China is learning to accept alternative modes of work

Digital nomads have set up communes across China to opt out of the rat race. Faced with a youth unemployment crisis, Beijing is now backing alternative ways of working.

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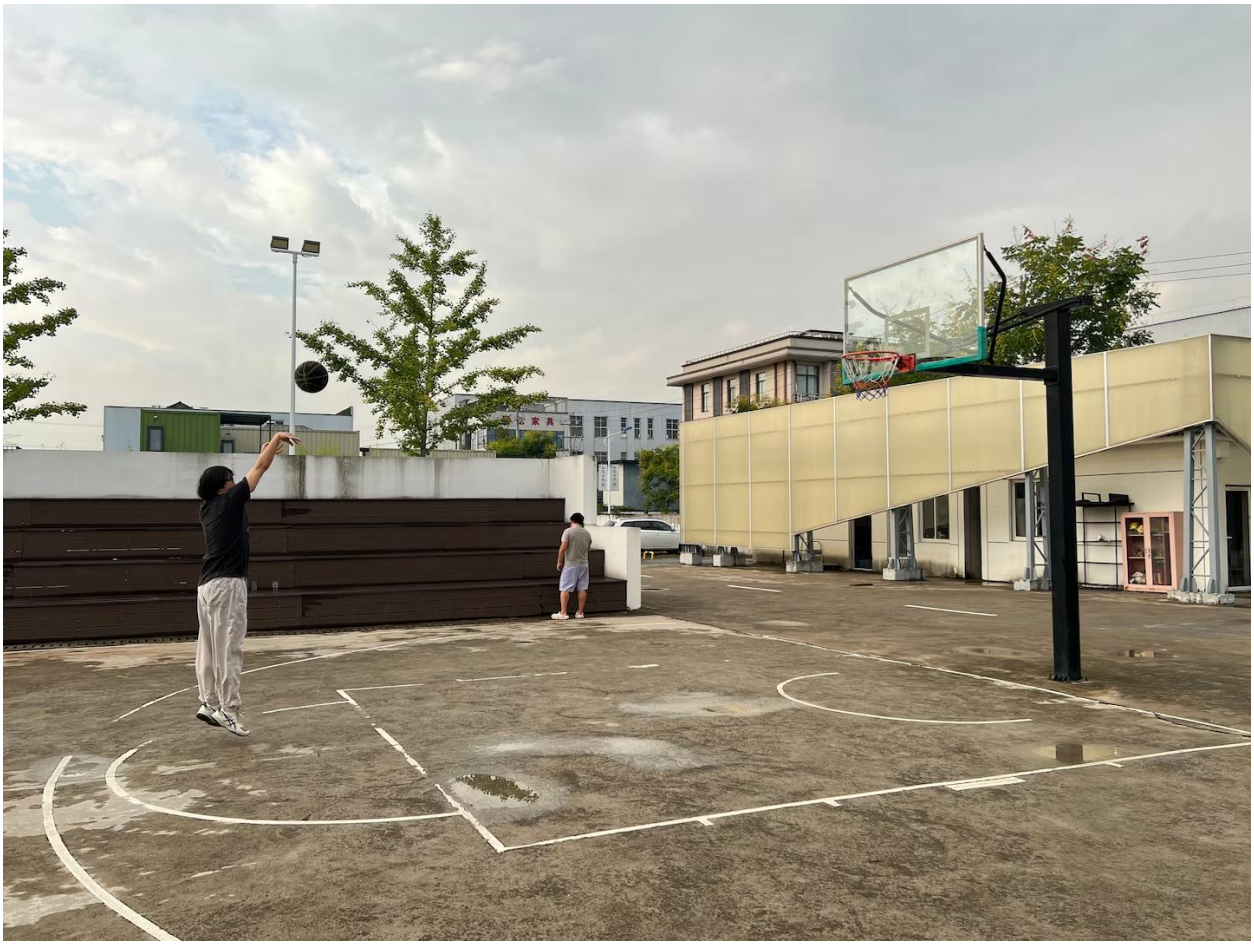

Residents play pickup basketball at the Anji Digital Nomad Commune, an hour west of the tech hub of Hangzhou in eastern China. (Christian Shepherd/The Washington Post)

ANJI, China — At the Anji Digital Nomad Commune — known to its residents as “DNA” — in the tea fields outside the tech hub of Hangzhou, a group of mostly 20- and 30-somethings are modeling a new way of working in China.

Instead of the “996” — 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week — work culture once the norm at Chinese tech companies, they build apps or write film scripts in their own good time, stopping for discussions on artificial intelligence, for a game of pickup basketball or to cook dinner together.

From Dali in the southwest to Anji in the east and Yichun in the north, these kinds of countryside retreats have sprung up across China since the coronavirus pandemic led young urbanites to flee big cities like Beijing and Shanghai and seek alternative ways of living in remote locations.

The trend was initially met with suspicion from authorities. Officials fretted that too many young people were “lying flat” and choosing to do the minimum required to get by.

But as the Trump administration’s tariffs hit the export economy, Beijing is looking for ways to boost domestic growth and particularly youth employment — and sees in Anji an approach it can get behind. This commune has become a model for state-backed efforts to provide alternative ways of living and working that can entice young people back to the workforce.

Although the commune was established as an experiment with minimal government support, its success has since been seized upon by state media and described as an innovative way to “revitalize” the countryside — a top priority of the Chinese Communist Party to close the income gap with cities by boosting investment, tourism and spending in rural areas.

The success of these communities in Anji has brought “curiosity, creativity and transformative vitality” to the countryside and “injected fresh momentum into rural revitalization,” the state-run *Worker’s Daily* newspaper said last month.

Residents, however, said they were mostly there to avoid stress and find new ways to live and work.

“Young people now have a strong urge to carve out their own path or to pursue a lifestyle that is not the same as before,” said Fan Suo, one of the founders and the current manager of the Anji commune.

Before coming to Anji, Fan, 38, had traveled for most of her 20s before settling in Dali, a hippy-ish town in the mountainous southwest that has come to be known as “Dalifornia.” Life there came with a sense of community and possibility that struck Fan as unique. After a decade there, she began to wonder: Why only Dali? She set out to re-create a similarly supportive yet permissive environment elsewhere in China.

In 2021, amid pandemic layoffs, she and two friends founded the commune in the countryside an hour’s drive west of Hangzhou, home to tech giants such as Alibaba and Deepseek. The converted factory backs onto rolling hills of tea fields and bamboo groves.

Down the road is the Anji Creative Design Center, or ACDC, built of modern glass and steel with a deer park and other Instagrammable features. Huge characters painted on a wall by the ACDC car park declare “let some chill out first,” a play on former leader Deng Xiaoping’s slogan “let some get rich first.”

The proximity to Shanghai and Hangzhou was part of Anji’s appeal. Office workers can easily drive or take the high-speed rail out for a week away from the city. Tech companies come for company retreats. Aspiring entrepreneurs come to save money while working on their next start-up.

Dozens of imitation communes have been set up across China in recent years, often with state support.

In the nearby city of Lishui, the local government is offering up to $28,000 and free workspaces as a one-off start-up subsidy for new hubs. Yixian County in Anhui has offered companies $70 per digital nomad they bring in and subsidies for college graduates who start businesses locally.

“We believe that many people can try out this way of living, then later they can decide what to do next,” Fan said. “We’re not saying this is the only option. We simply feel that for our generation there should be the right to choose among diverse lifestyles.”

Beijing forced to adapt

President Donald Trump’s tariffs are taking their toll on the Chinese economy and have worsened the tough environment facing Chinese job seekers.

While China’s economy held up for the early months of the showdown, signs of stress are beginning to appear and the property crisis is worsening. Many analysts now consider China at risk of missing its year-end target of 5 percent annual growth.

Unemployment has been a particular concern as young Chinese, many of whom studied through brutal coronavirus lockdowns, graduate and emerge into an unwelcoming market.

Two years ago the youth unemployment numbers got so bad — hitting a record high of 21.3 percent — that the statistics bureau simply stopped publishing the data. Even after adjusting their calculations, the current rate isn’t much better. Joblessness among 16-to-24-year-olds hit 18.9 percent in August, the highest level since the dataset was adjusted in 2023.

That creates political risks.

“The government is very concerned that unemployment could become such a severe problem or crisis that it would threaten legitimacy and political stability,” said Jenny Chan, an associate professor of sociology at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

Chinese leader Xi Jinping wants the country to lead the next industrial revolution in robotics, clean energy and other emerging technologies. He regularly calls on young people to work hard and spearhead a national project of scientific and technological advancement.

But creating attractive job opportunities for graduates who don’t want to work on the assembly line has been a challenge. Even in sectors where China appears to be doing well — such as electric vehicles — cutthroat competition meant companies were regularly laying off workers even before the United States imposed tariffs.

In interviews with Chan, graduates report finding the job market discouraging. Many are forced to accept salaries of only a few hundred dollars per month or they live off their parents, continue studying and sign up for endless courses and internships to put off taking on work.

“I do not feel young people are very hopeful about the future of China,” Chan said. “They are highly anxious.”

A gentler pace of life

For those who set up the Anji commune, the surge of official interest is a reflection of the government playing catch-up to the reality of people’s choices.

DNAers, as residents call themselves, are over the rat race. Many simply come for a break and to avoid burnout.

“It felt like I had a gun to my back, forcing me to always move forward,” said a senior at a Beijing university who is in Anji to write her dissertation. While some classmates rushed to register for the hypercompetitive civil service exams at the same time as finishing school, the sociology major, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to avoid repercussions from her school, came to Anji for a relaxed environment to write without the pressure of job hunting.

Some of the newer digital nomad communes are little more than youth hostels with a shared workspace, but Anji has a small library, a movie theater, a cafe-bar and a cafeteria. Accommodation ranges from six-person dormitories for $60 a month to en suite shipping container rooms for $50 a night. Residents say it is possible to live comfortably on an income of under $300 per month.

They also aim for a collective experience. On a recent weekday, one foodie resident offered to cook spicy numbing chicken and tofu for lunch, while someone else organized a screening of Taylor Swift’s Eras Tour.

While many in Anji are 20-somethings on an extended gap year, some residents are in their 30s and 40s. Almost everyone speaks of their decision to come to Anji as a way to avoid overworking and “involution” — Chinese slang for putting in extreme effort without achieving obvious success.

“Nowadays there’s involution, mounting social pressures and the downward trend in the economy,” said Amy Tao, 37, who is in Anji for her third visit this year. “All these pressures mean that many people end up feeling exhausted, stuck or wanting to take a break for a while.”

A couple of years ago, Tao quit her safe but boring job in a large state-run aviation firm and founded an English-language tutoring start-up. Being her own boss and working entirely online gave her freedom to travel, and after Anji, Tao plans to try new locations in China and abroad.

The corporate job “was respectable and considered to have obvious advantages for finding a partner and settling down,” Tao said. “But it wasn’t challenging. In that environment, I couldn’t find a sense of achievement.”

Lu reported from Taipei, Taiwan.
