



The Dynamics of Shadow Education: Contrasting 'Rat Race' and 'Lying Flat'

Cheng Peng*

Graduate School of Human Sciences, Assumption University, Bangkok, 10240 Thailand

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Abstract

In May 2021, the concept of 'lying flat' surged in popularity in China, inciting widespread interest and prompting extensive research and analysis. As its antonym, the 'rat race,' represents intense, high-pressure competition and is often featured and discussed in numerous articles alongside 'lying flat,' providing a contrasting perspective. This paper examines the phenomena of 'lying flat' and 'rat race' within the context of shadow education in China. It aims to elucidate their interplay and provide insights for schools, teachers, parents, and students. This paper seeks to help schools and teachers reassess and refine their educational objectives, assist parents in forming a balanced perspective on shadow education, and support students in managing their mindset to navigate the balance between the 'rat race' and 'lying flat' within the shadow education landscape. This article outlines the definition and evolution of shadow education, incorporating theories and past research on both 'rat race' and 'lying flat.' It delves into the causes, types, and manifestations of these phenomena within the context of shadow education. Building on the explanation of the 'rat race' and 'lying flat' in shadow education, the article offers three key recommendations: schools and teachers should deeply reflect on the essence of education, adjusting their objectives and expectations; parents should adopt a 'lying flat' approach to their children's performance, avoiding the pitfalls of overemphasizing competition and neglecting the importance of parent-child relationships; students should embrace the competitive spirit fostered by the 'rat race,' while also maintaining a 'lying flat' mindset to ensure their overall physical and mental well-being.

Introduction

In May 2021, the term 'lying flat' emerged in an article titled "*Lying Flat is Justice*", where the author posited that 'lying flat' is the movement of the wise and the ultimate measure of everything. This concept ignited a wave in China, prompting numerous studies and data surveys on 'lying flat.' The term 'lying flat' signifies a

subtle resistance to reevaluating current living conditions and embracing alternative lifestyles, paired with distinctive acts of non-conformity. Conversely, 'rat race' denotes intense, high-pressure competition. Despite China's relatively unified and equitable education system under government leadership—with the Ministry of Education evenly distributing resources and experienced

* Corresponding Author
e-mail: charlotte.pc92@gmail.com

teachers across schools, and students being assigned to nearby schools based on their residency—significant exam pressures persist due to the country’s large population, resulting in fierce competition among schools, teachers, parents, and students. Building on years of observation and teaching, the author has noted that China’s shadow education is increasingly dominated by the ‘rat race.’ Parents, and even students, are compelled to prepare for various entrance exams from pre-school onwards, seek admission to prestigious schools, choose renowned teachers, and enroll in various tutoring classes, with shadow education progressively morphing into a high-pressure competition. As the ‘rat race’ phenomenon intensifies within shadow education, some students exhibit signs of exhaustion, shifting from ‘rat race’ mode to ‘lying flat’, and frequently cycling through these states. Drawing on extensive research and data, the author discusses the development and models of shadow education both in China and globally. This paper examines the trajectory from academic stress leading to engagement in shadow education, and ultimately to the adoption of the ‘lying flat’ mentality. Within this pattern, ‘rat race’ and ‘lying flat’ are categorized into various types based on students’ stress-resistance capacities. Through analysis and synthesis, the author seeks to clarify the relationship between ‘rat race’ and ‘lying flat’ in China’s shadow education, delineating the developmental processes and expressions of different types. Proposals are then put forth for schools, teachers, parents, and students to address shadow education.

Shadow Education

Research on shadow education is done in most countries in the world. Shadow education serves as a supplement to mainstream education, aiming to improve students’ performance and enhance their competitiveness to cope with high-pressure academic performance. The author has compiled research literature on shadow education to illustrate its complementary and auxiliary roles.

The Definition of Shadow Education

Shadow education was initially proposed by Stevenson and Baker (1992), is viewed as a supplement to mainstream education. Shadow education content mirrors formal education and adapts to its changes. The key difference is that the cost of shadow education is primarily covered by private individuals, often in the form of extracurricular remedial activities.

Byun and Baker (2015) quoted and explained the current definition of shadow education. First, they believe

that the essence of shadow education is a supplement to mainstream education because it includes subjects already covered by schools. Secondly, shadow education operates within the marketplace, offered in exchange for fees rather than as free counseling for families or students. Finally, shadow education is academic. Encompassing a wide range of subjects, such as mathematics, language, physics, etc.

Kim and Jung (2019) described shadow education as a supplementary or enriched curriculum tailored to individuals to encourage and foster academic success. They coined it “shadow curriculum as a world curriculum learning.” Shadow education is a method parents use to enhance their children’s academic performance and achieve success, typically through after-school classes and private tutoring.

Global Shadow Education

Shadow education has proliferated globally, particularly in Asia where academic competition fierce. In China, the concept “shadow education” was first introduced by Peng (2007). In his article “*Shadow Education: Research and Enlightenment on Extracurricular Tutoring Abroad*,” he proposed that shadow education refers to the supplementary education of mainstream primary and secondary schools funded privately. However, China’s educational assistance system extends beyond primary and secondary schools to include professional after-school support. Families invest economic resources in providing differentiated educational opportunities, such as “shadow education”—a paid service outside of school—which significantly impacts students’ development. Despite many parents in China are cautious about shadow education consumption, the immense pressure from the education system and society, combined with the lack of alternatives, compels most parents to avail of shadow education services for their children (Li & He, 2019). Concurrently, students engage in numerous after-school or private tutoring classes from an early age to outpace their peers and gain a significant advantage in terms of enrollment, class division, and college entrance examination (Huang & Luo, 2021).

Under China’s education system, shadow education is essential in improving students’ performance and helping students face various pressures. However, its presence can also impact educational equity to some extent. For families with better economic and cultural capital, their children will have more opportunities to participate in shadow education and have more

advantages in participating in competitions. However, shadow education's impact on children from lower-income or less privileged backgrounds is significant. Ideally, shadow education should serve as a means for disadvantaged students to self-develop and elevate their social standing (Chen & Li, 2021).

Kim and Jung (2019) also mentioned shadow education in South Korea and Japan. They mentioned that private tutoring and after-school classes in South Korea are the fastest-growing courses in many industries. According to the sampling questionnaire of the Korean education department in 2007, the time spent by Korean primary, middle, and high school students in after-school remedial classes was 10.2 hours per week on average; the average tuition fee is 288,000 won per person per month (Hu, Fan, & Ding, 2015). The gradual popularization of shadow courses has also led the South Korean Ministry of Education to incorporate the courses provided by private tutoring institutions into the formal curriculum. In Japan, the total cost of education for a child from primary school to university is 10 million yen, most of which is for after-school tuition. Therefore, the Ministry of Education of Japan also provided financial assistance for high school students who need private tutoring later (Hu, Fan, & Ding, 2015).

Shadow education significantly influences social education not just in Asian countries but also in Europe. It plays a crucial role in supplementing mainstream education and supporting students' academic success. Bray (2021) frequently cited data from the International Student Assessment Program (PISA) operated by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the International Trends in Mathematical and Scientific Research (TIMSS) conducted under the auspices of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievements (IEA). PISA and TIMSS assessments revealed high tutoring rates in southern European countries, particularly in Greece, highlighting the emphasis on supplementary education to boost academic performance. The scale of tutoring in Eastern European countries has been increasing and has become part of the established culture. Western European countries also have small-scale private tutoring traditions. Northern Europe is the least affected by private tutoring, and most of them maintain the tradition of mainstream schools to meet the needs of students.

Table 1 in Bray's 2021 article presents data on shadow education in European countries. It includes the

proportion of students attending shadow education in specific years and the associated costs. The author highlights a small segment of this data to emphasize the importance of shadow education in European countries.

Table 1 Indicators of Private Tutoring in European Union Countries (Bray, 2021)

Country	Patterns
Austria	Data in 2017 indicated that 28% of upper secondary students in the academic (gymnasium) stream had received tutoring in the present or previous year (Boehm, 2018).
Belgium	Commercialized private tutoring has expanded rapidly (Bouillon, 2010). Meskens and Berkenbaum (2009) described it as a "juicy market" in which one child out of 10 was in need of private tutoring.
Croatia	Ristić Dedić et al. (2006) surveyed senior secondary students in 2004 and 2005, and found that 54.5% in public schools and 48.7% in private schools were receiving supplementary lessons. Jokic, Soldo, and Ristić Dedić (2013) followed up with a complementary qualitative study.
Denmark	Christensen and Orberg (2015) highlighted the emergence of the industry albeit in a limited way. Elaborating, Christensen (2019) showed a 458% increase in the number of businesses in 2018 compared with 2000 - 2009.

In 2017, Liu summarized the data on shadow education in more than 30 countries in her doctoral thesis. Her data shows that shadow education has emerged in countries with different economic forms, and its development speed varies according to each country's political, cultural, and other factors.

Table 2 shows the investment in shadow education in some countries in Liu's (2017) paper, which shows that countries with different economic conditions also pay attention to shadow education to varying degrees.

Table 2 Family extracurricular tutoring experience or needs in some countries or regions (Liu, 2017)

Geographical position	Study/data sources	After-school tutoring experience or needs
Canada	Aurini and Davies (2013)	According to Canadian Learning Council estimate in 2007, 33% of Canadian parents gave their children a supplemental education.
England and Wales	Kirby (2016)	As of 1025 articles, the proportion of students aged 11 -16 who had received private, or family tutoring increased to 25% from 18% in 2005.
Hong Kong China	Bray and Kobakhidze (2014)	Data from a survey of 1,646 students from 16 middle schools showed that 53.8 percent of ninth graders and 71.8 percent of twelfth graders had received private tutoring.
Japan	MEXT (2008)	According to a 2007 survey, 15.9 percent of first-year students are attending after-school tutoring in 'private schools' (tutoring centers), and the participation rate increases with grade, up to 65.2 percent in the third grade.

Rat Race

'Lying flat' often coexists with the term 'rat race,' frequently contrasted in articles, serving as its antonym. This section introduces the origin and development, academic support, definition, reasons, classification, and expression of the 'rat race.' Then, it focuses on the benefits and drawbacks of 'rat race' to connect shadow education.

The origin and Development of the 'Rat Race'

The concept of "involution" was first introduced by Alexander, an American anthropologist, to describe the cultural pattern of where a society becomes increasingly complex constantly becoming more complex internally upon reaching a particular final form. Geertz (1963) later applied this term in his book *Agricultural Involution* to describe the simple repetition and stagnation of agricultural production patterns (Liu & Qi, 2004).

This concept first appeared in China in Huang's (2000) book, where "involution" refers to workers investing more land to achieve less output, reflecting on China's national conditions of have more people and less land. The term 'rat race' was selected in China's "Bite Words" magazine in 2020 and became one of the top ten Internet buzzwords in 2020. It describes the internal friction that could be more meaningful due to fierce and excessive internal competition. It is also a metaphor for people's helpless status of abnormal internal competition (Huang & Luo, 2021). This term became famous in 2020 because of the picture of a Chinese college student riding a bicycle while using a computer (Huang & Luo, 2021).

Academic support for 'Rat Race'

Figure 1 shows the number of articles written about the 'rat race' on Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI). The figure shows that the number

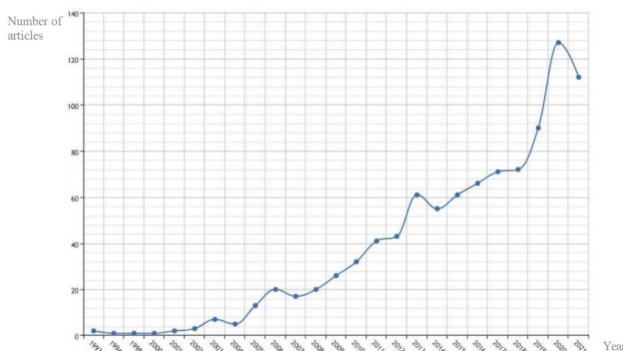


Figure 1 Statistical Chart of the Number of Articles in China from 1992 to 2021(Xu & Ma, 2021)

of articles on the 'rat race' in China has been increasing since 2000 and has exceeded 120 in 2020 (Xu & Ma, 2021).

Definition of 'Rat Race'

Liu and Qi (2004) noted that Gorz defined 'rat race' as the process of internal development refinement within a system under the constraint of external expansion. They provided a conceptual description of the social 'rat race' and described it as the competition in a particular industry. Paul (2008) describes the 'rat race' as a phenomenon where a social or cultural model stagnates, making it difficult to evolve into a more advanced model at certain development stages. It is viewed as a negative form of expression. Ni and Ye (2020) further elaborated that the 'rat race' denotes the internal refinement and over-intensive development of entities constrained by external conditions. It also mentioned that under China's involution development model, the culture hides self-replication behind the superficial progress of self-slack and self-consumption. Their papers mainly highlight the negative aspects of the 'rat race' hidden underneath social progress.

In their article, Ling and Li (2022) defined 'rat race' as a term used to describe excessive competition within a particular field or system, causing individuals to enter a state of mutual internal friction. They argue that the 'rat race' is a negative term and fails to generate any value during the process of involution.

Tian (2021) linked the term 'rat race' with higher education in his article, describing it as the excessive internal competition among highly educated students vying for employment opportunities. The term "excessive," used by Tian, underscores his negative perspective on the 'rat race.' Liu (2022) described the education industry's 'rat race' as an intensifying competition among parents and students for limited resources. She noted that the parents' material and spiritual investment in their children is increasing, but despite these efforts, the results show minimal improvement in such a competitive environment.

In many studies, it can be seen that most definitions of the 'rat race' are negative. Regardless of the field or the research subject, "involution" is described as the meaningless internal competition that fails to yield results proportional to the efforts invested.

The reasons for 'Rat Race'

Tian (2021) noted that China's education system became a 'rat race' due to the increase in the population with high academic qualifications. This resulted in

“qualification inflation,” where academic credentials became overly common, affecting the higher education landscape. In addition, the development of networks and information technology in recent years has also transformed the traditional patterns of education and employment. The entire society has evolved into a high-information flow environment due to online education, skill learning, etc., intensifying the ‘rat race’ within the education sector.

At the same time, Tang, Liu, and Fu (2022) analyzed the factors influencing education internalization among 497 parents of primary and secondary school students in Shandong Province, China. The data in Figure 2 shows that attitude anxiety directly contributes to both achievement anxiety and higher education anxiety. Additionally, achievement anxiety directly exacerbates higher education anxiety. They noted that excessive educational anxiety can trigger harmful competitive behaviors, which is not conducive to students’ growth. However, moderate or appropriate educational anxiety can be beneficial for enhancing academic performance and foster academic advancement.

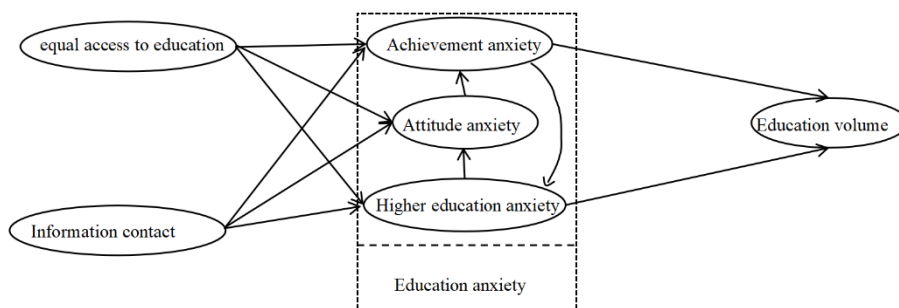


Figure 2 Structural Equation Model of Coil Behavior in Parent Education (Tang, Liu, & Fu, 2022)

The classification and expression of ‘Rat Race’

In the 2022 article of Qin and Dai, entitled “Involution,” “Buddhism,” and “Lying flat,” They introduced a new classification method of the rat race. The first type, “enjoyment type involution,” describes groups that consciously and actively engage in competition and derive happiness from it-competition as enjoyable. The second type, “utilitarianism,” focuses on the pursuit of interests with clear goals, aiming to maximize benefits through competition.

The positives of ‘Rat Race’

The author identified several ‘rat race’ enthusiasts through previous research and summary. Firstly, the ‘rat

race’ fosters competition, often irrespective of individual choice. Once initiated, competition can drive development, manifesting progress for both the group and society. Secondly, the ‘rat race’ introduces pressure, which can in turn drive personal growth. In shadow education, ‘rat race’ can stimulate students’ competitive spirit, boost their enthusiasm and initiative in learning and ultimately improve academic performance.

The negatives of ‘Rat Race’

Nevertheless, the negativity of the ‘rat race’ becomes excessive and this excessive competition can detrimentally affect physical and mental health. Prolonged exposure to competitive work, life, and study environments can place immense pressure on individuals, leading to negative emotions such as anxiety, depression, and irritability. In the context of shadow education, prolonged periods of intense competition can weaken students’ resolve, reduce their motivation to learn, and adversely impact their academic performance, resulting in a decline in grades.

Lying Flat

This section explores the origin and development, academic support, definition, reasons, classification, and expression of ‘lying flat.’ It then delves into both the positive and negative aspects of ‘lying flat’ to connect with the context of shadow education.

The origin and development of ‘Lying Flat’

In May 2021, a Chinese man published an article titled “Lie flat is justice” on the Chinese Internet. He revealed that he had not worked for two years and instead spent his time playing, yet did not see anything wrong to do so. He argued that the societal pressure around him stemmed from comparisons with others and the

traditional expectations of elders. He finally concluded that lying flat is the path of the wise; the ultimate measure of all things. Since its publication, the term ‘lying flat’ rapidly gained traction across various media platforms becoming a popular word for a time. The statement ‘lying flat is justice’ draws from Protagoras’ ancient Greek philosophy that ‘man is the measure of all things.’ Fu (2022) described ‘lying flat’ as a strategy that helps individuals navigate difficult situations, alleviate anxiety within a sarcastic internet culture, and foster a relaxed environment amidst high-pressure life and work conditions.

That was not the first time that the phenomenon of ‘lying flat’ has appeared globally. In May 2021, Caixin.Com published an article titled Trending in China: Young Chinese Reject Rat Race, Embrace ‘Lying Flat.’ In this article, the author explains the meaning of the two phenomena ‘rat race’ and ‘lying flat,’ and comparing them. The ‘lying flat’ phenomenon initially emerged in Europe and the United States, subsequently spreading to Japan, and was tied to the economic conditions of a certain period (Lu, 2022).

The ‘lying flat’ is similar to the concept of ‘couch potato’ or ‘couch spud’ in Western countries and is parallel to the NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training,) in the United Kingdom (Carcillo & Königs, 2015). The Boomerang Kids (Sandberg-Thoma, Snyder, & Jang, 2015) in the United States and the low-desire groups in Japan (Qiu, 2019) are all examples of ‘lying flat,’ denoting “idle, low-desire people” (Guo, 2021). In June 2021, some Western media outlets, such as Metro News, reported on this phenomenon in China using the Chinese pinyin “Tang Ping” to describe it.

Definition of ‘Lying Flat’

‘Lying flat’ literally means the physical state of lying down. However, online, it refers to a lifestyle where modern individuals, overwhelmed by immense societal pressure, stop striving, intentionally lower their desires, and alleviate their anxiety (Chen & Cao, 2021). Huang and Luo (2021) also described ‘lying flat’ in the article as evolving from simply ‘lying flat’ or lying down to a broader meaning: choosing to yield and not to act under pressure. This concept, initially a form of mutual ridicule in online communication, has become a lifestyle and even survival a philosophy for some people. Sun (2022) described ‘lying flat’ as reflection of group psychology, an examination of self-worth, and a temporary psychological and strategic adjustment in response to digital capital pressures. He emphasized that this state is

temporary, serving as a strategy for people to cope with substantial pressure. Zhang (2022) views ‘lying flat’ as a negative approach to problem-solving, contradicting traditional Chinese virtues, deeming it undesirable and a form of degeneration.

In Fu’s article (2022), the two definitions of ‘lying flat’ are elaborated. On the one hand, it can be seen as a positive way as an initiative and obedient strategy, and employing a subtle approach to achieve a relatively relaxed social life. Here, it is viewed as a positive life attitude and strategy. On the other hand, she describes the negative definition of ‘lying flat’ where it represents people’s passive resistance to difficulties and expressing their dissatisfaction and anger in a non-cooperative way.

Liu (2022) described ‘lying flat’ in the education industry, noting that it is neither fully ‘lying flat’ nor completely “inside.” She observed that students, overwhelmed by intense academic competition, feel powerless to compete, choose to avoid heavy workloads, and show indifference to scores. This results in a decline in their learning initiative, enthusiasm, and overall engagement, leading to a state of fatigue.

Overall, the concept of ‘lying flat’ can be understood in two ways: positive and negative. A positive ‘lying flat’ represents a wise attitude-recognizing the gap between one’s abilities and reality, and finding the most suitable way to survive accordingly. The negative ‘lying flat,’ on the other hand, often manifests as avoidance and refusal to confront real difficulties.

Academic support for ‘Lying Flat’

In an article by Li (2022) on the research status and future development of the ‘lying flat’ phenomenon, the research report on ‘lying flat’ and its related terms from 2011 to 2022 is statistically organized. Figure 3 presents these findings.

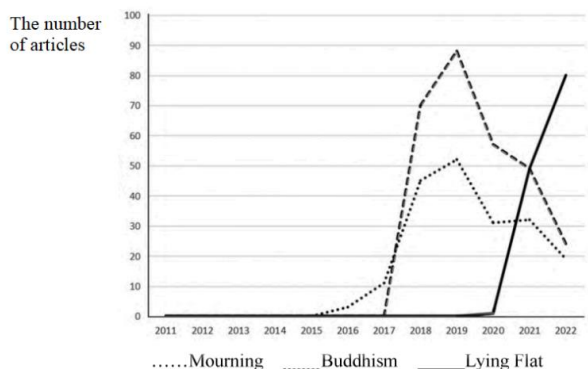


Figure 3 Statistics on the Number of Research Literature on the “Mourning Culture,” “Buddhism,” and ‘Lying Flat’ Phenomenon in 2011-2022

The above figure shows that the research on ‘lying flat’ has increased from 0 to 80 from 2011 to 2022 and has shown a sustained growth pattern in the two years from 2020 to 2022. This indicates that in recent years, the academic community has begun to focus on social hot words, famous words, and catchwords, which is also one of the effects of the current rapid development trend of science and technology.

At the same time, Li (2022) also analyzed the subject area of the ‘lying flat’ phenomenon research in the article, as shown in the figure below.

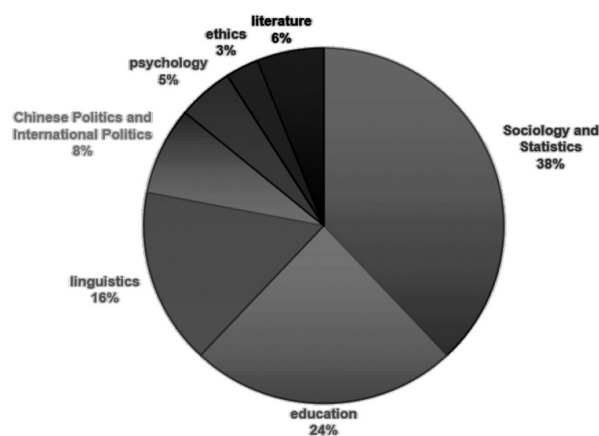


Figure 4 Subject Distribution of the Research Literature on the ‘Lying Flat’ Phenomenon

According to the data, the research literature on the ‘lying flat’ phenomenon in China spans many disciplines, including sociology and statistics, pedagogy, linguistics, Chinese and international politics, psychology, ethics, and literature. This shows that ‘lying flat’ is a multidisciplinary field of study and its research content closely follows social trends.

Reasons for ‘Lying Flat’

Guo (2021) believe that individual economic behavior is interconnected with various economic and institutional structures within a specific social and economic context. Therefore, the reasons why people choose to ‘lie flat’ are equally complex.

In Lin and Gao's (2021) article “*Youth Lying Flat: An Explanation of a Structural Dilemma*,” the following four reasons behind the current phenomenon of youth ‘lying flat’ are described.

Based on the current stage, youth development is limited. He argues that young people choose ‘lying flat’ because the uneven distribution of social resources

constrains their ability to create value despite their passion and ideas. Consequently, they gradually lose their enthusiasm and opt for ‘lying flat.’

High stress life, serious anxiety. Today, with the rapid development of society, especially technological advancements, material and spiritual life is becoming more prosperous. However, as the quality of life for young people is increasing, so do the costs, leading to increased life pressure and escalating anxiety.

They are feeling powerless after enduring the ‘rat race.’ Currently, young people often ignite their passion for struggle, but prolonged “internal involvement” yields insufficient returns. Over time, their enthusiasm wanes, and a growing sense of powerlessness takes hold.

It is difficult to integrate due to uneven distribution of resources. For social, political, economic, and other reasons, Chinese youth often migrate to first-tier cities for work. However, because of the uneven distribution of resources, it is challenging for migrant workers to integrate into urban life, especially in terms of life, facing restrictions in many aspects.

Li, Zhao, Long, Dong, & Sun (2022) conducted a questionnaire survey on 435 randomly selected young people to investigate the correlation between “escape lying down” and “awakening lying down.” The results indicated that individuals with low self-esteem and low achievement motivation were more likely to choose “escape lying down,” experiencing lower happiness. Conversely, while the overall achievement motivation of “lying flat with awakening” was not high, they were more likely to feel happy.

Li (2022) described the causes of the ‘lying flat’ phenomenon as follows: firstly, economic reasons and economic social changes are the primary reasons behind the youth ‘lying flat.’ Secondly, cultural influences such as “involution,” lead to ‘lying flat,’ contributing to negative cultural burnout under post-material attention, and global cultural impact. Thirdly, the rapid flow of information within an inclusive society driven by the internet accelerates this phenomenon. Lastly, the utilitarian approach in school education drives young students to adopt the ‘lying flat’ of mindset.

This reason is also the focus of the author’s research in this article. The “utilitarianism” in educational goals has led parents to push for shadow education, driving students into the ‘rat race.’ This raises the question: *Is this ‘rat race’ a necessary trend in development or is it merely a precursor to the phenomenon of ‘lying flat’?*

Classification and expression of 'Lying Flat'

The article of Chen and Cao (2021) discusses two types of 'lying flat.' One is the "helpless lying flat", which refers to people who, unable to achieve their goals and ideals, face immense societal pressure and various internal and external challenges, and ultimately deciding to stop fighting. The other type is "regressive lying flat." This refers to individuals who, initially having high expectations and living in a state of high tension and anxiety, recognize that anxiety causes various problems. Consequently, they lower their goals, abandon high desires, and ground themselves in reality. Regardless of the type, Chen and Cao's see "lying flat" as having both positive and negative implications. They view it as a social mentality and value orientation. On the negative side, it reflects people's frustration with the uneven distribution of social resources and the complexities of society, leading to life burnout. On the positive side, it represents a rejection of the impatience and a return to a more balanced, normal life.

Qin and Dai (2022) categorized 'lying flat' into three types: "evasive lying flat," "helpless lying flat," and "self-deprecating lying flat," each representing different ways of withdrawing from societal pressures.

Xu (2021) classified 'lying flat' into three perspectives of action. The "false lying flat doctrine" describes those who have succeeded in competition, enjoy life and view others with a 'lying flat' attitude. The "positive lying flat doctrine" represents individuals who consciously transform life's helplessness into a deliberate choice. Lastly, the "negative lying flat doctrine" involves reducing one's desires and making little to no effort.

Wang and Wang (2021) categorized 'lying flat' based on cultural goals into three types: "ritual lying flat," which abandons cultural value goals; "resistance lying flat," which acknowledges cultural value goals; and "swing lying flat."

Jin (2021) classified 'lying flat' from the perspective of the subject into various types: "true lying flat," "corrected lying flat," "lying flat," "lazy lying flat," and "hidden lying flat."

Pei (2022) divided 'lying flat' into "cynical lying flat" focusing on realistic life pursuits, "practical lying flat" aiming for present pleasure; and "intermittent lying flat" reflecting passive resistance.

Based on the above literature the phenomenon of 'lying flat' exists in various forms and can be categorized into three types:

The first type is active "selective lying flat." This form is grounded in clear self-awareness. Individuals recognize a significant gap between their abilities and goals that cannot be bridged by effort alone. Consequently, they choose to give up their efforts and instead focus on enjoying their current life. This is a clear manifestation of self-awareness and should be viewed as a positive aspect.

The second type is the negative "avoidance style lying flat." This occurs when individuals, unable to achieve their high goals and desires and lacking external support, give up out of helplessness and avoid reality. It reflects self-loathing and is often accompanied by inner pain and resentment.

The third type is the neutral "false lying flat." While individuals may understand that their abilities might not achieve their goals or wishes and claim they want to lie flat and stop striving, they typically continue trying and engage in 'rat race' despite facing repeated setbacks.

The positives of 'Lying Flat'

The positive significance of 'lying flat' lies in the enjoyment of doing so. In the case of inevitable competition, people choose to adjust their mentality and face the competition with a positive attitude. In this case, 'lying flat' has become a strategy to relieve the pressure of competition. According to Liu (2017), 'lying flat' can alleviate people's stress to a certain extent. When done appropriately, lying flat can enhance students' attention and spirit, thereby positively influencing their academic performance.

The negatives of 'Lying Flat'

The negative meaning of 'lying flat' is reflected in the complete abandonment and evasion of the competition. When people face competition, they cannot bear the intense pressure, thereby affecting their mental health, and choosing the treatment method of escape and give up the competition actively. This kind of 'lying flat' is harmful.

'Lying Flat' and 'Rat Race' in Shadow Education

China's education system, particularly the college entrance examination system, significantly impacts parents and students. As a result, many students increasingly dedicate their time to after-school remedial classes, driven by the fear of falling behind. At the same time, parents have heavily invested in supporting their children's participation in learning competitions. Despite students engaging in repetitive, mechanical learning to achieve better results, the monotony of the "inside roll"

does not mask the underlying anxiety and fear. As a result, complex learning has become a self-comforting strategy for students.

According to Xu's (2021) summary, the "involution" of education manifests in the student's pursuit of results, highlighting the current Chinese education system's focus on achievements. Biesta (2010) used a Venn diagram with three overlapping areas to describe the purpose of education, which should combine qualification, socialization, and subjectification.

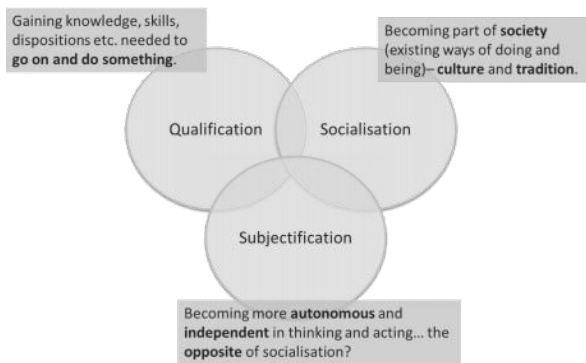


Figure 5 Biesta's Educational Purpose Venn Diagram (Biesta, 2010)

Liu (2021) argues that choosing between the two options is not necessary as individuals have multiple choices. It is crucial to find a balance that suits the situation, with the balance point adjusted based on the time, location, and personal needs.

How do 'Lying Flat' and 'Rat Race' occur in Shadow Education?

Under the shadow education system, students and parents feel the increasing academic pressure. To achieve outstanding results and stand out in fierce competition, students must race against their peers. In this context, the 'rat race' has become a learning competition aimed at gaining advantages and good results, while 'lying flat' rejects the culture of high-pressure competition.

The 'Rat Race' as a reason for Shadow Education

The 'rat race' is indeed a driving force behind shadow education—students feel the need to outshine their peers, leading them to seek extra help outside mainstream schooling. Liu (2022) highlights that in both mainstream education and shadow education, the 'rat race' drives the students to seek extra education to stay competitive. Within China's high-pressure academic environment, especially with college entrance

examinations, students feel compelled to engage in a relentless pursuit to improve their grades and take advantage of the competition by engaging in the 'rat race' through a large number of shadow education to supplement their shortcomings in mainstream education, leading to the phenomenon of 'lying flat.' However, it is worth noting that students' participation in the 'rat race' of shadow education often does not improve their grades but it will only lead to increased exhaustion. Ultimately, she believes that both 'lying flat' and 'rat race' are the products of China's exam-oriented education and represent the only way for students to cope with the immense pressure of achieving academic excellence.

Short-term 'Rat Race' type split

Once parents provide material support and students enter the 'rat race' of shadow education, the competition evolves based on individual factors like personal aptitude, resilience, and rate of improvement. This leads to various forms of 'rat races,' each tailored to students' unique abilities and pressures. Students with strong resilience and a fast learning pace can actually benefit from the 'rat race' of shadow education. This enables them to quickly acquire competitive skills and gain significant advantages in the academic competition and their confidence will continue to grow and develop. Under this development trend, on the one hand, students will increasingly focus on the benefits of this kind of 'rat race,' particularly the immediate changes in their performance, and would gradually incline to utilitarian type of 'rat race.'

Students find enjoyment in these 'rat races,' actively participating and deriving happiness from the process. The former group focuses on pursuing interests and achieving goals, while the latter seeks the pleasure and satisfaction of the experience. Regardless of the type of 'rat race,' both bring short-term positive effects.

Long-term 'Rat Race' type split

Over time, the 'rat race' can devolve into 'lying flat.' Despite initial positive effects, negative factors—like pressure, dissatisfaction, and stagnant performance—accumulate during continuous shadow education. These factors will gradually overshadow the benefits, leading to a transformation in its nature. Under prolonged effort, students in a "utilitarian rat race" type initially see their performance stabilize but eventually hit a bottleneck, unable to advance or retreat. Students begin to experience profound self-doubt regarding their parents, schools, and their own learning abilities. They would even no longer believe that this "introversion" will bring more benefits,

leading to thoughts and emotions of giving up, boredom, escape, and helplessness. Consequently, the ‘rat race’ is thus transformed into “negative lying flat,” characterized by a sense of helplessness and a desire to escape. In the context of shadow education, students in the “enjoyment rat race” prioritize the happiness derived from the competition itself. As a result, they are less affected by the negative emotions in the process of long-term performance changes. As the ‘rat race’ evolves, it can shift to “positive rat race” with students adopting a more enjoyable approach to competition, or into ‘lying flat’ but with a sense of contentment. Those caught in between the states often find themselves oscillating, resulting in “swing lying flat” or “intermittent lying flat,” reflecting their ongoing struggle to balance the pressures and enjoyment of academic life.

The positive and negative significance of ‘Lying Flat’ and ‘Rat Race’ in Shadow Education

In classifying ‘rat race’ and ‘lying flat,’ many researchers cited their positive and negative significance. The author believes that shadow education is vital to China’s education reform and development. Since China began the college entrance examination system, schools have assumed the critical position of mainstream education, and the country has invested many resources to ensure fairness and that the education level and quality of the population would improve (Tian, 2021). However, with the rapid development of the national economy, the increasingly frequent international exchanges, and the rapid development of information technology, mainstream education has gradually failed to meet the needs of all students, and school education has become unbalanced; students cannot understand, test scores and other phenomena are increasing, and the pressure is also increasing among schools, teachers, parents, and students. Due to this development trend and situation, shadow education emerged to meet the demands of the times. As an assistant to mainstream education, it helps students keep up with mainstream education, improve their competitiveness, and it also aids in ensuring the students would pass the examination system smoothly, and even getting high marks.

The positive and negative significance of Shadow Education

Shadow education has its pros and cons. On the positive side, it provides the right amount of pressure to foster healthy competition and encourage students to put in their best effort. However, the downside is the excessive ‘rat race’ it can create. Students end up juggling

multiple subjects daily, attending extra classes on weekends and holidays without any rest. This relentless cycle becomes a hostile ‘rat race’, which is detrimental to their physical and mental well-being (Tian, 2021).

The positive and negative significance of ‘Lying Flat’

‘Lying flat’ in the context of shadow education can have positive and negative connotations. On the positive side, it represents a proactive attitude, where students adjust to the pressures of shadow education and mainstream curriculum with a more relaxed approach, striving to ease the stress. However, on the negative side, ‘lying flat’ can also imply escaping and giving up altogether. Some students may choose to abandon their studies and face reality without attempting to cope, which reflects an irresponsible and total escape from their responsibilities.

Suggestions

In the study of shadow education and the concepts of ‘lying flat’ and the ‘rat race,’ it is clear that all social groups play a role. Drawing from previous articles and descriptions, the author offers several suggestions aimed at schools and teachers, parents, and students. These recommendations seek to help schools and teachers align educational goals, support parents in addressing their children’s performance, and assist students in navigating the ‘rat race.’

For schools and teachers

The ‘rat race’ in shadow education is a phenomenon that reflects the current social development where competition drives personal growth and societal progress. While competition can indeed foster these benefits within shadow education, it’s crucial to maintain a balance. Proper competition should encourage improvement without leading to excessive pressure or burnout. Striking this balance is key to ensuring the positive aspects of shadow education without succumbing to its potential downsides.

According to the Venn diagram of Biesta, qualification, socialization, and subjectivity should be taken as the dimensions of educational purpose. Qualification involves equipping students with the necessary knowledge and skills; socialization involves integrating students into society through education; subjectivity concerns fostering individual agency and personal growth. Biesta argues that these three dimensions are inseparable, and that education should not only impart knowledge and skills but also help

students to adapt to societal changes while emphasizing on their personal growth (Fu, 2022).

The author suggests that schools and teachers should focus more on helping students to master and apply the knowledge, prepare them to adapt to societal development. Additionally, they should emphasize students' holistic growth, encompassing physical and mental health, moral, intellectual development, as well as physical, aesthetic, and labor skills.

For parents

Most Chinese parents, drawing from their own experiences, understand the hard work required in society. They know that earning a living is not easy. Thus, when it comes to their children's education, they often aspire for their children to distinguish themselves and use the knowledge to change their fate, they hope their children can secure a more relaxed and comfortable future. Consequently, they adopt various methods to motivate their children in their educational journey. Parents use a variety of incentive methods—strict, gentle, guiding, etc.—to encourage their children's learning, improve their academic performance, excel in the college entrance examination, and achieve upward mobility. However, many parents adopt extreme approaches, often ignoring their own and their family's needs and emotions. They must invest significant amounts of money in shadow education, which strains the family's economic situation and quality of life, inadvertently placing immense pressure on their children.

The author believes that most Chinese parents show a similar level of dedication. Once they have children, they devote most of their time and energy to them, focusing intently on their growth and academic success. However, this often comes at a cost of neglecting the child's mental health. This oversight can create communication barriers between parents and children and contribute to academic pressure-induced depression in children.

The author suggests that parents prioritize their quality of life and avoid excessive interference with their children's growth, particularly in their education. Instead, they should guide their children's development and focus more on fostering a positive parent-child relationship. A supportive parent-child relationship and a warm family environment serve as a strong foundation and a safe haven for children.

For students

The researcher recommends that students tackle academic pressure in two ways. Firstly, they should

adjust their mindset based on their learning and living conditions or seek support from schools, teachers, parents, and friends. Taking time to reflect and relax can be an active and positive coping strategy in shadow education, known as 'active lying flat'.

Given the inevitability of competition, China's current education model is unlikely to change. Therefore, students should engage actively in competitions, maintain a positive attitude, and adjust their mentality as needed. This proactive participation in the 'rat race' can be beneficial. Researchers suggest a balance in shadow education can be achieved when 'rat race' and 'lying flat' coexist, and students consistently adapt with a positive outlook.

Conclusion

This article delves into the emergence, evolution, and definitions of the 'rat race' and 'lying flat' phenomena in society. It examines the literature, types, and forms of these concepts, particularly focusing on how they develop and change within the context of shadow education in China.

Shadow education acts as both a complement and supplement to mainstream education, aligning with its goals. However, it provides tailored guidance to meet individual student needs, helping them improve their performance and increase their competitiveness, ultimately aiming for smooth success in exams. The "inner volume" of shadow education is a process, where the initial goal of catching up with peers soon becomes insufficient for parents and students. This leads to setting new and higher goals to outdo peers, perpetuating a cycle of escalating pressure and competition. Consequently, the "inner volume" becomes excessive, and as a result, more students participate in extracurricular tutoring courses, and parents increasingly invest in shadow education. The 'lying flat' of shadow education arises from the 'rat race' behavior. Faced with intense pressure, students either completely give up and refuse to work hard, or adjust their learning rhythm using the 'lying flat' strategy (Kim & Jung, 2019).

In a rapidly developing society, the author argues that the 'rat race' is necessary and competition is reasonable as they can drive individual and social progress to a certain extent. However, the choice and degree of competition should be carefully managed to avoid excess. Excessive competition can be detrimental, like a spring that cannot bounce back after being overstretched. Maintaining a positive attitude, participating

in the competition, and rejecting excessive pressure can make the ‘rat race’ manageable. Additionally, ‘lying flat’ is sensible. Taking the time and allowing for rest and adjustment under the pressure of competition helps balance life and work.

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