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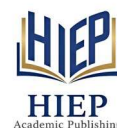
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Deconstructing the Mood of the Era, Seeking a Spiritual Haven: A Review of Wang Tianfu's *The Anxious Society: The Restless Modern Soul*

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Abstract: In the contemporary social context, terms such as “involution,” “lying flat,” “mental internal friction,” and “a sense of ease” have long transcended the realm of internet buzzwords and become precise annotations of modern existential conditions. People seem to be trapped in a collective psychological quagmire: they feel powerless when striving forward, yet are overwhelmed by anxiety when they stop. *Anxious Society: The Nowhere-to-Place Modern Mind* (2026), authored by Professor Wang Tianfu, emerges from this historical moment as a sociological work marked by strong realist concern and profound theoretical insight. The core contribution of the book lies in its crucial shift in perspective—it detaches “anxiety” from the realm of individual psychological distress and reanchors it as a structural symptom embedded in society. This work is not only a “social diagnostic” of emotion but also a “survival guide” that illuminates how modern individuals may achieve inner coherence amid pervasive uncertainty.

Keywords: anxious society; Wang Tianfu; meritocracy; social structure; inner coherence

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标题：解构时代情绪，探寻心灵归途——评王天夫《焦虑社会：无处安放的现代心灵》

摘要：在当下的社会语境中，“内卷”“躺平”“精神内耗”“松弛感”等词汇早已超越了网络流行语的范畴，成为描绘现代人生存状态的精准注脚。人们似乎陷入了一种集体的精神泥沼，前行时感到力不从心，停下时又伴随着巨大的恐慌。王天夫教授所著的《焦虑社会：无处安放的现代心灵》（2026），正是在这一时代背景下诞生的一部具有强烈现实关怀与深厚理论穿透力的社会学著作。本书的核心价值在于完成了一场关键的视角转换——将“焦虑”从个体心理困境中抽离，重新锚定为深植于社会结构的时代症候。这不仅是一部探讨情绪的“社会诊断书”，更是一部指引现代人如何在充满不确定性的世界中实现心灵自洽的“生存指南”。

关键词：焦虑社会；王天夫；优绩主义；社会结构；心灵自洽

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For a long time, understandings of anxiety have largely been confined to the domain of psychology, where it is typically attributed to individual-level deficiencies such as an inadequate mindset, low stress tolerance, or poor emotional regulation. When individuals experience anxiety, they are often met with one-dimensional advice—“adjust your mindset,” “relax,” or “work harder.” Those who suffer from anxiety, in turn, tend to fall into cycles of self-negation and self-reproach, believing that their distress stems from a lack of personal excellence or resilience. This fully individualized and subjectivized interpretation of anxiety not only fails to alleviate widespread anxious affect, but also obscures its deeper social roots, effectively shifting the psychological burden of social transformation onto individuals alone.

In *Anxious Society*, Professor Wang Tianfu’s most significant theoretical breakthrough lies in dismantling the misconception that “anxiety is merely an individual problem,” thereby effecting a fundamental shift in analytical perspective. He elevates anxiety from a matter of psychological distress to a structural, collective, and institutionalized social issue that emerges inevitably in the course of modern social development. The author explicitly contends that we are living in an “anxious society,” in which anxiety is no longer a condition peculiar to certain groups, but a pervasive collective mood that permeates all corners of society and constitutes the psychological norm for the majority. It is, in this sense, an inevitable byproduct of modernity at a particular stage of development and of rapid social transformation. By moving beyond the conventional confines of psychological inquiry and reexamining anxiety through a macro-sociological lens, the book redefines its essential nature, establishes a robust theoretical foundation for subsequent analysis, and provides readers with a new cognitive framework through which to understand their own anxious experiences.

At the outset, the author draws on a wide array of empirical materials to present a panoramic depiction of the “anxious society”. Adolescents lie awake at night under the pressure of educational advancement; young

adults find themselves caught between the demands of postgraduate entrance examinations, civil service recruitment, and an increasingly competitive labor market; middle-aged individuals confront the dual pressures of career insecurity and familial responsibility; and the elderly struggle with health-related anxieties and intergenerational estrangement. From white-collar workers in major metropolitan centers to migrant laborers in small towns, from highly educated elites to the general populace, individuals across the social spectrum are enveloped in varying forms of anxiety, collectively trapped in a psychological state characterized by an inability to pause and a persistent sense of unease. Rather than merely cataloguing these phenomena, the author synthesizes them to delineate the defining features of the “anxious society”: the pervasiveness, diffuseness, transmissibility, and structural embeddedness of anxiety. He thus advances a central claim that individual anxiety is the product of multiple external forces, including social structures, institutional arrangements, cultural norms, and technological developments, and that personal psychological distress is, in essence, a manifestation at the mental level of broader social contradictions.

This conceptual innovation endows the work with a depth that transcends that of conventional social commentary. It moves beyond simple emotional resonance to offer a rational critique of contemporary conditions; it does not merely instruct readers on techniques of individual emotional regulation, but instead encourages them to perceive, through their own affective experiences, the underlying logic of social operation. In doing so, it enables a more objective understanding of anxiety and fosters the possibility of a rational reconciliation with it. For those deeply immersed in anxiety, this shift in perspective can be profoundly liberating: it reframes anxiety not as a personal failing, but as a socially conditioned experience, thereby relieving individuals of unwarranted self-blame and clearing the psychological ground for the subsequent search for inner equilibrium.

1. The Academic Positioning of the “Anxious Society”

Building on the foregoing problematization, a further question arises: what constitutes the book’s most fundamental academic contribution? In my view, the answer lies in the proposal and systematic construction of the concept of the “anxious society” (Wang, 2026, pp. 1-15). This concept is not a mere substitution for existing terminology; rather, it embodies a clear theoretical ambition and strong diagnostic power.

First, the notion of an “anxious society” is distinct from the psychological concept of an “anxiety syndrome.” The latter focuses on dysfunctions and abnormalities internal to the individual, whereas the former concerns the overall state of social operation. When increasing numbers of people within a society experience anxiety—when anxiety is no longer tied to specific personality traits or life events but instead becomes a diffuse, quasi-normal psychological condition—the issue transcends the individual level and points toward the social structure itself. It is precisely this critical distinction that Wang Tianfu captures, shifting the analytical focus from “who is anxious” to “why society produces anxiety” (Wang, 2026, pp. 5-12).

Second, the author systematically identifies four defining features of the anxious society (4-18). The first is pervasiveness: anxiety is no longer confined to particular classes, professions, or age groups, but cuts across social stratification and becomes a shared emotional baseline. The second is diffuseness: anxiety lacks a clearly identifiable object or source; it may attach itself to work, education, health, or interpersonal relations, yet cannot be reduced to any single domain. The third is transmissibility: anxiety circulates rapidly through social networks—transmitted from parents to children, from superiors to subordinates, and from media to audiences—forming a self-reinforcing cycle. The fourth is structurality: anxiety is not an accidental psychological fluctuation, but an inevitable product of the interplay among social institutions, cultural values, and technological logics, exhibiting a high degree of systemic stability.

Third, the concept of the “anxious society” enters into a productive dialogue with existing sociological theories. It extends Ulrich Beck’s notion of the “risk society,” as both attend to uncertainty and crisis in the process of modernity; yet it shifts the analytical focus from external, objective risks to internal, subjective emotional experiences (Beck, 2018, p. 19-25). At the same time, it resonates with Hartmut Rosa’s theory of “social acceleration,” which posits that the continuous speeding up of social change deprives individuals of stable frames of reference, thereby generating persistent anxiety (Rosa, 2015, p. 21-30). Wang’s contribution lies not in merely introducing or reiterating Western theories, but in integrating these intellectual resources with the concrete experience of Chinese society, thus advancing an analytically grounded framework with strong local explanatory power.

In sum, the “anxious society” is not only the central concept of the book, but also an analytical category with significant potential for broader academic dialogue. It offers a compelling entry point for understanding contemporary social mentalities in China and provides a solid theoretical foundation for subsequent analyses of causes, cases, and possible resolutions.

2. The Roots of Anxiety

Having established the academic positioning of the “anxious society,” the author proceeds to a more fundamental question: if anxiety has become a pervasive social emotion, what are its underlying causes? Rather than reducing the answer to a single factor, *Anxious Society* offers a multi-layered analysis spanning structural, institutional, and cultural dimensions, thereby revealing the complex mechanisms through which anxiety is produced.

First, structural pressures constitute the foundation in which anxiety proliferates. Amid rapid social transformation, social stratification has intensified and upward mobility channels have narrowed, while competition in key domains has escalated, such as education, employment, and housing. (Wang, 2026, pp. 26-35). The coexistence of “unequal opportunities” and “heightened competition” places individuals in a persistent state of instability and insecurity. Unable to clearly situate themselves or form reliable expectations

about the future, individuals become trapped in ongoing cycles of comparison and pursuit, giving rise to generalized anxiety.

Second, changes in institutional logics further amplify this sense of unease. Evaluation systems oriented toward performance and efficiency, while facilitating social development to some extent, also subject individuals to continuous measurement and selection. Whether in educational ranking systems or workplace performance appraisals, individuals are incorporated into highly quantified regimes of evaluation. Under such conditions, human value is increasingly reduced to comparable and replaceable metrics; any instance of “falling behind” may entail the loss of opportunities or even downward mobility. Anxiety thus becomes an inescapable accompaniment. This aligns with broader sociological findings that institutional pressures shape emotional experience (Hao & Gu, 2026, p. 62).

Third, cultural value orientations also contribute to the diffusion of anxiety. Contemporary definitions of “success” have become increasingly homogenized, privileging wealth, status, and efficiency, while marginalizing diverse life trajectories. In the context of advanced information technologies, social media further intensifies mechanisms of comparison, exposing individuals to others’ “success narratives” and fostering continuous self-surveillance and self-negation (Wang, 2026, pp. 35-45).

Taken together, anxiety does not originate in individual psychological fragility; rather, it is embedded within social structures and institutional logics, emerging from the intersection of multiple forces in the process of modernity. In this sense, individual emotional distress constitutes a micro-level manifestation of broader social contradictions.

3. The Disturbed Mind

If the foregoing analysis reveals the structural roots of anxiety, the subsequent case studies demonstrate how these macro-level forces unfold within lived experience. This integration of macro-theoretical analysis with micro-level experience exemplifies the distinctive appeal of sociological inquiry: it enables us to perceive the operation of large-scale structures within concrete, tangible life contexts.

In the book, Wang examines the anxious experiences of multiple social groups, each highly representative (Wang, 2026, pp. 50-90):

1. Delivery workers trapped in algorithmic control

Drawing on relevant studies, Wang reveals how food delivery platforms manage and control workers through algorithmic systems. Delivery times are calculated down to the minute or even the second, and every action is monitored. Algorithms continuously optimize routes and time estimates based on historical data, meaning that today’s performance becomes tomorrow’s benchmark—the faster one works, the higher the expectations set by the system. This constitutes an endless mechanism of “self-intensification.” Workers cannot afford to pause: delays result in penalties, negative reviews, and reduced order allocation. Their anxiety is not psychological in origin, but an inevitable outcome of algorithmic design.

2. Educational anxiety among “Haidian Mothers”

Against the backdrop of scarce high-quality educational resources and intense competition, middle-class mothers are drawn into a silent yet relentless struggle. From early childhood, every aspect of a child’s life is meticulously planned—English, mathematics Olympiad training, piano, programming, sports—nothing can be neglected. Mothers invest not only financial resources and time, but also extensive emotional labor: researching policies, gathering information, contacting teachers, and supervising study. Wang argues that this seemingly “overprotective” parenting style is, in fact, the penetration of anxiety mechanisms into the family sphere. Mothers are not simply acting in the best interest of their children; they are driven by the fear that their children may not be “good enough.”

3. The precarious survival of young academics

Wang encapsulates the competitive ecology of Chinese academia with the phrase “publish or perish.” Young faculty members are required to produce a sufficient number of publications and secure research funding within six to eight years, or face dismissal. While modeled on the tenure-track system in the United States, this regime operates under conditions that significantly intensify its pressures: long publication cycles, fierce competition for grants, heavy teaching loads, and additional life pressures such as housing, childcare, and eldercare. As Wang’s cited data suggest, mental health issues among university faculty have become a serious and growing concern.

4. Grassroots workers under “Nanny-Style Governance”

Perhaps most striking is Wang’s analysis of what he terms “nanny-style governance.” In grassroots community administration, layers of accountability pressure compel frontline workers to assume an all-encompassing role. They must respond to every resident demand—from plumbing repairs to mediating disputes, from organizing activities to handling inspections. This model of “unlimited responsibility” imposes an overwhelming burden: tasks are endless, fragmented, and trivial, rendering completion impossible. Their anxiety stems directly from institutional design—a system that seeks to manage everything despite limited capacity inevitably pushes its executors into chronic stress.

These seemingly disparate groups, in fact, share a common condition: all are embedded within an inescapable mechanism of anxiety production. The seemingly opposing choices of “involution” and “lying flat” are, in Wang’s account, merely two sides of the same coin. “Involution” entails relentless competition in pursuit of success, whereas “lying flat” signifies withdrawal from a game perceived as endless. Yet both accept the same premise: that the game exists and its rules are valid. The former seeks victory within the rules; the latter opts out, but neither fundamentally questions the legitimacy of the rules themselves. This is precisely the power of the anxiety mechanism: it captures all participants within its logic, regardless of their stance.

4. Pathways Beyond Anxiety

Having diagnosed the mechanisms that generate anxiety, a crucial question emerges: within the context of an

“anxious society,” is it possible for individuals and society to find a way forward? Rather than offering simplistic solutions, *Anxious Society* outlines a multidimensional pathway. (Wang, 2026, pp. 95-130)

At the societal level, alleviating anxiety depends on structural and institutional adjustments, including improving social security systems, expanding channels for social mobility, and mitigating excessive competition. However, such transformations are inherently long-term and complex.

At the individual level, Wang first critiques popular yet superficial prescriptions like “just think positively,” “don’t be anxious”. He argues that they merely reproduce a logic of blame by shifting responsibility back onto individuals. He then proposes several directions:

First, “cognitive upgrading”. Wang argues that genuine relief begins with an accurate understanding of the problem. When one comes to realize that anxiety is not a personal failure but a symptom of the times; when one recognizes that one is not an isolated “abnormality” but one among countless ordinary individuals experiencing similar conditions; and when one understands how the mechanisms of anxiety operate, whose interests they serve, and why they are so difficult to resist—such clarity in itself constitutes a form of liberation. Under these conditions, individuals are no longer passively led by invisible forces; instead, they are able, at the very least, to assert: “I am not escaping—I am making a choice.”

Second, the cultivation of “self-coherence” (zìqia). This is a key concept proposed by Wang Tianfu. It refers to a lucid and proactive mode of self-settlement: after recognizing the uncontrollability of external conditions, individuals maintain their own rhythm, establish their own evaluative standards, and seek forms of life experience that are not subject to quantification, assessment, or comparison.

Third, “limited resistance.” Wang does not assume that individuals can fundamentally transform social structures, yet he equally rejects the notion that individuals are entirely powerless. Instead, he proposes a series of strategies of “limited resistance.” For example, in the workplace, this includes setting boundaries and learning to say “no”. It is not a refusal to work, but a refusal to undertake meaningless or excessive tasks.

Although modest, these strategies are significant: they carve out spaces of autonomy and, when collectively adopted, may exert countervailing pressure on the broader system.

In the concluding section, the author also reflects on emotional care in the age of artificial intelligence, raising the open question of whether future technologies might serve as tools for psychological relief. It is an issue that invites further sociological inquiry.

Conclusion

Overall, *Anxious Society: The Nowhere-to-Place Modern Mind* achieves a crucial shift from individual psychological explanations to structural analysis by situating anxiety within a sociological framework. It provides a powerful tool for understanding the emotional condition of contemporary society and encourages readers to reassess the relationship between personal experience and social environment.

More importantly, the value of this book lies not in offering ready-made solutions, but in reframing the problem itself. Once anxiety is recognized not as an individual failing but as a product of structural conditions, individuals may begin to free themselves from excessive self-blame and confront their emotions more rationally.

In a highly uncertain modern world, anxiety may not be entirely eliminated. Yet, as the book suggests, understanding anxiety already constitutes a form of resistance. Only by recognizing its social roots can we begin to rearticulate a space for the self between structure and agency.

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