

'The last generation': The disillusionment of young Chinese

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A resident takes part in a round of Covid-19 testing during a lockdown in Shanghai, China, on Thursday, April 21, 2022. Photographer: Qilai Shen/Bloomberg

Li Yuan (*The New New World*)

Four years ago, many young Chinese liked to use the hashtag #Amazing China.

Two years ago, they said China was the “A” student in pandemic control and urged the rest of the world, especially the United States, to “copy China’s homework.”

Now many believe they are the most unlucky generation since the 1980s as Beijing’s persistent pursuit of the “zero-Covid” policy is wreaking havoc. Jobs are hard to find. Frequent COVID-19 testing dictates their lives. The government is imposing more and more

restrictions on their individual liberty while pushing them to get married and have more children.

"I can't stand the thought that I will have to die in this place," said Cheng Xinyu, 19, a writer in the south-western Chinese city of Chengdu, who is thinking of migrating to a foreign country before the government's iron fist falls on her.

She cannot imagine having children in China either.

"I like children but I don't dare to have them here because I won't be able to protect them," she said, citing concerns like pandemic control workers breaking into apartments to spray disinfectant, killing pets and requiring residents to leave the keys in their apartment door locks.

Cheng is part of a new trend known as the "run philosophy," or "runxue," that preaches running away from China to seek a safer and brighter future. She and millions of others also reposted a video in which a young man pushed back against police officers who warned that his family would be punished for three generations if he refused to go to a quarantine camp. "This will be our last generation," he told the police.

His response became an online meme that was later censored. Many young people identified with the sentiment, saying they would be reluctant to have children under the increasingly authoritarian government.

"Not bringing children to this country, to this land, will be the most charitable deed I could manage," wrote a Weibo user under the hashtag #thelastgeneration before it was censored. "As ordinary people who're not entitled to individual dignity, our reproductive organs will be our last resort," wrote another Weibo user.

The "run philosophy" and the "last generation" are the rallying cries for many Chinese in their 20s and 30s who despair about their country and their future. They are entering the labor force, getting married and deciding whether to have children in one of the country's bleakest moments in decades. Censored and politically suppressed, some are considering voting with their feet while others want to protest by not having children.

This is quite a departure for members of a generation previously known for its nationalistic penchant.

They grew up as China rose to become the world's second biggest economy. They trolled critics of Beijing's human rights records and boycotted many Western brands for perceived slights of their motherland.

Sometimes they complained about their gruelling work schedules and lack of upward social mobility. But if they were less sure of their personal future, they were confident that China would be great again — as their top leader promised.

This spring it has become increasingly clear that the government cannot live up to its promises and the state has different expectations for their lives.

A new survey of more than 20,000 people, mostly females ages 18-31, found that two thirds of them do not want to have children. The government has a different agenda, pushing people to have three children to rejuvenate one of the fastest aging populations in the world.

Doris Wang, a young professional in Shanghai, said she had never planned to have children in China. Living through the harsh lockdown in the past two months reaffirmed her decision. Children should be playing in nature and with one another, she said, but they are locked up in apartments, going through rounds of COVID-19 testing, getting yelled at by pandemic control workers and listening to stern announcements from loudspeakers on the street.

“Even adults feel very depressed, desperate and unhealthy, not to mention children,” she said. “They’ll definitely have psychological issues to deal with when they grow up.” She said she plans to migrate to a Western country so she can have a normal life and dignity.

Compounding the frustrations, headlines are full of bad news about jobs. There will be more than 10 million college graduates in China this year, a record. But many businesses are laying off workers or freezing head counts as they try to survive the lockdowns and regulatory crackdowns.

Zhaopin.com, a recruiting site, found that its job prospect index in the first quarter of this year was about half what it was a year earlier and even lower than when the coronavirus first struck in 2020. Graduates who have signed offers will be paid 12 percent less per month on average than last year, the company reported.

A growing number of college graduates are trying to get into graduate schools or pass the increasingly competitive public servant examinations to land a secure government job.

Two-thirds of 131 new recruits of civil servants in Beijing’s Chaoyang district in April had masters or doctoral degrees, according to a government document, reflecting an increasing trend. They graduated from top universities in China and around the world, including Peking University, University of Hong Kong, University of Sydney and Imperial College London. Many of them will be doing the

most basic government jobs, ones that high school graduates used to fill.

A doctoral graduate of particle physics from Peking University will become an urban management officer, or chengguan, according to the report. Chengguan are the most reviled officials, known for brutalizing beggars, chasing down street vendors and assisting in tearing down people's homes. The contrast is too rich.

One bright spot in the job market is in COVID-19 testing. As Beijing sticks to the "zero-Covid" policy, local governments need a lot of people to staff their numerous testing stations. Henan province in central China said in January that it would train 50,000 people this year in COVID-19 testing, disinfecting and public sanitation management. But even a government-run news site asked what kind of career prospects these jobs offered after the pandemic.

For the young Chinese, the increasingly stringent social controls are equally depressing.

Some students in Changchun in north-eastern Jilin province complained on social media that they could not shower for more than 40 days when the city was locked down and had no access to public bathhouses.

Tongji University in Shanghai, known for its engineering and architecture programs, issued detailed instructions on how to use a mobile phone-based queuing system for the toilets and washrooms, according to a document on the system reviewed by The New York Times.

Students would need to press "start" when they left the dorm for the toilet, and press "stop" when they returned to avoid having two people in the hallway at the same time, the instructions said. Each toilet run would be allowed a maximum 10 minutes. After eight minutes, the others in the queue could digitally poke the student in the toilet. After 10 minutes, the student would need to explain to the queuing group why it took so long.

Some of the social control mechanisms were never lifted.

In 2020, the prestigious Fudan University in Shanghai developed a tracking system that requires its students to register their health conditions and real-time locations every day. It is similar to systems that some countries, including South Korea, developed to monitor travellers for short-term home and hotel quarantines. Fudan students have had to register in the system daily, doing so even during the year and half when there were very few infections in China. If they fail to do so, they are not allowed onto the campus, according to a step-by-step registering process reviewed by the Times.

Universities have very little tolerance for any act of disobedience.

Sun Jian, a graduate student at Ludong University in eastern Shandong province, was expelled in late March after he walked around the campus holding a sign saying, “Unlock Ludong.” He was also admonished by police for disturbing the public order.

A college student in Shanghai told me her adviser was able to track her down for a critical Weibo comment she made about the lockdowns — even though she had used a pseudonym. She was told to delete the post.

It is impossible to measure how many young Chinese have become disillusioned by the government’s iron fist in the latest lockdowns, which have affected hundreds of millions of people. Beijing has complete control over propaganda outlets, the internet, textbooks, schools and nearly every aspect that could touch the brain waves of the Chinese public.

But the growing online disenchantment is unmistakable. And people will always find ways to escape suppression. In “1984,” Winston wrote a diary. In “The Unbearable Lightness of Being,” Tomáš and Tereza moved to the countryside.

“When you find that as an individual you have zero ability to fight back the state apparatus, your only way out is to run,” said Wang, the young professional in Shanghai.

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How Are We Still Debating Interracial Marriage in 2022?

Sen. Mike Braun of Indiana while fielding questions from local media on Tuesday said the existence of certain rights, and the particular shape they take, was best left to the states. He used abortion and marijuana legalization as examples. It was then that a

reporter asked if this applied to interracial marriage.

New York Times



Representative image.

"You would be OK with the Supreme Court leaving the question of interracial marriage to the states?"

"Yes," said Sen. Mike Braun of Indiana while fielding questions from local media on Tuesday. "If you're not wanting the Supreme Court to weigh in on issues like that, you're not going to be able to have your cake and eat it too," he said. "That's hypocritical."

Braun walked this back, of course, undoubtedly aware of the damage it could do if he let it stand. "Earlier during a virtual press conference I misunderstood a line of questioning that ended up being about interracial marriage," he said in a statement to NBC News. "Let me be clear on that issue — there is no question the Constitution prohibits discrimination of any kind based on race, that is not something that is even up for debate, and I condemn racism in any form, at all levels and by any states, entities, or individuals."

As damage control goes, this was unpersuasive. It's not just that the questions he originally answered were clear, it's that Braun's answer was consistent with what he had said throughout the news conference. His argument to reporters was that the existence of certain rights, and the particular shape they take, was best left to the states. He used abortion and marijuana legalization as examples. It was then that a reporter asked if this applied to interracial marriage.

"Would that same basis" apply "to something like Loving v. Virginia, the Supreme Court case that legalized interracial marriage?"

To which Braun said, "When it comes to issues, you can't have it both ways." When another reporter asked him to clarify using a version of the same question, he did. Braun was confronted with the

implications of his own beliefs. It is to his credit that he did not flinch from them.

Braun wasn't the only Republican to speak candidly this week. In a video statement criticizing Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson, President Joe Biden's nominee to the Supreme Court, Sen. Marsha Blackburn of Tennessee condemned the court's "constitutionally unsound" ruling in *Griswald v. Connecticut*, the landmark 1965 case that established a constitutional right to privacy, striking down a Connecticut law that restricted married couples' access to birth control. And Sen. John Cornyn of Texas used his time during the Jackson hearings to question the merits of the Supreme Court's ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, which legalized same-sex marriage in 2015.

Although it's tempting to think otherwise, these are more than sound bites intended for Fox News or One America News Network or Twitter. They represent a worldview, not simply of conservative social values, but of the proper organization of America's political and constitutional order.

The great legal and political advance of the 1950s, '60s and '70s was the creation of a universal baseline for civil and political rights. A floor, of sorts, akin to the one imagined by the authors of the 14th Amendment to the Constitution when they wrote that, "No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States."

Before the emergence of the postwar civil rights movement and its legal and political arm, the scope of your rights varied from state to state. This was most acute for Black Americans, who became second-class citizens upon entering the states of the former Confederacy, but it was true across a range of issues for a large number of Americans. The extent of your voting rights, of your privacy rights, of whether you could marry or obtain an abortion, of whether you were counted equally for the purposes of representation, varied depending on where you lived in the country.

To the degree that this was "freedom," it was the freedom to dominate, exercised by people at or near the top of our various overlapping hierarchies. And in fact, the ability to circumscribe rights for particular groups of Americans was itself constitutive of that hierarchical power. The decentralization of rights gave local bullies the space to thrive.

The rights revolution weakened and unraveled this state of affairs. The effect of the Voting Rights Act, for example, was twofold. It democratized political power in the South and it undermined the hierarchical social relations of Jim Crow. The introduction of something like political equality — established and secured by the

federal government — helped lay a foundation for greater social equality and a more egalitarian society.

With that in mind, one way to understand the agenda of much of the modern Republican Party — from its crusade against Roe v. Wade and its attacks on the Voting Rights Act, to the frantic efforts of some Republican-controlled states to stigmatize sexual minorities — is that it is an attempt to make rights contingent again.

If successful, Republicans would effectively handcuff the federal government's ability, either through legislation or through the courts, to establish and maintain that universal baseline for civil and political rights. And it would mean a return to the world as it was when the standard-bearers for hierarchy — whether of race or of gender or of class — had much freer rein to dominate as they saw fit.

As it stands, as Ron Brownstein wrote in *The Atlantic* last year, there is already a “great divergence” between “the liberties of Americans in blue states and those in red states.” And as Republican-led states ban abortion, ban books, restrict the teaching of America's racial history in schools and trample on the rights of transgender people, this will only get worse.

Braun's mistake was not that he misunderstood the question; it's that he understood it all too well. The world he and his colleagues are working toward is one in which the national government defers the question of civil and political rights to the states. And it is in the states, free from federal oversight, where people like Braun can exercise real control over what you might do, how you might live and who you might love. It's freedom for some and obedience for the rest.

(Author: Jamelle Bouie)/(c.2021 The New York Times Company)
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The return of the dream honeymoon

One inevitable aspect of a dream honeymoon is careful photo documentation. After all, if you're putting forth such extra effort and money to actually make your honeymoon happen these days, you're going to want to get keepsake pictures of it.

New York Times



When Kalyn and Collin Pounders finally went on their honeymoon to Greece in July after delaying it for more than a year because of the pandemic, they were ready to splurge. The couple, who live in Atlanta and married in June 2020, extended their trip so that they were able to visit Mykonos and Santorini islands, got a nicer room at the hotel they had booked and even went on a private cruise.

At first, Kalyn Pounders, 25, wasn't planning on taking the advice of her friends, who told her that this was a once-in-a-lifetime trip and that she shouldn't hold back on luxuries. But that's exactly how she and Collin Pounders, 27, ended up approaching the vacation after the months of waiting and pandemic hardship. "We're really glad we took that advice," said Kalyn Pounders, who works as a clinical pharmacist. Her husband is an investment analyst. "We've waited for this, we worked really hard in between," she said, "and when the time finally came, we were like 'Why not? We deserve it.'"

Verlinda Vu and Rainier Dalusag of Seattle, who originally had their wedding planned for May 2020, ended up having a ceremony without a reception this February. And because Europe's borders remained closed to travelers from the United States at the time, they decided to have a minimoon in Mexico and Puerto Rico following the ceremony, instead of their planned honeymoon to Spain and Portugal. "It was tough because everything was just changing," said Dalusag, 31, a health informatics analyst. "We had a big plan, but then there was a lockdown, and it was just a huge domino effect. We didn't know what was going to happen and we just tried to make the best out of the situation." But that doesn't mean they have abandoned their dream. "Hopefully sometime in the future, maybe for our one- or two-year anniversary, we can do our original plan," said Vu, 30, a registered nurse.

Other couples have been determined to have their perfect getaways, even if that has meant dealing with all manner of restrictions and travel hiccups.

Before their engagement, Hannah and Teddy Gates of Chicago had both agreed that it would be a goal to attend all four Grand Slam tennis tournaments in their lifetime. They were married in June, and

as part of their honeymoon, they went to Wimbledon and even paid to get privately provided COVID tests to shorten their quarantine time. “Not only did our wedding symbolize our next chapter as husband and wife, but Wimbledon was the first of four majors we hope to attend together,” said Hannah Gates, 29, a senior shopping specialist at Google.

After Wimbledon, she and Teddy Gates, 30, an industrial brokerage vice president at CBRE, went to Comporta, Portugal, and Marrakesh, Morocco. En route from the United Kingdom to Portugal, they had to miss their flight because they didn’t have digital proof of vaccination, like many European travelers did. They only had their physical vaccine cards, which Hannah Gates said an airline employee looked at like it was a “sad Post-it note.” Luckily, since they had both been vaccinated through a Walgreens, they realized they could show digital proof of vaccination through their app. (Worth noting for those who were not immunized at a place that makes it relatively easy to access your electronic records: You can now often access the information through your state’s department of health website, depending on where you live.) They were let on to the next flight after the unexpected hassle.

Traveling to three different countries meant constantly having to keep up with different sets of restrictions and rules, while getting lots of COVID tests, but it was well worth it, they said. “We wanted so badly to do this trip, and yes it took a little bit more work, but it was 110% worth it,” Hannah Gates said. “Dreams were truly made on this trip. I affectionately call it our adventure honeymoon, and we loved every piece of it.”

Another inevitable piece of the dream honeymoon: careful photo documentation. (After all, if you’re putting forth such extra effort and money to actually make your honeymoon happen these days, you’re going to want to get keepsake pictures of it.) And indeed, the company Flytographer, which focuses on finding local photographers for people on vacation, has started to see a recovery for honeymoon photoshoot bookings this year, with Hawaii (Maui, Honolulu, Kona and Kauai), Greece (Santorini) and Mexico (Cancún, Playa del Carmen, Cabo San Lucas and Tulum) as especially popular regions.

Nicole Faron and James Walmsley of Durham, North Carolina, were among those newlyweds eager to both upgrade and permanently capture their honeymoon. Faron, 31, a health care director at UNC Health, and Walmsley, 36, a software analyst at First Citizens Bank, eloped and went on a honeymoon at the end of June to the U.S. Virgin Islands. Initially, they were only planning on going to St. Thomas and St. John, but they added in a day trip to St. Croix when they saw that Flytographer had a photographer stationed there. “Having professional photos that we can share is really nice,” said Faron, adding that, for such a major life event, you want friends and

family to be a part of it in a way — “to be able to give them some of that experience.” Plus, she and her husband got to go on a seaplane on the way over to St. Croix.

(Author: Anna P. Kambhampaty)/(c.2021 The New York Times Company)
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