Hamlet in China's "Lying Flat": Resistance Through Refusal

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ABSTRACT
From the closed-door late-Qing era to the authoritative Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the Chinese government has antagonized Western literature. However, due to the Marxist foundation of the CCP, Chinese society also offers a unique proletariat literary tradition. *Hamlet* stands out as a Western text that allies the people: the hesitation, obscuration of time, and interchangeability of identity in *Hamlet* resonate with the Chinese people struggling under the extreme pressure from the authoritarian government with its grand narratives for hard work and collective success. The persisting charisma of *Hamlet* is particularly pertinent in China's "lying flat" movement, as the hard work narrative crumbles in the face of the degrading economy. The hesitation in *Hamlet* parallels the movement where people refuse to participate in the system. *Hamlet*'s cyclical revenge signals a rejection of seeking meaning under a bigger authority who forges hope, only to manipulate the people's agency repetitively. This postmodern refusal of meaning and hard work in fact provides a space for protest as the movement is already threatening the CCP's regime. Thus, this article analyzes how *Hamlet* informs both lying flat as resistance in China and how lying flat informs *Hamlet*, opening further research into the power of quitting in and beyond literature.

KEYWORDS
Hamlet; Shakespeare; Lying Flat Movement; Overwork; China; Resistance; Social Movement; Postmodernism; Literary Analysis

INTRODUCTION

It might seem surprising that a canonical Western text as *Hamlet* can still garner strong influence in the CCP-dominated contemporary China, a society where traditional values and work culture pressures converge to anonymize people's identities. *Hamlet* is a play that Harold Bloom and others have suggested virtually "invents" the human individual, making characters rather than characterizations.[1] Regardless, many *Hamlet* adaptions have emerged from the anti-individualist China—including *The Banquet* (2006) and Lin Zhaohua's theatrical production *Hamlet* (1989)—interestingly all after the establishment of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1949. More intriguingly, these adaptations in China have often placed particular emphasis on certain aspects of the *Hamlet* story: cycles of revenge with implicit and delayed actions, and disjointedness of time and identity.

Looking at the modern history of China from the late stage of the Qing dynasty to the governance of CCP today, I have found that *Hamlet* takes up unique political significance among its Chinese audience due to its many parallels with sentiments of China's "lying flat" movement that started in 2021. The movement stems from an exhaustion upon the realization that the hard work and piety dictated by CCP propaganda and traditional Chinese culture are mostly useless. In the movement, young Chinese people "lie flat": they refuse to work (or overwork), valuing their own psychological health over the betterment of the collective society thereby resisting the social structure of pressures set in place by the CCP. Their lying flat, similar to Hamlet's hesitation of action in the play, signals a break from the cycles of CCP propaganda, which can be read as analogous to the cycles of revenge in *Hamlet*. But this "break" from the system through silence or withdrawal does not simply represent a way out. Hamlet's constant self-reflection, his madness that scholars have debated about, along with a multitude of characters featuring undistinguishable identities, all coalesce into a theme about struggling to find one's identity under an assimilating social structure. His eventual revenge also reflects the inescapable shadow the system casts upon its people, the existential struggles that people face when alienated by the looming pressures of an authoritarian society.

HAMLET AND RESISTANCE IN CHINA

Chinese interpretations of *Hamlet* seem aligned with a long human history of resistance through lying flat. Human civilizations have been established based on fixed definitions of identity, usefulness, and progress so that communities and countries can work toward certain goals. Yet, when one tries to resist such pressures, such as expectation to participate in continual hard work

or to strive for societal ideals, it feels almost impossible to topple the structure. Thus, many have opted to drop out from that social structure, defining their value differently. In fact, there has been a long tradition of using "giving up" as a sign of protest against social expectations, such as the 4th-century Greek philosopher Diogenes lying in the sun, refusing to engage with the hard work as did everyone else.[2] That tradition was recently amplified by Slavoj Žižek in his repeated use of Bartelby's phrase "I prefer not to." This titular character from "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" illustrates well the political potential of taking a stance against work by refusing to do anything.[3] It takes courage and critical thinking to resist the long-standing lifestyle wherein one is defined through one's worth (and work). As Jenny Odell writes in their book *How to Do Nothing*, "to the capitalist logic, which thrives on myopia and dissatisfaction, there may indeed be something dangerous about something as pedestrian as doing nothing: escaping laterally toward each other, we might just find that everything we wanted is already here."[2]

What is unique in China's inaction as resistance is that it is juxtaposed against the country's pervasive hard work narrative that is so closely tied into its people's identities. Additionally, in contemporary China, the short time frame in which the country has flourished economically, along with the intricate relationships between government propaganda and the people, make such resistance more difficult, but also more significant. Because the propaganda itself is collective, it places people's individual involvement into a larger narrative, making one's resistance to hard work a form of alienation from both their personal and cultural identities. That any form of resistance is censored in Chinese culture also contributes to the implicitness of this particular protest.

The timing of the widespread introduction of Shakespearean works to China, specifically *Hamlet*, could shed light on the intricate relationship between people's subjective understanding of themselves and the compulsive force of hard work ethos. After the CCP started its governance in 1949, the improved welfare and a much-needed open policy for a new government allowed more Shakespearean works to be read and adapted for theater performances. However, the people's freedom to enjoy Western artworks only constitutes an illusion of choice. The government's doctrine of Russian Marxism demanded that literary theory on Shakespearean works focus on class struggles.[4] Evidently, in the Cultural Revolution that lasted from 1966 to 1976 under Chairman Mao's leadership, the CCP aggressively destroyed everything related to foreign cultures, including books, plays, instruments, schools, etc., to strengthen his regime based on his understanding of creating a country for the proletariat.[5] Just a few years before the Cultural Revolution from 1958 to 1962, China experienced another hazard of famine resulting from "The Great Leap Forward,"[6] in which manufacturers exploited labor and forged production rates to satisfy the CCP's unrealistic production standards raised to create hopes for its communist regime. It is worthy to note that these hard work policies not only forced work upon the people but asked people to purge their minds of everything non-work-related and cast upon them a sense of responsibility in the collective manufacturing of products. During this period, one of Shakespeare's plays apparently spoke to Chinese audiences: *Hamlet*. Bian Zhilin, one of the leading Shakespeare scholars at the time, praised *Hamlet* as being written for the people instead of the ruling class because it shows Hamlet struggling for a better society.[4]

Despite various disastrous outcomes, the CCP's hard work narrative continued in cyclic ways. In 1978, the CCP implemented another policy "Reform and Opening-Up," which focused on international trade, though still framed in a way that emphasized hard work and the guidance of collective power.[7] The resulting strong economic boost lasted for about 25 years before problems started to occur. Most notably, with its economy heavily dependent on human labor, China had to loosen its one-child policy for economic progress, although the policy change did not bring about the desired effects.[8] This failed outcome also seemed to suggest that the CCP's overarching narrative was self-contradictory, leaving many wondering: if the CCP is serving the proletariat, then why does it have the privilege to change people's lives without asking their opinions?

Amid this wave of disappointed, quiet sentiment, *Hamlet* adaptations began taking space in, and reflecting, Chinese culture. Longxi Zhang, a translator and a cultural studies scholar in east-west communications, wrote that *Hamlet* still remains its strongest appeal among all Shakespearean works in China because of its focus on thinking and interpretation, following a long intellectual history in China of non-action.[9] From ancient Chinese philosophy to present, arguably the culture prefers thinking rather than speaking or acting. Confucius, one of the foundational Chinese philosophers that CCP still heavily quotes from today, teaches "think thrice before taking action."[10] Confucianism, which has been widely adopted as the orthodox rule of society by many emperors, places a strong emphasis on self-containment and etiquette to maintain the harmony of nature.[10] With the oppression stemming from the CCP as well as strict, authoritarian regimes preceding the CCP in China, it is hard for Chinese people to speak about their true thoughts. Therefore, the art of "迂回Yuhui" is valued in communication, where people manipulate "words of detour"[11] to avoid letting out their thoughts directly thereby creating more space for strategizing and reflection. The tendency to think and speak in a detour is represented in *The Banquet*, where the Empress Woman, who represents Gertrude, pulls together manipulative language instead of direct communication to help her son's revenge.[12] Also, the scene from the Chinese traditional story *Hongmen Banquet* woven into the movie illustrates a devious sword fight carried out in actual revenge hidden under the *name* (and guise) of a sword

fight performance.[12] In one of the first *Hamlet* theater adaptations in China, director Zhaohua Lin had actors change their roles constantly, making a clear identity of each character impossible.[13] "Words, words, words," (Act 2, Scene 2, line 210)[14] Hamlet exclaimed when he engaged competitively in a conversation with Polonius to try to dig out the truth of his scheme. Meant to indicate that Hamlet is reading, this line eventually turned to his comment about Polonius' scheme: every trap is set through words, lies. A clear meaning is in fact wrapped up in layers of vague words. In a more recent adaptation by the Peking Opera, "The Revenge of Prince Zidan" adopts the highly codified but ridiculous gestures of the Peking Opera genre to depict a restricted but absurd story of Hamlet.[15] It seems that *Hamlet*, as portrayed in China, focuses more on implicit narrative instead of explicit actions.

Many have already attempted to interpret *Hamlet*'s appeal to delay and uncertainty within a Western context. Hughes Glenn and Sebastian Moore state that the fluid, indeterminate actions Hamlet commits appeal to a contemporary Western society where uncertainty abounds and a clear, expected progression of stories may not be possible anymore. According to Glenn and Moore's argument, the uncertainty and fluidity of *Hamlet* that makes the story unique and represents postmodernism in current society.[16] The features of postmodernism were established by philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* in the late 20th century. Due to the increasing commercialization of human knowledge, Lyotard writes, artificial discourse distorts truth in infinitely different ways,[17] which means that there is an increasing tendency in society to view humans' hard-earned achievements as mere commercial products exchangeable with money, diminishing the meaning of individual diligence and clear recognition of identity. A vague term, "postmodernism" has been interpreted in infinitely different ways, including a denial of objective reality, truth, science and logic as progress, a unified human nature, and language being accurate in the delivery of meaning.[18] Despite the differences in these interpretations, a shared characteristic of them is their uncertainty, a dizziness of what is true or not, whether there is, or can be, a single truth.

China's postmodernism has developed uniquely as a form of protest against Western narratives and their implicitness. Due to censorship that rejected Western ideologies in 20th-century China, and in an effort to establish the legitimacy of CCP's governance, Chinese literary critics were not able to study Western debates on postmodernism in their original and complete form.[19] Instead, they mobilized the vagueness in the definition of postmodernism and applied it to China's social and cultural context, such as reversing historical narratives that prioritize achievements of Western settlers, debunking CCP's positive narrative around economic progress, and questioning the force of individual power in the progress of collective movements.[19] As discussed above, China's contemporary history is a continuous back-and-forth between the CCP's repetitive collective propaganda and the overwhelming pressures on the people which they're supposed to take pride in. This tension between the government and the society makes people wonder who they are in the bigger narrative of hard work for the nation's progress.

China's postmodern condition can be seen reflected in the lying flat movement, after the chaos stemming from "Reform and Opening-Up," "Three Reforms," and COVID-19 pandemic with its consequent, and still dropping, yearly economic growth as well as the dehumanizing lockdown measures that stemmed from it.[19] Despite that depressing economic outlook, with CCP's determination to push for technological innovation and rejoin the world's economic competition, propaganda surrounding work flourished and workloads in China became increasingly heavy. Under such pressures, the lying flat movement started as an informal Internet meme complaining about workload, but it soon became instilled with a sense of justice and was adopted as a sign of rebellion.

Just like the postmodern condition from which it stems— that posits questions to big narratives and refuses clear definition— the lying flat movement started without a clear goal and eventually became a collective attitude, not necessarily against the government or the financial pressures, but against the fixation of a hardworking identity in the cyclical propaganda. It signals the postmodern condition of the Chinese people, realizing the distortive force of governmental, socioeconomic narratives. From the emergence of the CCP, to "The Great Leap Forward," to the COVID-19 lockdown, participants in this movement are attempting to escape the cycle of false hope from reforms through intentional aloofness. They've chosen to purposely give up as they grow disillusioned by the cyclical and seemingly futile reforms. The movement started with an article titled "Lying Flat is Justice" and quickly spread through a meme that depicts a man hopelessly lying on the couch.[21] Online discussions credit various sources for the start of the movement, including Zhuangzi's philosophy of balance and Guangdong Sanhe community's contemporary nomads.[21] There is no official organization, protests, or an explicit goal, but just the dangerous sentiments of giving up proliferating on the internet, which prompted the CCP to censor the term "lying flat."[22] However, that only encouraged more derivatives of the term: people posting pictures of themselves lying flat or advertisements of sleeping products suggesting the posture of lying flat. Instead of explicitly calling for reducing work pressures, participants gradually immunized themselves to these repetitive messages by "lying flat" – encouraging a rhetoric of turning a blind eye to work incentives. This

term has now become a popular, colloquial phrase to describe anything from the literal, phenomenological act of lying flat to an implicit protest against the entire political system.

LYING FLAT MOVEMENT IN *HAMLET*

Just as the popularity of Hamlet in contemporary Chinese culture can be seen growing alongside the past decades of discontentment and sociocultural upheaval in the country, the play itself can be read as reflecting the very movement that those conditions ultimately resulted in. In Hamlet, too, time, identity, and action seem to be as disjointed as in China's postmodern conditions. Lying flat isn't an explicitly rebellious movement; the cyclic revenge, confused time, interchangeable identity, and the inexplicable acts of madness in *Hamlet* can be read as commenting implicitly about the pressures under a strict hierarchy, the resistance against such a system.

In the arguably most famous soliloquy throughout the play, which is Hamlet's "to be or not to be speech," the prince of Denmark talks about difficulties in life that he as a royal member would never go through:

> "Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
> The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
> The insolence of office, and the spurns
> That patient merit of th'unworthy takes,
> When he himself might his quietus make
> With a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear,
> To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
> But that the dread of something after death,
> The undiscovered country from whose bourn
> No traveler returns, puzzles the will
> And makes us rather bear those ills we have
> Than fly to others that we know not of?" (Act 3, Scene 1, 79-89)[14]

Hamlet is less likely than most of the people to have undergone oppressions and poverty, nor has he experienced death. However, in this speech, it seems that he has ceased to be Hamlet, but a common person who is archetypical of universal human struggles. Hamlet's identity becomes interchangeable with that of any other. Here I draw a parallel between Hamlet's speech and the tacit agreement among Chinese people in the lying flat movement, where people struggle with their own identity, feeling the silence of individual voices cast upon the entire humanity. In fact, Claudius may seem to Hamlet similar as to how the CCP government is perceived by the Chinese people in its collective progress narrative. He diminishes the sorrow experienced from losing Old Hamlet by changing the subject quickly from the old king's death to his new marriage during coronation, urging people into a new era hastily. "To our most valiant brother – so much for him" (Act 1, Scene 1, 96).[14] Hamlet's personal emotions here are sacrificed for the bigger narrative of the royal trajectory as Gertrude moralizes almost cruelly "all that lives must die" (Act 1, Scene 2, 74).[14] Moreover, Hamlet is constantly told by Claudius and Polonius about how to live his life. While Hamlet grieves his father, Claudius rudely interjects with "Tis unmanly grief. / It shows a will most incorrect to heaven" (Act 1, Scene 2, lines 99-100).[14] Other characters also live under the shadow of a strict, hierarchical system. Ophelia cannot even follow her romantic intuition as she is educated by Laertes and Claudius about who she should love.[14] Hamlet is the only person in the play who raises doubt against this social structure fixating on people's undistinguishable identities manipulated by hard work. As Marcellus and Horatio warn him against following the ghost, for instance, Hamlet questions, "Why, what should be the fear?" (Act 1, Scene 3, line 72)[14] manifesting his free will beyond the system. On this, Horatio comments that "he waxes desperate with imagination," (Act 1, Scene 4, line 97)[14] but imagination and thinking outside of the cycle of revenge might be the only opportunity to break through this generational tragedy.

The postmodern condition in *Hamlet* can be illustrated through the obscuration of identity throughout the play, along with many unsolved mysteries surrounding characters' identities. Shakespeare, instead of developing distinct identities for his different characters, gives them assimilated or generalized characteristics. For example, the ghost of Hamlet's father who has been guiding Hamlet in his revenge in Act 1 disappears abruptly starting from Act 2, except that he comes back briefly in Act 3, Scene 4 to remind Hamlet of his goal of revenge. The characters' identities throughout the play do not seem to be concrete. When Horatio first introduces himself, for instance, he says "A piece of him" (Act 1, Scene 1, line 24)[14] in answer to Barnardo's "Is Horatio there?" (line 1).[14] It seems that his genuine personality is not fully present and he is not sure what his entire identity is; he is only pretending to be, or only accessible to, part of him.

Some of the secondary characters in *Hamlet* are also paired up as if their experiences and emotions can be switched without implications. For example, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern always appear together to report businesses of the royal family. Almost nothing can be used to distinguish them. Hamlet's revenge storyline is also similar to that of Young Fortinbras: both are vengeful for their dead father. The two female characters, Gertrude and Ophelia, are similarly feeble, especially when it comes to Hamlet's "madness." After Hamlet insults Ophelia, instead of insulting him back or becoming angry, she laments Hamlet's change in solitude and even belittles herself to show Hamlet's previous glory:

> "O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown! … And I, of ladies most deject and wretched, That sucked the honey of his musicked vows, Now see that noble and most sovereign reason, Like sweet bells jangled, out of time and harsh… O woe is me…" (Act 3, Scene 3, line 164-74)[14]

When Hamlet castigates Claudius' trickery against him to Gertrude, she seems to be scared and even asks what she has done wrong to herself instead of rebutting Hamlet, much like Ophelia's self-blaming. Finally, Polonius and Claudius also seem to be interchangeable. Claudius adopts Polonius' opinions without a second guess. After Hamlet mistakes Polonius for Claudius and kills him, however, Claudius continues his suppression of Hamlet despite the loss of Polonius' witty mind.

This narrative trope concerning uncertainty of identity parallels the crisis of individuality experienced in the contemporary society of China that bred the birth of the lying flat movement. Under the CCP's collectivist propaganda, people are obliged to work like human cogs within a machine without any individuality so that they can all contribute to common goals thrust upon them without any thought to their personal needs. Eventually, many within Chinese society hit a breaking point. After the pandemic lockdown, Chinese propaganda focused on rebooting the economy heavily increased, leading to people creating terms like 996 (work from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. for six days a week) and 内卷 *neijuan* (involution) to describe everyone's same suffering under the oppressive government,[23] sacrificing their own time and assimilating themselves to a machine-like schedule. In addition, under the strict, hierarchical, and authoritarian culture of both the CCP government and traditional Chinese philosophy, people see it as a virtue to hide their true identity in exchange for politeness. Apart from relieving themselves from this pressure, people in China's lying flat movement are also seeking a form of uniqueness to distinguish themselves from the generalized working schedule that dictates life value. If postmodernism as a whole contributes to this loss of one's identity, then perhaps this quietness of identitarian expression rallies against it and can be a space for lost people to develop musings on their own, using the silence and solitary form of living as a way to figure out who they really are.

Another lying flat motif can be seen threaded throughout the plot of *Hamlet*. The cyclical nature of revenge within the play ultimately portrays such attempts as futile and impotent. These recurrent attempts at vengeance continue to morph and cause destruction in ways that mirror the relentless rounds of CCP propaganda imposed on Chinese people to cover failures in the country's economic system. The play starts with Barnardo's line "Who's there?"[14] Instead of getting a response, the question is received with an echo, "Nay, answer me."[14] This echo highlights the cyclical theme in *Hamlet* in that there is no answer, but repetitiveness resulting from people's caution, hesitation, and fear. It has become a norm in early modern revenge tragedies that when a family member dies, the rest of the family takes revenge, but a successful revenge will only lead to the death of another family member, thus starting a new round of revenge. Yet, such an obvious pattern doesn't stop the characters from pursuing revenge. It seems that people don't care about the success of the revenge but linger in the complications of performing revenge. When Hamlet mistakenly kills Polonius, for instance, the revenge plot inevitably brings Laertes into it as well. Claudius complicates the cycle of this revenge even more by irritating Laertes with "Was your father dear to you?" (Act 4, Scene 7, line 122),[14] prompting Laertes to kill Hamlet for Claudius himself. Although doing this does not facilitate Claudius's goal in trapping Hamlet, he decides to do it seemingly just to satisfy his spite against his own complicated life and to drown himself further into the cycle of revenge.

Moreover, throughout the play, the young Fortinbras' own plot has been looming behind the characters, trying to take revenge on Denmark for the death of his father. In Act 1, Scene 2, Claudius claims that he has already dismissed Fortinbras' quest for Denmark's land. Yet, toward the end of the play, Fortinbras reappears. Even more complicatedly, contradictory to his family members, Hamlet discovers the meaning of life from this enemy of his country: "This is th' impostume of much wealth and peace, that inward breaks and shows no cause without why the man dies" (Act 4, Scene 4, line 28),[14] ultimately voicing his support for electing Fortinbras.

The non-stop cycle of revenge in the play thus renders the time in the plot disjointed. Hamlet can't tell how long his father has been dead: "But two months dead – nay, not so much, not two" (Act 1, Scene 2, line 142),[14] "within a month" (line 149)[14], "a little month" (line 151).[14] In Act 1, Hamlet desires to go back to college, while Claudius acts as a fatherly figure to ask him to stay: "And we beseech you, bend you to remain here in the cheer and comfort of our eye, our chiefest courtier, cousin, and our son."[14] This makes Hamlet seem he is in his 20s. However, in Act 5, the gravedigger tells the audience that Hamlet is already 30 (Scene, 1, line 167).[14] Although Barnardo, Marcellus, and Hamlet all want to find out who the ghost is, they can't identify the time at which the ghost appears. Horatio seems to be the only one among them who at least has a general sense of time:

> Hamlet: "What hour now?"
> Horatio: "I think it lacks of twelve."
> Marcellus: "No, it is struck." (Act 1, Scene 5, lines 3-5)[14]

As noted earlier, China's lying flat movement isn't an explicitly rebellious movement, it is not a direct path to solving the problem at hand. This is similar to how Hamlet operates circuitously and doesn't immediately, directly engage revenge in any way that might be described as effective for most of the play. The effects of giving up competition in the job market, lying flat, makes a much smaller ripple than taking people's anger to the stage. It is obvious that people involved in the movement desire something more than to simply not work. Living under long-term propaganda by the CCP, people's identities have been forced into assimilation, into patriotic, subservient, working machines for the collective good of the CCP, just as how the identities of Hamlet and other characters in the play are put into vague, interchangeable, or identity seeking roles. The lying flat movement provides a chance for people to pause, allowing them a moment to not engage in the big narrative that one must contribute to social progress. A narrative that is reinforced by those in power like China's biggest company leader, Ali Baba's Jack Ma who made the following statement about working hard: "In this world, all of us want to be successful, all of us want a good life, and all of us want to be respected. I ask you, 'How can you achieve the success you want if you don't put in more effort and time than others?'"[24] But with the transition from modernity to postmodernity in China, people are rethinking the definition of success, of how their identities and lives should unfold regardless of the collective hope for the CCP's success. Yet, the answer is still not here. That's why the movement has taken its course in a way of quietness and hesitation instead of the loud protests we usually see in the history of revolution. In fact, such a silent protest may require more struggles than explicitly giving up their lives or showing their anger because it takes the patience of reflecting upon one's identity and the postmodern condition of society.

Similar to the CCP's repetitive propaganda encouraging people to work under the pressure of a degrading economy, the revenge plots in *Hamlet* have already lost their meaning and only provide an excuse for people to stalk others and become restive and oversensitive. In the restricted space of a castle, when Claudius and Polonius stalk Hamlet to figure out his madness and thus control him, Hamlet is also listening to their conversations, somehow knowing their plots against him. Hamlet once even explicitly speaks out his master knowledge of Claudius' scheme to Gertrude, "let the bloat king tempt you again to bed, and let him, for a pair of reechy kisses or paddling in your neck with his damned fingers, make you to ravel all this matter out" (Act 3, Scene, 4, lines 206-08).[14] This proves that the cyclical revenge continues due to reasons other than bringing actual success. Their revenge can be seen similar to the protesting function of the "lying flat" movement. The movement mostly spreads through participants' repetitive posting of the lying flat meme, diffusing the act of lying flat into all aspects of their lives – not only pulling out from work, but also describing all forms of rest and relaxation. Through performing the revenge, they get a better sense of who their enemies are and who they are themselves while venting out their despair, anger.

These cycles exist due to the constant pressure from the battle to win kingship and to establish the legitimacy of one's regime. Both Claudius and Gertrude try to convince Hamlet to stay instead of pursuing his personal interest at university by inculcating him to forget his father's death.[17] Ophelia is even taught how to manage her own emotions (which usually cannot be rigidly regulated) by both Polonius and Laertes.[14] Despite these lectures by people high up in the political and patriarchal hierarchy, they don't seem to be able to prevent the repeated tragedies happening in the play. Thus, characters in the play start to become confused about who they are, whether they still have agency amidst the clutter of conflicts in the story.

Struggling to find his identity and trapped in the elusive meaning of success, Hamlet often stops to ask himself of who he is, causing delays in action that may be seen as irrational, disturbing the course of progress in their revenge. Hamlet has the chance to kill Claudius in Act 3, Scene 3, but he starts to think about the happy afterlife of Claudius if he kills him at the moment and gives up doing so. In this hesitation, Hamlet's consideration doesn't entirely center around how he can torture Claudius, but on

how he hasn't been a responsible son for revenge. "I, his sole son, do this same villain send / To heaven, Why, this is hire and salary, not revenge" (line 82-84).[14] He feels that he's losing his uniqueness as an actor of revenge and is assimilated into the norms of the noble family: everything is based on an exchange of conditions, a "hire and salary," without considering one's genuine emotions. This "hire and salary" is similar to how the CCP releases one after another work-encouraging propaganda only in exchange for more loyal labor, rather than truly granting any successful prospect for individuals. When Gertrude tries to win Hamlet back by saying "Come, come, you answer with an idle tongue," (line 14) begging for the truth of Hamlet's emotions for her, Hamlet responds by "Go, go, you question with a wicked tongue" (line 15).[14] This alienation from his mother suggests Hamlet's despondent attitude toward human relationships. His revenge for his father seems to have evolved into solving the puzzle of people's ignorance of him, figuring out how he can win back his position in the noble family. The lack of explanation for the ghost and the ghost's refusal to reveal its mystery also add to the increase of delay in the play. When Horatio interrogates the identity of the ghost, saying "I charge thee, speak!" (Act 1, Scene 1, line 61)[14] it leaves. Marcellus suggests that "We do it wrong, being so majestical, to offer it the show of violence" (line 158-59).[14] The characters in the play display an indifference to orders of speed.

The elusiveness of identity can also be shown in suicidal attempts throughout the play. As Albert Camus claims in his philosophical essay "The Myth of Sisyphus," the single most important philosophical problem is suicide, judging whether one's life is worth living. To live, according to Camus, takes more courage than to die, and thus the hesitation of suicide in fact shows a struggle with the meaning of life, a struggle with finding one's identity in the course of life.[24] In Act 5, Scene 1, the gravediggers' conversation talking about Ophelia's seeming suicide also attests to Camus' argument: "For here lies the point: if I drown myself wittingly, it argues an act, and an act hath three branches – it is to act, to do, to perform" (line 11).[14] Yet, Hamlet doesn't feel at ease listening to their comfortable conversation: "That skull had a tongue in it and could sing once" (line 77-78).[14] Hamlet ponders suicide multiple times. For instance, in Act 1, Scene 2, he sighs, "O, that this too, too sullied flesh would melt, Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew."[14] But he doesn't kill himself eventually, constantly immersed in his struggles without finding a definite reason to die. Ridiculously, he was killed through an intentional murder plot (Act 5, Scene 2). Such hesitation may seem less meaningful as a symbol of struggles in life and identity than a suicide, but it is exactly such pauses in one's course of action that signals one's loss of hope in life.

Nevertheless, the delay of action and disjointment of time and identity are not only manifest through silence. In the play, the characters' lost track of time and identity can also be seen in moments of outburst. When Hamlet finally decides to fulfill his revenge plan, his words of determination still signal a sense of compulsion, unwillingness: "Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting / That would not let me sleep" (Act 5, Scene 2, lines 4-5).[14] This scene, despite being a successful portrayal of Hamlet's revenge, is utterly bitter. His revenge wrongfully led to Gertrude's suicide, and his eventual death leaves Horatio behind in this world, whose sorrow is abruptly disrupted by Fortinbras' arrival: "You from the Polack wars, and you from England, / Are here arrived, give order that these bodies / High on a stage be placed to the view" (line 418-20).[14] It seems that Hamlet's eventual participation in the system is an inevitable result of political pressures. Notably, in the last scene before Hamlet's revenge, his woe for Ophelia starkly contradicts his insult of her in Act 3, Scene 1. It also took Hamlet long to recognize that the corpse was Ophelia's: he showed an unusual sense of empathy and persistence to mourn for the dead body despite the gravedigger's repeated disregard, which eventually leads to Laertes' curse on him for Ophelia's death. Indeed, it has been a constant debate whether Hamlet is pathologically mad, with no answer determined. I believe that the elusiveness of Hamlet's madness and the moments of its determination are exactly an illustration of the systematic repression of people that prompt them to struggle to find a way out, that make them believe in their own value while scared to claim it. The uncertain madness of this oft-analyzed character represents the dehumanizing oppression that drives people to lose who they are.

The change from the First Quarto of *Hamlet* to the Folio further proves that an individual's agency is intentionally left vague in the latter versions of this play, leaving readers to wonder whether any act of determination is truly useful. In the First Quarto, for example, there were still lines that clearly indicate one's stance. As Gertrude tells Hamlet, "But as I have a soul, I swear by heaven, I never knew of this horrid murder" (Scene 11, 2520.2).[26] In contrast, in the Second Quarto and the Folio leave Gertrude's innocence of murder in suspense.

Similarly, the lying flat movement is not an outwardly rebellious movement, nor is it just a movement of complete unchanging silence. While the term "lying flat" is still censored by the CCP, images, videos, advertisements, and other derivative media forms of this term are continue to be prevalent on the Chinese internet, such as RedNote, a digital platform popular among Chinese youth.[27] Many of these images are not the rallying chants of rebels, but rather idly depict users' state of mind: they want to travel, they desire a break, and they question what their roles are in the capitalist society, etc. (Figure 1).

Figure. 1 Search results for "躺平 (Lying Flat)" on RedNote[28]

CONCLUSION

This essay informs the role that *Hamlet* plays in modern work culture in China, which tends to mechanize and assimilate people cyclically. Through introducing the tradition of giving up in human history and contextualizing the development of China as the world factory under the CCP, the research highlights the unique similarity between China's sense of quitting and the disjointment of time and identity in *Hamlet*. Specifically, *Hamlet* represents characteristics of China's lying flat movement born under the class struggles, the strict censorship of the CCP, and the historical collective work culture of the country. *Hamlet*—packed full of its pauses, delays, and contemplation—retains its appeal with the modern Chinese audience even despite a language barrier as it reminds people that hesitation can be a form of resistance against the assimilation of identity under empty, social progress narratives. Similar to the lying flat movement in China, characters in *Hamlet* choose to "lie flat" many times during their revenge schemes, driven off course as they ponder over their identities. Just as the characters grow weary of cyclic revenge in *Hamlet*, the repetitive reforms in China find people becoming increasingly suspicious toward their intentions, causing them to ditch their hope for progress entirely, placing themselves in a uniquely human (or perhaps uniquely Chinese) postmodern condition where they opt out of the collective. Their acts, sometimes quiet and small, signify humans' resilience in face of the pressures from modern society. Yet, notably, Hamlet's eventual commitment to revenge warns against the cycle of progress and action, reminding readers of the inescapable pressure of capitalist work culture that aims to assimilate identities.

The play should not only provoke the contemporary Chinese audience, but also global readers to think about who we are in a time where economic progress takes the central stage of social development, where propaganda is repetitive and endless, where workers' identities are assimilated and fungible, and where people long to give up but can't entirely due to realistic considerations. The silence in lying flat, in not engaging with the system, becomes a new, feasible way of protest. The larger research that informs this literary analysis raises questions in political and labor theory about how our current society is failing the people with its sole focus on economic development, and it also turns to mental health studies to learn best how to tackle the political pressures placed on our lives right now. Further research can be done in analyzing the political effects of such lying flat protests. Admittedly, conforming to the capitalist standards of economic progress and work success is still a predominant part of many of our lives, but reading the enduring appeal of *Hamlet* in current Chinese society (and others) can help people to value the hesitation and the lying flat moments in life for us all to contemplate where (and who) we are.

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PRESS SUMMARY

Many have defined Hamlet as an indecisive person, having multiple chances to seek revenge for his murdered father while not doing so. Past literature has also described him as mad, trapped in a cycle of revenge, losing track of time. However, read in the context of China's lying flat movement, Hamlet's hesitation might signal a silent form of resistance. In this movement, Chinese people "lie flat" – refusing to work and choosing alternative lifestyles – to signal a break from the cyclic propaganda of the Chinese Communist Party government for hard work, progress, and collective success. Hamlet, too, breaks himself away from the taking of power in his family and country. His bizarre actions prompt the audience to think about the effects of cyclical, oppressive narratives we now experience: What are their effects on our psyche? How can the politically powerless resist it?