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Youth Disillusionment and Political Coping: A Comparative Study of China and South Korea*

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This article compares how youth disillusionment has unfolded in China and South Korea between 2010 and 2025 and explains why coping patterns diverge across these contrasting political contexts. Drawing on stress- coping theory, social movement framing, and political opportunity structures, we conceptualize youth responses as adaptive repertoires that range from passive withdrawal to collective contention. Using existing literature and survey data, we show that shared drivers—slowing growth, precarious employment, entrenched inequality, and intensifying performance pressures—have strained many young people's confidence in institutions and produced parallel vernaculars of malaise (e.g., *tǎngpíng* / "let it rot" and "Hell Joseon"). When opportunities for voice are perceived as limited, Chinese youth tend to adopt individualized, low-risk strategies such as quiet quitting, online irony, internal exits, punctuated only occasionally by brief episodes of public expression and met with a combination of narrative steering, selective accommodation, and efforts to preserve social order control. In South Korea's more pluralistic public arena, similar grievances more readily translate into digitally enabled mobilization, issue-specific protests, and partial institutional uptake, even as polarization (notably along gender lines) and persistent "exit" aspirations endure. The findings illuminate how structure conditions agency and suggest several potential policy priorities: credible pathways to quality jobs and housing, inclusive participation channels, and depolarizing frames that restore a generational stake in the future.

주제어 Youth disillusionment, Stress-coping theory, Framing processes, Political opportunity structures, China-South Korea comparative study

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I. Introduction

Young people around the world are expressing growing unease about the status quo. From Europe to Asia, many feel that the promises associated with modern education and work have not fully materialized, fueling widespread frustration and skepticism. In East Asia, this sentiment is vividly encapsulated in popular slogans: in China, some young people speak of "lying flat" as a way of stepping back from relentless competition, while in South Korea, the phrase "Hell Joseon" conveys disillusionment with intense pressures and perceived social unfairness. Although these expressions emerge from distinct national contexts, they point to a shared generational malaise—shrinking economic opportunities, deepening inequality, and declining confidence in conventional pathways to success. Many young people feel that, even when they work hard and follow the rules, upward mobility remains uncertain, prompting them to question whether existing systems can meet their expectations for security and fairness.

Against this backdrop, the present study compares how youth disillusionment has unfolded in two contrasting contexts: the People's Republic of China and South Korea, whose political institutions and policy processes differ markedly. Despite these differences, both countries have seen their younger generations contend with slower economic growth and intense social pressures. In each case, youths have developed novel coping mechanisms—from quiet withdrawal and dark humor to more public forms of expression—as they grapple with unmet expectations and perceived injustices.

This comparative analysis examines how the distinct structural conditions of China and South Korea have shaped these coping strategies between 2010 and 2025. Drawing on three theoretical perspectives —psychological stress-coping theory, social movement framing theory, and political opportunity

structure theory—we explore why Chinese and Korean youths respond to disillusionment in particular ways. We also analyze how state institutions in each country have reacted to the youth-related discontent—through regulatory measures, institutional incorporation, and reform initiatives—and what this reveals about the interplay between youth agency and political structures in addressing a generation's concerns.

II. Youth Crisis

Over the past decade and a half, a multifaceted youth crisis has taken shape in both China and South Korea—a convergence of economic hardship, social frustration, and political disengagement that has complicated young people's transition to adulthood. Key dimensions of this crisis include economic precarity, social inequality, and mounting strains on many young people's trust in institutions. Economically, many youths find themselves caught between exceptionally high personal investments in education and a shortage of commensurate opportunities. In China, annual GDP growth declined from double digits in the 2000s to single digits after 2010, contributing to an increasingly competitive environment for new job seekers (The Economist, 2023). Official urban youth unemployment surged above 20% in the early 2020s, reaching a record 21.3% in mid-2023. South Korea's advanced economy likewise entered a period of slower growth and evident labor-market saturation. By the late 2010s, youth unemployment hovered in the high single digits, with underemployment and precarious gig work widespread (Holttinen, 2020).

Intensifying these economic concerns is the heavy weight of social expectations. In Confucian-influenced cultures that prize educational and career achievement, young people often report feeling intense pressure to

excel—yet many perceive the returns on their efforts to be diminishing. In China, youth commonly invoke the term "involution" (nèijuǎn, 内卷) to describe relentless cycles of hyper-competitive striving—from exam preparation to overtime work—in which additional effort yields ever-smaller returns.

South Koreans similarly refer to a culture of "education fever" characterized by cram schools and résumé-building—a burden increasingly questioned as some doubt whether relentless effort still delivers proportional rewards. When even elite degrees and extraordinarily long work hours are seen as insufficient to guarantee upward mobility, frustration deepens. Surveys and public commentary reflect a growing sentiment that the conventional pathways to success emphasized by older generations are less reliable than before, accompanied by declining confidence in traditional meritocratic narratives (Kim, 2018). A widely discussed South Korean metaphor contrasts "gold spoons" (those born into privilege) with "dirt spoons" (those born without such advantages), underscoring a perception that inherited disparities are difficult to overcome and that hard work alone may not be enough to bridge them. These debates have prompted a broader rethinking of social mobility and values among younger generations.

A further dimension that warrants closer attention is the *divide between metropolitan and regional youth*, which has deepened as economic and cultural resources have become increasingly concentrated in Seoul and its surrounding metropolitan areas. The discursive dominance of elite universities in the capital region—reinforced by media visibility, digital influence, and concentrated policy attention—often obscures the lived experiences of young people in provincial cities and rural areas, who navigate more limited opportunities and slower local labor markets. Studies by Yang (2023) highlight how regional youths express distinct forms of frustration rooted in uneven development, out-migration pressures,

and feelings of being structurally overlooked within national debates. Incorporating this regional lens underscores that youth malaise in South Korea is not monolithic but stratified by geography, affecting expectations of mobility and shaping divergent coping repertoires across metropolitan and non-metropolitan contexts.

In China, debates about fairness and opportunity have likewise become prominent in youth discourse. Surveys and public commentary suggest that many young people perceive unequal access to desirable jobs and housing, with disparities often discussed in relation to regions and family backgrounds (Yang, Lei et al., 2025). In online spaces, metaphors such as being "harvested like leeks" circulate in jokes and memes to express anxiety about being taken advantage of or falling behind. These expressions reflect a sense of vulnerability among some segments of the youth under real-world pressures, rather than a universal condition shared by all.

In China also, youth discourse is disproportionately shaped by urban, educated, and middle-class voices who dominate social media ecosystems and public commentary. Yet a substantial share of China's younger generation consists of rural migrant laborers (青年农民工), whose working and living conditions diverge sharply from those of urban college graduates. Episodes such as the Foxconn chain suicides have revealed strains and collective expressions among young workers, often linked to demanding work conditions, limited social protections, and significant livelihood insecurity. More recently, the emergence of *Sanhe Dashen* (三和大神) youth in Shenzhen—characterized by day-to-day survivalism, unstable gig work, and resignation toward long-term aspirations—illustrates another pathway of coping that receives far less public attention despite its demographic significance. Integrating these experiences broadens the analysis beyond urban middle-class narratives and highlights how differences associated with class and hukou status influence young people's opportunities,

expectations, and ways of coping in China.

The challenges facing today's youth are not only economic but also deeply psychological and political. Surveys and public health data indicate elevated levels of stress, depression, and even youth suicide in both South Korea and China, underscoring the toll of chronic pressure and pessimism. In South Korea, suicide became the leading cause of death among people in their teens and twenties during the 2010s. Chinese youth likewise report growing anxiety and burnout linked to an intense study-and-work culture, contributing to what some commentators describe as a broad generational malaise. These personal struggles are closely connected to attitudes toward politics and institutions. Across surveys and qualitative accounts, many young respondents report low political interest or confidence and express skepticism about the possibility of meaningful social change. Some feel that their concerns are not adequately reflected in public discourse, responding either by disengaging from formal civic channels or by turning to cynical humor and nihilistic memes circulating online. Vernacular expressions of frustration—ranging from Chinese buzzwords like "lying flat" and "let it rot" to South Korea's dark joke of "hell Joseon"—capture anxieties about fairness, opportunity, and institutional responsiveness among segments of the youth population, even as their experiences and perspectives remain diverse.

Importantly, young Chinese and Koreans operate within political systems that differ markedly in their institutional design and everyday practices, shaping the channels through which youth concerns can be expressed. In South Korea, competitive elections, a legislature with active opposition parties, and legal procedures for public assembly and association provide institutionalized routes for young people to engage in party politics, join civil society organizations, and, at times, participate in street demonstrations or issue campaigns.[1]

In China, by contrast, a centrally led party-state structure relies more

heavily on hierarchical administrative organs and mass organizations. Youth feedback is often conveyed through schools, the Communist Youth League, student unions, online platforms under content governance, and various consultative or petition mechanisms (King et al., 2013).

These differing institutional arrangements help explain why public, organized contention by young people is more visible in South Korea, whereas in China the coping patterns discussed in this article tend to manifest more often in individualized, everyday practices or culturally mediated expressions, alongside participation in officially sponsored organizations and activities. Taken together, the two cases provide a valuable comparative setting for examining how distinct institutional configurations shape the mix of coping strategies that emerges among youth.

A useful complement to this discussion is the ethnographic and sociological work presented in Cho et al. (2021), which examines the everyday lives of young people across both societies. This study highlights how structural pressures, cultural expectations, and transnational imaginaries intersect in distinct ways for different youth cohorts, offering rich comparative insights that reinforce the argument that youth disillusionment is heterogeneous and shaped by class, region, and mobility. Drawing on such interdisciplinary work strengthens the empirical grounding of this study and underscores the multiplicity of youth experiences across China and South Korea.

[1] The 2024 Namtaeryeong impeachment protests represent another example of youth-led mobilization in Korea, driven especially by women in their 20s and 30s. They introduced a new form of "feminist peace" that reshaped protest culture through care, solidarity, and inclusive public spaces. Yoo (2025) argues that these practices show how feminist peace can function as a concrete political force capable of renewing Korean democracy.

III. Theoretical Lenses

To interpret patterns of youth disillusionment and coping in these cases, we draw on three complementary theoretical lenses. Each framework illuminates a different dimension of how young people experience stress and exercise agency within their sociopolitical environments.

1. Stress and Coping Theory

Stress and coping theory in psychology (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) distinguishes between problem-focused coping—actively making efforts to change a stressful situation—and emotion-focused coping, which involves managing one's emotional response to the stressor. Young people encountering severe stressors—whether unemployment, inequality, or intense social pressure—assess the threat to their well-being and consider what actions are realistically available to them. When youths perceive their challenges as largely beyond their control for example, persistent labor-market barriers or limited avenues to influence public decision-making, they are likely to shift toward emotion-focused strategies. When conventional routes for change, such as social mobility or participation in formal politics, appear uncertain or difficult to influence, many young people cope by adjusting expectations and emotions rather than investing heavily in efforts they expect to be ineffective. This dynamic helps explain more inward-looking coping patterns among disillusioned youth: rather than continuously striving for change through channels they believe are unlikely to succeed, a frustrated graduate may withdraw from competitive pursuits or turn toward personal interests and close relationships as a way to maintain psychological balance.

Stress-coping theory thus clarifies why some disillusioned youths respond to stressors through active engagement, while others cope by disengaging

or stepping back from especially demanding arenas. Both reactions can be understood as adaptive responses shaped by each individual's perceived reality (Kim, 2020; Norris, 2002). Youth inclined toward problem-focused coping will attempt to alter their circumstances when they believe change is possible, whereas those who see few realistic avenues for influence are more likely to gravitate toward emotion-focused coping—seeking psychological relief and adjustment rather than investing heavily in efforts they expect to have little effect.

2. Framing Theory

Framing theory in social movement research highlights how young people make sense of their circumstances through shared narratives and collective symbols. Even when they avoid formal political participation, they often engage in informal political expression—coining sarcastic slogans, creating internet memes, and circulating ironic catchphrases that resonate with their peers. These cultural artifacts function as coping frames: they validate young people's sense that their struggles are connected to broader social conditions rather than being purely individual shortcomings, and they foster solidarity through shared experience (Qin-Liang, 2022; Brookings, 2021). As Benford and Snow (1988) argue, groups construct interpretive frames that transform private frustrations into shared public concerns.

Disaffected young people are remarkably adept at using digital culture to reframe personal frustrations as part of a broader generational narrative. It is common for ironic catchphrases or viral memes to emerge that succinctly capture shared grievances, turning individual frustrations into collective sentiment. By repeating and remixing such phrases in online forums and everyday conversation, young people implicitly communicate: "This isn't just my problem—we're all facing similar pressures and constraints." These

frames often carry a self-mocking or darkly humorous tone that makes them socially acceptable and easy to share, even as they embed subtle critiques of prevailing social expectations.

Framing processes can encourage low-risk forms of participation—posting, sharing memes, or joking online—that enable young people to voice discontent through cultural commentary. In this sense, framing illustrates how youth coping can take the form of a collective, symbolic act: through memes, slang, and storytelling, private struggles become reframed as markers of generational identity. These youth-generated frames serve a dual function. On the one hand, they operate as emotional coping devices, helping individuals process their frustration through humor and shared understanding; on the other hand, they can foster a sense of collective consciousness, which may prompt reflection or, alternatively, reinforce resignation, depending on how the narrative evolves (Benford and Snow, 2000).

To more vividly illustrate how youth interpret and express their frustrations, the analysis can incorporate brief examples from qualitative materials such as online comments, memes, or interview testimonies. For instance, Korean users frequently write statements such as "헬조선에서 벗어날 방법이 없다" ("There is no escape from Hell Joseon"), while Chinese youth often post remarks like "努力也没有用" ("Even hard work changes nothing") under trending hashtags discussing involution or lying flat. These examples reveal how personal discouragement becomes codified into widely shared vernacular frames, validating the application of framing theory and demonstrating how digital expression operates as both a coping mechanism and a form of low-risk collective signaling.

The influence of frames such as tangping and Hell Joseon extends beyond online humor; these narratives have demonstrable effects on public discourse and policy attention. In Korea, the widespread circulation of Hell Joseon helped push youth inequality and housing precarity onto

party platforms and media agendas during the late 2010s. In China, official responses to tangping included public messaging emphasizing "positive energy" and adjustments to how related online content is curated and managed. These cases illustrate how cultural frames can shape institutional behavior, prompting governments to recalibrate messaging, expand targeted programs, or refine relevant regulatory practices. Such examples underscore how framing processes actively structure state-youth interactions rather than merely reflecting them.

3. Political Opportunity Structures

Whether youthful discontent manifests as public voice or quiet forms of withdrawal is shaped by the surrounding political opportunity structure—that is, the degree to which institutions provide channels for expressing diverging views and responding to them (Tarrow, 2011). Like other political actors, young people weigh the expected costs and risks of collective action against the likely efficacy of participation (Norris, 2002). In contexts where participatory channels and pluralistic debate are more firmly institutionalized, frustrated youth are more inclined to exercise voice through social participation, civic organizations, or electoral engagement, as they perceive the costs of protest and public engagement to be relatively manageable and the prospects for meaningful change are higher (Norris, 2002; Tarrow, 2011). By contrast, in more highly regulated or formally regulated environments, open expression is often viewed as carrying higher potential costs and is more strongly shaped by institutional norms, content governance, and legal procedures (King et al., 2013). When young people perceive few safe or effective avenues for collective "voice," they are more likely to turn toward "exit" or toward more personal, adaptive coping (DeButts, 2024; Yang, Jiamei et al., 2025).

Political economist Albert Hirschman's classic schema of *exit, voice, and loyalty* (1970) offers a useful framework for understanding these dynamics. When confronted with dissatisfaction, individuals essentially face three options: use voice to seek improvement, exit by withdrawing or disengaging from the system, or remain loyal enduring quietly while hoping for better conditions. In more highly regulated or hierarchically organized environments, quiet compliance may emerge as a pragmatic strategy, as open confrontation is often perceived to involve higher potential costs (Hirschman, 1970; Scott, 1985). At the same time, expressions of "loyalty" may in practice reflect everyday adaptive behaviors—small routine adjustments that help individuals maintain stability in their lives. Even where youth appear outwardly compliant, they may engage in indirect forms of expression such as procrastination, symbolic gestures, reduced participation, or coded humor that remains low-visibility and indirect (Scott, 1985; King et al., 2013). Such low-profile behaviors allow limited self-expression without triggering overt conflict, enabling disillusioned youth to articulate discontent indirectly in contexts where open disagreement is difficult or deemed inappropriate. These dynamics reflect a contemporary manifestation of the tension between "exit" and "voice." The configuration of political opportunities shapes whether a generation's response to disillusionment takes the form of quiet retreat, collective engagement, or some combination of the two. Taken together, these theoretical lenses help explain the divergent patterns observed among youth in China and South Korea. The next section examines how young people in each country have coped with disillusionment and how state institutions have responded.

IV. Youth Coping Mechanisms and Public Responses

1. Youth Coping Mechanisms

Applying these theories to our cases, we find that young people in China and South Korea between 2010 and 2025 have developed a wide spectrum of coping strategies in response to disillusionment. Some behaviors appear in both countries—for instance, retreating into private life or venting frustrations through online humor—while other responses are shaped by the distinct social, economic, and institutional conditions in each context. These coping patterns span a diverse set of youth experiences, from urban middle-class students navigating intense educational and labor-market competition to migrant-worker youth and "Sanhe" youth grappling with precarity and daily survival, to digitally networked communities circulating frames such as "lying flat" (tangping) and "Hell Joseon." Four notable categories of youth coping stand out: (1) Passive withdrawal and resignation, including "quiet quitting" or opting out of high-pressure competition; (2) Digital engagement and networked participation, (3) Identity-based expression and differentiation; and (4) collective participation and solidarity practices. In the following sections, we examine each of these coping patterns in turn, drawing on illustrative examples from interviews, surveys, and online communities and analyze how they manifest differently in China and South Korea.

1) Passive withdrawal and resignation

A prominent coping pattern among disillusioned youth in both countries is quiet withdrawal from conventional ambitions—opting out of high-pressure competition as a means of self-preservation. In China, this ethos is epitomized by tǎngpíng ("lying flat"), which went viral around 2021 as some

young people embraced minimalist living: quitting grueling jobs, reducing consumption, and foregoing milestones such as homeownership to escape what they perceived as an unwinnable rat race (Brookings, 2021). By 2023, the tongue-in-cheek bǎilàn (摆烂, "let it rot") meme captured an even deeper sense of nihilism allowing one's situation to stagnate because improvement feels unattainable. Survey-based studies suggest that many young Chinese increasingly regard their personal ideals as "unachievable," fueling feelings of resignation. Experimental research also links heightened stress and anxiety to a stronger inclination to "lie flat," underscoring resignation as a psychological coping strategy when structural pressures feel overwhelming (Hsu et al., 2022).

Surveys and media interviews similarly show young people describing "just lying flat for a while" as a way to protect their mental health and "avoid being crushed by expectations." As television host Chen Luyu has noted, youth who "lie flat" are not inherently choosing laziness; rather, they feel that when opportunities are unavailable, lying flat becomes a way to endure a difficult period. It is not a rejection of effort, but a way of gritting one's teeth and waiting for the moment when motivation returns (bilibili.com, 2025/07/21). Importantly, these discourses are not purely "passive," they also carry social and political implications. Some commentators interpret the refusal to "hustle" as an implicit challenge to dominant narratives equating perseverance with upward mobility, echoing Scott's account of everyday forms of resistance (Scott, 1985). At the same time, media analysis notes that some mainstream outlets frame tǎngpíng as a form of "negative energy," and online platforms have introduced various forms of content governance around related topics. These discourses and practices have been interpreted as reflecting concerns that widespread youth disengagement may sit uneasily with officially promoted norms of diligence and aspiration. (DeButts, 2024).

South Korea exhibits a parallel repertoire of coping behavior under the banner of "Hell Joseon," a darkly humorous metaphor for unforgiving competition and deepening inequality (Holttinen, 2020; Schoonhoven, 2017). By the mid-2010s, many young people—especially those outside Seoul's elite universities and chaebol career tracks—fantasized about "Tal-Joseon" ("Escape Joseon"), treating emigration as a form of salvation. Surveys at the time found that a large majority of twenty-somethings said they would leave the country if given the opportunity (Salmon, 2019).

For those who remain, withdrawal often takes the form of an internal exit: settling for less-demanding or unstable jobs, relocating from Seoul's high-pressure environment to regional cities, and opting out of marriage and childbearing. Commentators describe an "N-po generation" that successively relinquish life goals as they become impractical. Such adaptive resignation reduces emotional burden by letting go of aspirations perceived as structurally unattainable (Schoonhoven, 2017). Many young people, particularly outside the capital region, now describe themselves as "already N-po," emphasizing that it is not a lack of desire that they do not want these things, but a growing sense that these goals are simply out of reach (Kim, 2022). The circulation of "Hell Joseon" and "Tal-Joseon" across online forums, social media, and popular culture has turned these expressions into a shared shorthand for youth despair. Their widespread use has also helped push issues such as youth inequality, regional disparities, and out-migration into mainstream public debate and policy agendas.

Hirschman's "exit–voice–loyalty" schema helps situate these choices. When voice appears ineffective or risky, young people often pivot toward exit—either literally or figuratively (Hirschman, 1970). In South Korea, "Tal-Joseon" has fueled policy concerns about brain drain, prompting new incentives to retain domestic talent; Yet many youth engage in softer forms of exits by delaying family formation, adopting low-pressure lifestyles, or,

among some young women, embracing the 4B movement ("no dating, sex, marriage, childbirth") as a protest against entrenched patriarchal expectations (Lee, 2024). Lower youth voter turnout in certain electoral cycles similarly reflects alienation from institutions perceived as unresponsive (Holttinen, 2020). In China, online discussions of a "run" (rùn) philosophy have emerged as some educated young people consider studying or working abroad in response to perceived constraints on employment opportunities and future mobility. At the same time, practical, legal, and financial barriers mean that only a limited number are able to emigrate in practice. For those who do not -or cannot- leave, "exit" often takes the form of domestic disengagement. Public debate has highlighted the rise of NEET(Not in Education, Employment, or Training) youth and the popularity of móyú (摸鱼, "touching fish")—doing the bare minimum at work—as subcultures of quiet quitting that, in Scott's terms, resemble low-profile forms of resistance to systems perceived as an overly strict or unreasonable social environment (Scott, 1985).

Across both cases, memes, slang, and dark humor blur the line between private coping and nascent political signaling: sustained discourses such as "lying flat," "let it rot," "Hell Joseon," and "Tal-Joseon" have come to convey a shared generational skepticism toward prevailing opportunity structures. The divergence, however, lies in context. Within a more highly regulated media and social environment, coping among Chinese youth tends to be individualized and covert, with digital expressions at times encounter management and constraints from state-affiliated media and online platforms (King et al., 2013; DeButts, 2024). In South Korea's more pluralistic media and electoral landscape, young people often combine resignation with periodic expressions of collective voice; yet even there, a widespread aspiration to exit signals an enduring sense of structural malaise. How policymakers and institutions interpret these quiet exits—and whether

they respond with substantive policy adjustments that address underlying concerns—will shape whether resignation deepens or recedes.

2) Digital engagement and networked expression

In the cultural context of China, where openly contentious expression is not encouraged, the internet often serves as an important space for low-profile expression and mutual support. Young people make extensive use of coded slang, memes, and satirical content to voice frustration in ways that can circulate within content-moderation boundaries, and frames such as tǎngpíng and bǎilàn spread across platforms (King et al., 2013). Through private chat groups and semi-anonymous accounts, young people share everyday frustrations, exchange information, and provide mutual emotional support in relatively low-visibility ways (Yang, Jiamei et al., 2025). These digital practices allow some Chinese young people to vent and find community, providing a sense of agency and collective identity within an environment with relatively strict information management.

In South Korea's more pluralistic media environment, digital platforms amplify youth voices and facilitate direct political action. Outraged young Koreans routinely turn to Twitter, YouTube, and online forums to mobilize public opinion and organize campaigns on issues ranging from unaffordable housing to gender inequality. Viral hashtags and online petitions frequently snowball into street rallies and shape mainstream news coverage and policy debates (Kim, 2020).

For example, youth-driven social media movements played a key role in catalyzing the massive 2018 protests against spy-cam voyeurism and in energizing student-led climate strikes. In this context, the internet serves not only as a coping outlet but also as a practical tool for collective organizing. It expands the reach of youth activism beyond physical gatherings, making it easier to sustain movements and apply pressure on

political and economic institutions to respond.

In short, Chinese youth use digital engagement primarily as an alternative space for emotional expression, symbolic contestation, and low-profile non-compliance, whereas South Korean youth use it as an extension of their political voice to demand tangible change (Verba et al., 1995; Kim, 2020).

3) Identity-based mobilization and polarization

Intense economic and social pressures have also fueled forms of identity-based mobilization among youth, particularly in South Korea. There, what commentators have described as a youth "gender war" emerged in the 2010s as many young women and men began attributing their difficulties to different structural causes. On one side, young Korean women rallied around a new wave of popular feminism as an outlet for grievances.

Through online communities such as Megalia and viral social media campaigns, they shared personal experiences of sexism and connected these injustices to the broader societal inequalities (Jeong, 2020). This grassroots feminist surge culminated in some of the largest women's rights demonstrations in Korean history—for example, the massive 2018 street rallies in Seoul against spy-cam voyeurism and sexual harassment. By reframing gender discrimination as a pressing social problem rather than a private hardship, these young women found solidarity and empowerment through collective action (Lee, 2024).

On the other side, a segment of young Korean men gravitated toward anti-feminist backlash discourses as a way of making sense of their own frustration. Feeling left behind in an intensely competitive job market, some came to believe that feminism and gender-equality policies were contributing to their difficulties—casting themselves as victims of "reverse discrimination" (Jung et al., 2023; Lee, 2024). This narrative of male victimhood spread rapidly on anonymous online forums and was amplified by

politicians seeking to harness young male anger. It even shaped electoral dynamics: commentators argue that youth gender divides were a salient factor in the 2022 South Korean presidential election, as one leading candidate openly courted disaffected young men by criticizing aspects of contemporary feminism (Jung et al., 2023). The result has been a polarized youth landscape in which gender identity functions as a proxy battlefield for deeper socioeconomic grievances. Both feminist activists and anti-feminist groups sought to regain a sense of control over their lives—the former by demanding structural reforms for greater equality, the latter by attributing blame to perceived out-groups—but this polarization fragmented the youth voice and at times diverted energy away from addressing the broader economic challenges that affected young people across gender lines (Lee, 2024).

In China, by contrast, identity-based youth mobilization around gender and sexuality has been less publicly prominent than in South Korea. Existing scholarship notes that student and civil-society initiatives in these areas tend to be relatively small-scale and episodic, shaped closely by institutional rules governing associations, universities, and online content. Public debate about gender, families, and values more often unfolds within broader discussions of social stability, demographic change, and national development. Within this landscape, one of the most salient collective identity frames available to youth is nationalism and the language of national rejuvenation, which feature prominently in official discourse and popular culture. Many young Chinese express pride and aspiration through online patriotic narratives, emphasizing China's achievements, defending the country's reputation against perceived external criticism, and articulating a desire to contribute to the nation's future. For some, these narratives provide a sense of belonging and forward-looking purpose. Compared with South Korea's more bottom-up gender movements, this pattern of

identity expression ties youth identity more closely to state-led projects and national goals, channeling disillusionment into efforts to align personal aspirations with collective development.

4) Collective action

Street protest has been a prominent outlet for South Korean youth to channel discontent, reflecting the country's robust tradition of contentious politics. When confronted with perceived injustice or corruption, young Koreans have frequently joined large-scale demonstrations to demand change. A defining moment was the 2016–17 Candlelight Movement, during which millions protested against presidential misconduct; students and young adults played a key role in sustaining the peaceful rallies that ultimately led to the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye (Yoon, 2020; Lee, 2018). This experience provided many youths a powerful sense of political efficacy—evidence that their collective voice could produce tangible reform (Kim, 2020). Since then, youth participation in demonstrations has remained common on issues such as labor rights, education policy, and climate change. In South Korea, the perceived costs of protesting are relatively low and the likelihood of influencing policy is comparatively high, making street mobilization a rational coping strategy for many young people when other avenues seem insufficient (Tarrow, 2011; Norris, 2002).

In China, by contrast, public street protest among youth has been far less visible than in South Korea, opting within a political and legal environment that prioritizes social stability and formal participation channels. Research on contentious politics suggests that young people often view the personal, legal, and career risks of extra-institutional contentious collective action as high—especially students—making such actions an unattractive option for most (Hirschman, 1970; King et al., 2013). When pressures intensify, Chinese youth are therefore more likely to rely on other coping strategies discussed

above—private withdrawal, digital expression, or decisions related to work, study, and mobility—rather than sustained street-level contention. Although occasional localized episodes of collective expression have drawn public attention in recent years, they have generally remained limited in scale and duration, and are typically handled through administrative or institutional channels rather than developing into extended cycles. In this sense, over "voice" in Hirschman's terms, tends to be narrow in scope and short-lived, while youth disillusionments are more commonly managed through exit-type or low-profile coping behaviors.

These contrasting experiences illustrate how political opportunity structures shape youth responses to social and economic pressures. In South Korea, where protest is legally recognized and public debate over youth issues is relatively visible, collective action provides a legitimate channel through which discontent can be expressed and can at times contribute to tangible reforms, reinforcing many young people's willingness to speak out. In China, by contrast, young people often perceive exit or quiet endurance as more realistic strategies than high-profile contention in most circumstances reserving overt forms of protest for exceptional situations. As a result, youth engagement tends to take more cautious, indirect, and low-visibility forms (Tarrow, 2011; Hirschman, 1970).

2. Public Response

1) China

The Chinese government has introduced various policy measures presented as efforts to ease pressures on young people. For example, regulations issued in 2021 tightened oversight of for-profit after-school tutoring and imposed limits on excessive homework, officially framed as attempts to reduce students' academic burden (The Economist, 2023; DeButts,

2024). State agencies have also modestly expanded recruitment into public-sector positions such as civil service posts and encouraged university graduates to take jobs in rural and less-developed regions as part of broader efforts to mitigate urban unemployment. Debates surrounding the so-called "run philosophy" have coexisted with official appeals encouraging young people to build their careers domestically (Woo et al., 2024).

Taken together, the government's approach can be characterized as a mix of limited responsiveness and firm guidance. On the one hand, China's political system deploys targeted policy adjustments to signal attentiveness to youth concerns—for instance, by fine-tuning policy implementation, modestly expanding employment programs, or recalibrating official rhetoric around education and labor-market pressures. On the other hand, policy efforts emphasize that collective concerns are best communicated through institutionalized and officially recognized channels, rather than developing into sustained extra-institutional mobilization. While policy shifts have been visible on issues that generate substantial public attention, official discourse consistently underscores that grievance should be expressed through formal organizations—such as trade unions, the Communist Youth League, and student associations—and through various consultative or feedback mechanisms, rather than through extra-institutional channels of contention. In this sense, selective policy adjustments operate alongside an emphasis on institutional pathways for collective expression.

Rather than foregrounding autonomous youth organization, official discourse places strong emphasis on integrating youthful idealism into Party- and state-affiliated channels. The Communist Youth League and other official groups have been tasked with expanding outreach to young people, by promoting volunteer service, social practice programs, and patriotic activities endorsed by the authorities.

Schools and media have intensified patriotic education, framing diligence, professionalism, and collective responsibility as essential components of both personal achievement and national rejuvenation. At the same time, regulators continue to oversee youth-oriented cultural industries—for example, issuing guidelines and restrictions on reality shows, fan culture, and celebrity conduct deemed inconsistent with public-interest and value guidance—in order to steer youth norms toward officially supported ideals. In sum, China's approach to youth attitudes and expectations reflects a strong emphasis on social stability and guided participation. Policy measures that combine value-oriented education, employment and placement initiatives, and regulatory management of cultural and online spaces aim both to address some of the pressures facing young people and to encourage them to link their personal development to broader national goals. At the same time, official and expert commentary has noted that trends such as "lying flat" and declining willingness among some youth to engage in intense competition could, if they became more widespread, affect economic vitality and social cohesion. These concerns have helped elevate youth issues on the policy agenda, within an overall framework that seeks to respond to generational challenges while maintaining continuity in political leadership and institutional arrangements.

2) South Korea

In South Korea, responses to youth disillusionment have generally emphasized recognition and inclusion, albeit within the usual constraints of democratic policymaking. Confronted with highly vocal demands from young people—and the realities of electoral competition—Korean institutions have taken steps to integrate youth voices and address their grievances, though the results have been mixed. A landmark development was the passage of the *Framework Act on Youth in 2020*, the country's first

comprehensive youth law. This act formally defined the rights of young people (broadly encompassing those up to age 34) and the responsibilities of the state, while establishing a legal foundation for youth policy. Crucially, it created formal mechanisms for youth participation such as a Presidential Youth Committee and local youth councils—signaling that the "youth crisis" had entered mainstream policy discourse (Qin-Liang, 2022).

In practical terms, South Korean administrations in the late 2010s and early 2020s introduced a variety of youth-focused initiatives. These included expanding affordable housing programs such as Seoul's "Youth Housing" micro-apartments offered at below-market rent, increasing scholarships and providing partial relief on student loans, offering subsidies to firms that hire young workers, and reforming labor laws to address the abuse of interns and temporary staff.

Political parties also intensified efforts to court young voters by recruiting younger candidates; as a result, several lawmakers in their twenties and thirties were elected to the National Assembly in 2020 and 2022, giving youth a somewhat stronger voice in national politics. The government also showed some openness to youth-led agendas on contentious issues. Following feminist protests drawing attention to the widespread problem of spy-cam crimes, authorities imposed harsher penalties. Youth climate marches contributed to Seoul's adoption of more ambitious carbon-neutrality commitments and the inclusion of youth representatives in a climate-policy task force. Rising concern over mental health— suicide being the leading cause of death among young Koreans—prompted the National Assembly to expand counseling services and stress-education initiatives in schools.

Yet these efforts have also faced limits and pitfalls. Some measures have been criticized as tokenistic—for instance, youth committees seen as existing largely on paper with minimal practical influence, or high-profile

policy pledges that raise expectations but falter in implementation—thereby deepening cynicism among young people. Korea's polarized politics can also exacerbate rather than alleviate youth divisions. A striking example concerns gender politics: as noted earlier, the administration elected in 2022 (under President Yoon) has been widely viewed by critics as adopting a more explicitly anti-feminist stance to appeal to certain young male voters, including a pledge to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality and efforts to restructure its functions. These shifts left many young women disappointed and further alienated, highlighting how short-term strategies can complicate broader attempts at youth inclusion (Lee, 2024).

Likewise, economic reforms intended to assist youth—such as substantial minimum-wage increases or restriction on the use of temporary "irregular" workers—have at times been moderated or delayed in the face of business opposition, limiting their overall impact. Thus, although the Korean government clearly recognizes youth challenges and has made them a policy priority, its ability to resolve them remains constrained by broader structural factors, including generational trade-offs, interest-group resistance, and budgetary limits. Institutionally, South Korea tends to address youth-related concerns through established political and policymaking channels: protests, media debate, and civil-society initiatives signal priorities from outside government, while ministries, political parties, and the National Assembly respond through legislation, budgeting, and programmatic adjustments. Even when progress is slow or partial, youth issues continue to appear on party platforms, government agendas, and expert discussions.

V. Conclusion

This comparative analysis shows that Chinese and South Korean

youths have experienced a broadly similar trajectory of rising strain and disappointment—rooted in inequality and persistently high performance pressures—yet their coping repertoires diverge under different political opportunity structures. In both contexts, emotion-focused strategies such as "lying flat," "let it rot," and "Hell Joseon" signal a shared perception that straightforward effort no longer guarantees stable upward mobility. Framing processes transform private strain into shared public vocabularies, while differences in institutional channels shape how youth agency is expressed. Overall, Chinese youth tend toward more individualized, low-risk adaptation and episodic exits, whereas Korean youths more readily translate grievance into digitally enabled mobilization, protest, and—at times—incremental policy uptake. Across both cases, identity politics and online cultures simultaneously soothe and sharpen discontent, and the internet serves as a parallel of youth political engagement.

The theoretical lenses employed—stress-coping, framing, and political opportunity—clarify why similar structural shocks produce different behavioral equilibria. When perceived efficacy is low and the anticipated costs of speaking out are high, withdrawal and low-profile coping strategies are more likely to predominate; where institutional channels and potential allies are more visible, collective action and engagement become more feasible. These patterns are not merely attitudinal but function as early-warning indicators: sustained resignation, NEET growth, and rising emigration intentions may foreshadow the erosion of human capital, civic trust, and future dynamism.

As both China and South Korea navigate an era of slower trend growth, the stakes for youth policy are rising. Slower growth heightens scarring risks for new cohorts, deepens insider-outsider divides, depresses fertility, and can contribute to political and social polarization that further deters investment and reform. To avoid an equilibrium of widespread resignation,

both governments will need to expand credible pathways to adulthood—quality entry-level employments, affordable housing, and portable social protections—while reducing zero-sum competition in education and hiring.

At the same time, the feasibility of these policy recommendations requires careful consideration. Efforts to expand youth employment, reform labor-market dualism, and provide affordable housing face practical constraints—including fiscal limits, resistance from entrenched interests, and persistent political polarization. In China, structural reform of private-sector environments or hukou-based inequalities involves substantial institutional trade-offs, while in South Korea, ambitious housing or labor policies often encounter obstacles from real-estate interests, business groups, or partisan gridlock. Acknowledging these implementation challenges ensures that proposed reforms are grounded in realistic political-economic conditions and highlights the need for broad coalitions and long-term governance frameworks to make youth-centered reforms sustainable.

For China, analysts commonly emphasize priorities such as easing institutional constraints on private-sector development, strengthening labor-market information and guidance systems (including for young jobseekers), expanding practical channels for youth feedback and problem-solving within existing institutions, and placing greater weight on concrete opportunity creation alongside value-oriented messaging. For South Korea, frequently highlighted priorities include further addressing labor-market dualism, improving housing supply and financing mechanisms targeted at young adults, providing predictable support for entrepreneurship and SMEs, expanding mental-health services, and investing in civic education and dialogue to help bridge generational and gender divides. In both countries, more institutionalized youth voice—through well-resourced and empowered consultative bodies, participatory budgeting, and campus–city policy labs—can help channel grievances into constructive co-production

rather than simple exit. A central implication is that, in slow-growing economies, public confidence increasingly hinges on visible pathways to upward mobility and perceptions of procedural fairness.

When youth malaise is treated merely as a transient mood, patterns of resignation risk becoming entrenched; but when macroeconomic realism is paired with expanded micro-level opportunities and meaningful channels for participation, current disillusionment can also serve as pressure and motivation for institutional adaptation. How these issues are addressed will shape not only the life chances of a generation but also the innovation capacity and social cohesion on which the future development trajectories of China and South Korea will increasingly depend.

Future comparative research might further situate youth disillusionment within broader structural transformations affecting advanced and emerging economies alike—ranging from technological disruptions and automation to declining intergenerational mobility and the financialization of housing. Incorporating such global and historical perspectives would help reveal why youth malaise has become so pronounced across diverse political systems and underscore that restoring generational confidence requires not only domestic reforms but also new policy paradigms capable of addressing structural inequalities at their root.

While this article focuses on China and South Korea, it is important to situate rising youth disillusionment within broader global transformations. Around the world, younger generations face structural headwinds—including slow post-industrial growth, technological automation, intergenerational wealth concentration, and the erosion of stable employment pathways—that have collectively weakened the traditional social contract linking effort to mobility. These global dynamics frame youth frustration not merely as a domestic policy failure but as part of a deeper, systemic challenge confronting advanced and emerging economies alike. Future

research would therefore benefit from embedding East Asian youth experiences within wider debates on global capitalism, demographic stagnation, and intergenerational inequality, enabling more far-reaching and creative reform agendas beyond incremental domestic remedies.

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