reacted immediately and got moving, whatever it cost; the other has become almost immobilised by indecision. The desire to leave is often driven by a wish to run away from frustrating conditions of living, but the promises of *rùn* stop there, for it is impossible to foresee exactly what will happen next. Will *neijuan* stop, or at least slow down after the *rùn*? Can one comfortably 'lie flat' somewhere else? Will life really be different on the other side? There are no straightforward answers to these questions. And the real consequences of one's actions may only be felt long after leaving. Whatever the case, for those who are determined to leave, *rùn*ning may open up new directions in life, especially when upward social mobility is no longer one's main objective. For others, 'I want to *rùn*' will remain nothing more than a desire, one not strong enough to compensate for the potential costs or risks involved.

'Help me decide how to *rùn*'

Among the many possibilities that *rùn* offers, one of the most striking is this: there are significantly more opportunities and places to *rùn*, regardless of age or gender, than many young Chinese would likely expect. Having grown up in an environment where people are constantly taught to 'do the right things at the right age' (*dao shenme nianling zuo shenme shi*), learning that 'age appropriateness' is significantly less rigid in western countries gives one a fresh perspective on life. In China, going through life stages just like everyone else and hitting the right 'targets' (*rensheng mubiao*) at the right moments, once regimented, becomes an oppressive social-cultural practice. The steps are pre-ordained: one is to go to school, to work, to marry, to have children. Any deviation from the path can be highly stigmatising – not only for the individual, but also for their parents. Before undertaking her PhD, Annabelle – the doctoral student in Australia introduced in the first entry on *rùn* (https://www.eth.mpg.de/molab-inventory/reproduction-migration/run-part-one-why-is-Chinas-urban-youth-searching-for-a-way-out) – asked me whether it would be acceptable to return to university after having worked for two years: Would she be too old? Would people in Australia find it strange that she was still single in her 30s? Would people ridicule her as a mature student? And could this disadvantage her on the job market? She had to be reassured multiple times before

[14] For a detailed examination of 'lying-flatism', see: Gong, Jing and Tingting Liu. 2021. Decadence and relational freedom among China's gay migrants: Subverting heteronormativity by 'lying flat'. *China Information.* Available online at: https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0920203X211050319. Last accessed 27 March 2022.

[15] The Guardian. 2021. The low-desire life: why people in China are rejecting high-pressure jobs in favour of 'lying flat'. 5 July 2021. Available online at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/05/the-low-desire-life-why-people-in-china-are-rejecting-high-pressure-jobs-in-favour-of-lying-flat. Last accessed 10 July 2022.

believing that none of these concerns would matter, and that she could do what she wanted to. For Annabelle, this freedom was both liberating and frightening, because then she had to chart a new path for herself, one for which she alone was responsible.

There are numerous posts each day in the Fiveland group from concerned members asking, 'help me decide how to *rùn*' (*bangwo kankan zenme rùn*). These posts are typically detailed and follow a similar format – the person's age, financial situation, educational/work history, marital status (especially for women), and preferred destinations. The latter, which are often broad-ranging, typically include North America (*beimei*), Europe (*ouzhou*), Japan-Korea (*Rihan*), and Southeast Asia (*dongnanya*). In the geopolitical imagination of would-be *rùn*ners, North America remains the most expensive and elite destination with the highest level of '*rùn* involution', while Southeast Asia is seen as easier and more affordable – perfect, in other words, for 'lying flat'.

Like Annabelle, those posting questions online on 'how to *rùn*' are worried and lacking in confidence, unsure of the possibilities, and they wonder whether they really would have a chance of making it. Based on individual conditions (*geren tiaojian*), they want to be 'matched' to the most 'appropriate' destination. And yet their choice of destinations is often swayed by somewhat random – and typically unverified – comments or suggestions. As a result, many prefer to keep their options open, considering as many destinations as possible in the hope of being able to find something, of arriving somewhere. This openness offers both hope and confusion, as *rùn* loses its concreteness and begins to feel like a game in which one plays out multiple scenarios. Different *rùn* destinations mean divergent directions in life, and in the process, pre-ordained 'life targets' and 'programmes' become unsettled. When these coordinates, and the benchmarks of success and failure that emerge from peer competition, fall away, would-be *rùn*ners can find themselves facing a fundamental challenge to a familiar 'Chinese' way of being – a challenge that can equally be stressful. This may explain why, for many, hesitations and second-thoughts linger, anxieties escalate, and making a decision becomes increasingly difficult. Constantly being told where and how to *rùn* makes *rùn*ning itself stressful as would-be *rùn*ners worry about making mistakes, missing opportunities, and not maximising value for money.

Hesitant migration

In one response to doubanjiang's post 'Are there those like me who want to *rùn* but can't let go?', user shuangren yu commented:

> Me too. It is my mental weakness that is tearing me up (*siche*). I am not the most determined person or someone with a strong ambition. My family conditions (*jiating tiaojian*) are neither good nor bad (*bushang buxia*), and my grades in school are neither good nor bad – this is how I have muddled along (*hunhun e'e*) through life so far. "Too tired to roll on but too indecisive to lie flat" is a true reflection of how I feel. What happened recently has given me a wakeup call – you know what I am talking about if you are a woman in China. I am tormented by so many thoughts going back and forth constantly, from my pessimism towards the future to the anxieties about my decision to *rùn*.[16]

[16] Aibuaichi doubanjiang. 2022.

Like doubanjiang, shuangren yu, Annabelle and Joe, many young Chinese want to leave an unviable environment that offers little freedom and a dull future. But what happens after the exit is uncharted territory for which many feel they are not yet prepared. When young urbanites like shuangren yu have, like most of their peers, 'muddled along' pre-determined life paths, 'rolling on' alongside everyone else generates a powerful momentum that is hard to stop, let alone turn around. 'Rolling on' may be hard work, and the future may be dull and hopeless, but as long as one manages to 'muddle along' with that forceful rolling momentum, the familiar routines of life can quickly normalise problems and make them tolerable.

My friend Mei in Guangzhou calls this the 'lukewarm water environment' (*wenshui huanjing*) in which one's will and determination is slowly eroded. By 'lukewarm water', Mei is referring to the familiar allegory in China of a frog being slowly boiled alive (*wenshui zhu qingwa*). The lukewarm water, a metaphor for Chinese society today and its growing tensions and pressures, is at first only slightly uncomfortable for the frog. As the temperature rises, the frog – despite growing discomfort – continues to adapt, and it is only when the water becomes unbearably hot that the frog senses the imminent danger and tries to jump out. But by then, all its energy and strength have been drained, and it has missed its chance to escape. Today, many young urbanites compare themselves to the frog in lukewarm water. Their families and friends, personal and professional networks, and the abundant material comforts to which they have grown accustomed, make a miserable life bearable, even though many are alarmed about how quickly the temperature of the water is rising. Compromises and complacency have not only eroded their vigilance, but also the confidence needed to resist or stand up to the many forms of injustices and violations of their rights, in both their personal and their professional lives.[17]

In 2022, when strict measures to control the spread of Covid-19 were prolonged across the country, the government stopped issuing or renewing passports for 'non-urgent travel'.[18] For many, this is a clear sign that the water is close to boiling point. Growing panic is triggering a strong sense of regret and self-doubt -- is it already too late? Has previous hesitancy cost people the opportunity to jump out? 'Running for the nearest exit' no longer seems like a joke but rather a survival strategy. Mei, for example, is prepared to *rùn* in four different directions, and she will try each in turn until one works out. Her options range from securing a five-year Elite Visa for Thailand that costs around 150,000 RMB, to buying a Vanuatu passport, which costs around one million RMB (150,000 USD).[19] Where Mei eventually ends up remains to be seen, and if she is unable to move her money abroad safely, all the plans will be for nothing. In that case, she says, she will move to a small town with her dog, grow vegetables, and 'lie flat'.

For those who remain hesitant about leaving China, who believe that things may eventually get better if they lay low and ride it out, the emotional torment continues. Without a clear direction or a

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[17] See this BBC Chinese story on a closely related phenomenon of "accelerationism" where a "quick death" is seen as more preferable than a "slow boil", BBC Chinese. 2020. 中国政治暗语"入关学"与"加速主义": 年轻一代的幻灭和狂热. 18 August 2020. Available online at https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/chinese-news-53803071. Last accessed 10 July 2022.

[18] Reuters. 2022. China says not granting passport renewals for non-essential travel. 12 February 2022. Available online at: https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-says-not-granting-passport-renewals-non-essential-travel-2022-02-12/. Last accessed 15 May 2022.

[19] Vanuatu's Citizenship by Investment scheme has been popular among Chinese since it was first introduced in 2014. It is reported that more than 4,000 passports have been sold under the scheme, most of which went to Chinese nationals. See: Fox, Liam. 2019. Why Vanuatu's lucrative 'passports for sale' scheme is popular among Chinese nationals. *ABC News*. Available online at: https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-08-07/vanuatu-passports-for-sale-scheme-to-chinese-nationals/11387292. Last accessed on 10 July 2022.

strong will, making a decision is challenging. With the near impossibility of obtaining a passport, at least for now, some of my friends on WeChat feel even less confident about *rùn*ning. They, like most Chinese, are locked in, stuck in place. Saving money, learning the language, practicing cooking – these are the small yet pragmatic things that could help them make progress and stop worrying about what may or may not happen. *Rùn* continues to offer the exit people are longing for, but in the meantime many sit and wait, hoping that the water stops warming so quickly, and that the 'boiling point' will somehow be delayed. By then, with any luck, some of them may have finally made up their mind and found a way out of the pot.