Sang subculture in post-reform China

K Cohen Tan and Shuxin Cheng
University of Nottingham Ningbo China, China

Abstract
This article examines Sang (丧) subculture within the context of positive energy (正能量) in post-reform China, and how as an emergent subculture it is characterised by feelings of defeatism and loss. Chinese youths share Sang memes via social media as a form of affective identification to communicate their sense of disenchantment with the ‘main melody’ of official discourse in post-reform China, and in this sense it is similar to other Internet cultures such as e’gao and diaosi. However, unlike subcultures in the West, Sang subculture does not constitute a form of political resistance, but expresses instead an inchoate feeling of loss among Chinese youths. This article asks two research questions: how does Sang subculture parody normative subject positions of youth constructed by official state discourse, and what does it reveal about the subjectivity of its participants? This article employs Raymond Williams’ concept of ‘structures of feeling’ within a semiotic framework to analyse three sets of Sang memes to understand the processes of subjectivity formation and the affective significance to its participants. Through semiotic analysis of Sang memes and semi-structured interviews with 20 participants aged between 18 and 26, we find that Sang subculture is a current of thought-feeling due to a perceived incapacity by Chinese youths to live up to the ideological re-positioning within official consciousness.

Keywords
Affect, e’gao, Internet memes, positive energy, Sang subculture, structures of feeling

Chinese dream and positive energy
Chinese urban youths used to describe themselves as ‘Ku’ (酷, a transliteration of the English word ‘cool’) in the 2000s, which reflected the subjectivity of this fairly well-educated and affluent generation raised in the climate of rapid economic growth in post-reform China (Moore, 2005, p. 357). A decade later, some Chinese urban youths began to describe themselves as ‘Sang’ (丧, literally translated as ‘bereavement, loss, or to lose’), which was originally a funereal term that has since...
been appropriated to convey various negative sentiments such as defeatism, disenchantment and disconsolation. It is tempting to view Sang simply as a form of losing face, since one of its cognate terms is that of loss (丧失). If we consider that ‘Lien [face] is both a social sanction for enforcing moral standards and an internalized sanction’ (Hu, 1944), Sang as a communicative practice sharing ‘low’ feelings on social media is thus contrary to traditional notions of face loss, since the latter is normally accompanied by feelings of aversion and a desire to remain hidden (Bao et al., 2003). In this sense, Sang appears to be the dialectical opposite of ‘face’ in its communicative dimension despite having a common basis in internalised sanction or self-approval. Lim (2019) has recently argued that the economic and affective structures that undergird the zeitgeist is mutually constitutive. If so, it is of interest to examine why, within the space of a mere decade, urban Chinese youths shifted from expressions of confidence to defeatism and loss when more than 800 million people have been lifted out of abject poverty in China’s modern history.

Sang culture (丧文化) took off in July 2016, when abject images were borrowed from mainstream cultures – such as ‘Paralysed Geyou’ – and re-signified into memes by urban youths to represent themselves in a defeatist and pessimistic style. Official media including the state-owned news agency People.cn were alerted to this and promptly labelled Sang culture as an ‘erosion’ of youth spirit, admonishing Chinese youths to stay positive and to remain ambitious in order to better contribute to society (Xia, 2016). Sang is a youth subculture in post-reform China that parodies the symbolic order through subverting ideological values of Chinese mainstream that codes youth with positive qualities of ‘hope, courage and dynamism’ (Kwong, 1994, p. 248). By contrast, in a survey of 500 students at Nankai university, the post-1990s generation was viewed as a ‘failed generation’ characterised by ‘rebelliousness’ and ‘overindulgence’ (G. Zhang et al., 2011). In Taiwan, youths were described as the ‘collapsed’ or ‘misanthropic’ generation (Lim, 2019). Meanwhile, Sang subculture has yet to be explored within the literature, and the present article fills this research gap with the following research questions: how does Sang subculture parody normative subject positions of youth constructed by official state discourse, and what does it reveal about the subjectivity of its participants?

In Mao’s era, the hegemonic subject position of youth in China was highly collectivistic. As reflected in the state-wide youth campaign of the Red Guards, young people were expected to be self-sacrificing and devoted to the communist revolutionary goal rather than develop their personal wills (Kwong, 1994). However, this collectivistic construction of youth was considerably transformed by China’s reform to market economy in 1978. After the reform, individualism and consumerism flooded into China along with rapid urbanisation and economic privatisation. This placed the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in an ideological dilemma where it must ‘admit capitalism’, however, ‘only on condition that capitalism serves, rather than subverts . . . a national self-image grounded in the history of socialist revolution’ (Dirlik, 1989, p. 34). Within this context, a new generation of youth who were motivated by individualistic concerns demonstrated against the state in Tiananmen Square, thus emerging as a critical social problem (Rosen, 2009). As noted by Kwong (1994), the state subsequently made adjustments to the ideological positioning of youth in the 1990s so that their individual aspirations to material success was not only encouraged, but more significantly, celebrated as a positive contribution to the country under the aegis of the CCP. By doing so, the potentially disruptive individualistic pursuits of youth are discursively re-appropriated into a collectivistic act so that socialist values such as altruism and the collective good would remain ideologically intact.

A more recent example of such discursive re-appropriation is that of ‘Positive Energy’ (正能量) promoted online by the CCP since 2012, which calls for ‘positive emotions . . . attitudes . . . discourses and actions in individuals or collectives such as the society and nation’, encouraging youth
to pursue a materialist ‘good life’ on an individual level while maintaining social harmony (和谐) on the collective level (Yang & Tang, 2018, pp. 15, 19). In this way, the pursuit of personal success by youth is redirected as a contribution towards, rather than a disruption of, the nation and party-state. However, this also opened up a disjuncture ‘between the official consciousness of an epoch . . . and the whole process of actually living its consequences’ (Williams, 1979, p. 159). To better understand its significance and reach, ‘Positive Energy’ was ranked first in 2012 within the lists of ‘Top 10 catchphrase of the year’ and ‘Top 10 New Words from the Chinese Media’ (2012) (L. Sun, 2012).

In addition, Yang and Tang (2018) noted that the term appeared increasingly within official articles and speeches, and the state-run media has appropriated it as a ‘main melody’ (主旋律) online targeting youths. Conceison (1994) defined main melody as a metaphor that ‘refers to the part of a musical composition which is the primary theme of the piece and yet exists among other elements in harmony’ (p. 191), celebrating the primacy of core socialist values and the party. Sociologist Andrew Abbott (2007) forwarded the concept of ‘lyrical sociology’ which contrasted narrative to lyricism, noting that while narrative focuses on events in explaining social progress, lyricism ‘communicate[s] a mood, an emotional sense of social reality’ through concrete emotions (p. 76). As the mediating term between private individualism and social collectivism, ‘Positive Energy’ interpellates Chinese youths into the social fabric by aligning their desires (coded as ‘Chinese dream’) with social priorities. Following a review of online media, Yang and Tang (2018) defined ‘Positive Energy’ as ‘the capacity to induce positive emotions and/or attitudes, the potential to induce constructive/conciliatory discourses and/or actions, in individuals or collectives such as the society and nation’ (p. 15). To paraphrase Williams (1977), the ideological significance of ‘Positive Energy’ expresses not only a thought as felt but more importantly, feeling as thought (p. 132). In addition, the signifier ‘正’ does not only denote ‘positive’, but also connotes order, moral rectitude and integrity. These are fundamental Confucianist precepts that are also coded as masculine in nature (‘yang’), and in this way gender essentialism becomes embedded within state discourse (Wallis, 2014). By reterritorialising the potentially disruptive force of youth into its civilisational tap roots, ‘Positive Energy’ mediates between past and present, collective and individual, continuity and ingenuity in ideological service towards a political aim (Chinese dream). It is in this sense that Du (2014) concludes, ‘Positive Energy’ can be viewed as a form of ‘transcendental nationalism’.

From 2014 onwards, Xi Jinping’s political campaign of the Chinese Dream (中国梦) constructed Chinese youth as an aspirational generation (G. Zhang & Liu, 2017), aligning their individual dreams of upward mobility with the ‘dream of revitalization of Chinese nation’ (Bislev, 2015). From these official discourses, it can be observed how the state attempts to construct an idealised coexistence between individualism from the capitalist economic base and the state’s socialist heritage of collectivistic planning and interference, producing in the process a subject position of youth that is universally positive and harmonious. The double articulation of individualism and collectivism is concretised around the subject position of the singleton, whose personal success is simultaneously constructed as part of collectivist filial responsibility. Just as the main melody of official discourses attempt to construct multiple sets of feelings that are embodied and related, these cannot be reduced entirely to institutions or official belief systems, since the affective elements are formed in response to the ‘meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt’ (Williams, 1977, p. 132).

Academic achievement is traditionally viewed by the Chinese as a prerequisite to upward mobility, and Chinese students’ performance at exams, especially the *gaokao* (national university entrance examination), is seen as an important milestone for their future success (Fong, 2004). However, the encouragement of individual development is exhorted as a social responsibility
rather than a personal choice. The efforts of Chinese youths with regard to the stressful preparation of *gaokao* – described as a test that could mythically ‘determine the course of [one’s] life’ (Wong, 2012) – is not only construed as a filial duty to their parents but also enforced by strict school discipline that extends parental surveillance to maintaining campus ‘harmony’ and eliminating pernicious distractions (Yu et al., 2018, p. 199). Based on their academic performance, youths are often labelled with the binary of being a ‘good/bad’ student, which in turn influences the degree of acceptance and respect they receive on campus (Cockain, 2012).

Cockain (2012) argued that the single-child policy implemented in the 1980s paradoxically undermined and reinforced traditional parental authority over children in China based on the Confucianist value of filial piety (孝). On the one hand, singletons are treated like ‘little emperors’ in China, receiving full financial and psychological investment from their parents and both sets of grandparents. On the other hand, singletons also constitute the sole hope of the family, with the concomitant that they are placed under heavier parental control during childhood (Cockain, 2012) as well as greater parental expectation to bring social mobility, honour and elderly care to the family. These concerns are especially pertinent within the context of rapid economic shifts and widening inequality (Fong, 2004; Szablewicz, 2014). Y. Sun (2017) argued that filial piety remains significant in single-child families, which produces considerable influence on their subjectivity formation and identification. In her interviews, for instance, singletons consider personal setbacks as a failure to meet filial duty, which produces feelings of guilt and inferiority. Filial piety is also prescribed by the state, which is not only advocated as a key element of state ideology but also legislated as a legal obligation of children to provide financial and emotional care to their parents (Leung, 1997; Y. Sun, 2017).

It might be therefore argued that Chinese youth are subjected to two sets of hierarchical binaries within the ideological context of post-reform China. The first set is similar with the ‘high/low’ binary in social status based on a bourgeois sense of self in capitalist society (Hall, 1996), which is reflected in the celebration of consumption, material success and upward mobility in contemporary Chinese society. This is articulated with another set of binary values – ‘harmony/disharmony’ – demanding youth to contribute as an altruistic member of society in addition to their filial responsibilities. The articulation of these two sets of binaries produces therefore an idealised normative subject position of youth that is individually ‘high’ and collectively ‘harmonious’. However, this is accompanied by a deeply conflicted sense of subjectivity that is self-enterprising for personal gains, on the one hand, and self-sacrificing for collective aims, on the other. Leading a life ‘in between . . . two co-existing ideological systems’ has been widely argued to cause cultural disorientation to post-reform urban youth (Fu, 2018; Weber, 2002; X. Zhang, 2015). Because of this, Williams’ ‘structure of feeling’ provides us the theoretical lens to examine the ‘affective elements of consciousness and relationships’ (Williams, 1977, p. 132) that are ‘often admitted to consciousness for the first time in this way’ (Williams, 1961, p. 86).

Studies conducted on Chinese youth culture have tended to follow the American sociological approach, focusing on policy issues around youth delinquency (Ren et al., 2016; H. Zhang et al., 2017) and deviant students in schools (Liu & Xie, 2017), noting the restraining effect of Confucianism on young offenders (H. Zhang et al., 2017). Recent studies on Chinese Internet culture have looked at the practice of ‘e’gao’ (evil work) that employs parody as a form of political expression (Meng, 2011), or as a form of protest culture against online censorship (Meng, 2011; Wallis, 2014) with limited success. At the same time, Internet memes such as ‘little freshness’ and ‘diaosi’ (loser) as examples of citizen-to-citizen connectivity reveal emergent structures of feeling that can relate to generational injustice (Lim, 2019) or sense of disillusionment due to perceived lack of opportunities by youths (Szablewicz, 2014). As a tactic to avoid censorship, the use of
bricolage in e’gao by netizens in China is a creative act of re-signification that interrupts and interrogates ideological norms (Meng, 2011; Wallis, 2014).

_Sang_ subculture exhibits a similar carnivalesque aspect with e’gao, but differs from the latter in its emphasis on disenchantment as affect rather than dissent as activism against censorship (Meng, 2011). In this regard, _Sang_ subculture is closer to _diaosi_ as a form of affective identification, where the latter ‘empower themselves by embracing their lowly status’ online (Szablewicz, 2014, pp. 267–268). However, _diaosi_’s crude reference to male genitalia also makes it an inherently masculinist discourse, thus perpetuating a structural gender inequality in Chinese Internet culture as noted by Wallis (2014). This may also explain why many young men openly identify with the _diaosi_ trope (Szablewicz, 2014). As a further example of citizen-to-citizen connectivity (Lim, 2019), _Sang_ originally referred to young women who lack romantic/sexual experience in Japan prior to its online appropriation by Chinese youths. We noted a corresponding reluctance on the part of male interviewees to identify themselves as _Sang_ participants, preferring to view the activity of sharing _Sang_ memes as a harmless distraction instead. Another distinction between _diaosi_ and _Sang_ memes is that while the former emphasises wealth, appearance and sexual stereotypes thus indirectly reinforcing the normative subject positions it intended to mock (Szablewicz, 2014), the latter focuses instead on explicit expressions of affect and subjectivity such as defeatism, disenchantment and disconsolation.

**Methodology**

A total of 20 participants (14 females and 6 males) aged between 18 and 26 were recruited via Wechat groups through snowball sampling who lived or studied in different cities in China, which included Ningbo (8), Shanghai (6), Wuhan (1), Chengde (1) and Beijing (4). Out of the 20 participants, 13 were undergraduate students while 7 were in the early stages of their career. Snowball sampling was chosen because _Sang_ memes tended to be shared between friends on social media as a form of self-help, and it was easier this way to identify participants who were already engaged in the practice.

We collected a total of 31 memes from 20 participants, and did a first-round coding for number of frequencies followed by a second-round coding for themes. From this, we selected 10 memes that were divided into three sets for semiotic analysis: ‘Paralysed Geyou’, ‘Salted Fish’ and ‘Sad Toad’. Of the three sets of memes, ‘Paralysed Geyou’ is the most iconic representative for _Sang_ subculture, while the other two may be considered supplementary.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with participants as this could provide a ‘repertoire of possibilities’ based on ‘both open-ended and more theoretically driven questions’ to integrate concepts with the experience of participants (Galletta, 2013, p. 45). During the interviews, participants were asked to provide their own definitions of _Sang_ and recall their experiences of _Sang_, as well as the significance of _Sang_ activities in their daily life. We recorded a total of 23 episodes of _Sang_ experiences through recollection by participants. The interview data were subsequently thematically analysed and coded and are presented below in three areas of discussion: school, marriage and society.

Raymond Williams’ (1977) concept of structure of feeling is useful here in understanding ‘social experiences in solution, as distinct from other social semantic formations which have been precipitated and are more evidently and more immediately available’ (pp. 133–134). As youths generally lack discursive power within Chinese society to effect policy change (Meng, 2011), the strategic use of _Sang_ memes becomes a tactic to articulate their ‘thought[s] as felt and feeling as thought’ (Williams, 1977, p. 132). More significantly, Williams (1977) argued that structure of feeling is not only a concept but also a methodology to investigate social experience that are emergent and yet to be defined, since it is ‘derived from attempts to understand such elements [of affect] and their con-
connections in a generation or period, and needing always to be returned, interactively to such evidence’ (pp. 132–133).

Semiotics is concerned with sign systems at work in texts (Stokes, 2003) and it was employed for the analysis of the memes as this can provide a qualitative perspective of the symbolic meaning within the memes as well as relating back to the broader discourses that prompted its production. As the structure of feeling usually occurs on the edge of semantic availability, semiotic analysis is useful in separating between the denotative and connotative levels of a text, between what is shown and what is otherwise implied (Stokes, 2003).

‘Paralysed Geyou’: Sang as waste

‘Paralysed Geyou’ as a set of memes depict a balding middle-aged man dressed in a printed floral t-shirt lying prostrate on the sofa, accompanied by captions describing a state of waste (废) and self-worthlessness. ‘Paralysed Geyou’ as a meme first emerged in the sweltering summer of 2016, as youths sought solace and retreat from school and the discourses of progress, harmony and positive energy. For this reason, ‘Paralysed Geyou’ is most iconic and readily associated with Sang subculture. The original image was a screenshot taken from the TV show I Love My Family. In the show, the well-known comic actor Ge You played the role of a parasitical freeloader who was unemployed and broke and consistently failed in his filial responsibilities. In this sense, ‘Paralysed Geyou’ represents a failed image of masculinity that is anti-normative through his deliberate and self-conscious apathy, and there is a direct correlation between the level of economic productivity and the relative standing of family members as a form of moral sanction (Figure 1).

In contrast to the other responsible and productive members of the family, ‘Paralysed Ge You’ is a degraded subject deemed to be indecent or unhealthy. The ‘unliveable’ abject quality is visually reinforced through the character’s prostrate body: his emaciated face, unfocused eyes and feeble limbs render Ge You more like a corpse than a living person. The sense of visceral loss and despiritualisation is clearly expressed in Figure 2, where his physical body is being ‘gouged empty’ by an unnamed external force, a disembodiment towards idealised normative subject positions. As pointed out earlier, state media moved quickly to label this as an ‘erosion’ of youth spirit, which is concretised around the revolutionary martyr Lei Feng who died at the age of 22. An ideal soldier and voracious reader of Mao’s writings, ‘Lei Feng spirit’ (雷锋精神) was promulgated by Mao in 1963 to induce positive affective identification for youths to emulate, and ‘Learning from Lei Feng’ is a familiar slogan prominently displayed at high schools in China. By stark contrast, the impenitent apathy of ‘Paralysed Geyou’ is morally antithetical to Lei Feng, most notably in the confession of Figure 3: ‘I know I am wasting my life but I don’t want to stop’. ‘Paralysed Geyou’

![Figure 1. ‘I am more or less a waste’.](image1)

![Figure 2. ‘Feels like my body has been gouged empty’.](image2)

![Figure 3. ‘I know I am wasting my life, but I just don’t want to stop’.](image3)
is thus an anti-hero that transgresses moral and ideological norms, and like the *diaosi* who ‘harbour no illusions about their place in the hierarchy of Chinese society’ (Szablewicz, 2014, p. 267), *Sang* participants embrace their subaltern position by using humour as a disarming tactic so that the oppositional reading of official discourses can evade further disciplinary judgement by the authorities while suspending its hegemonic discourses.

**‘Salted Fish’: *Sang* as disenchantment**

Salted fish is a foodstuff made by preserving fish in salt that is subsequently hung out to dry. In the Cantonese dialect, ‘Salted Fish’ (咸鱼) is also a colloquial expression of a corpse, and by extension, someone who is unable to improve their lot in life. The phrase was popularised by the Hongkong comic actor Stephen Chow in the film *Shaolin Soccer* (Yeung, 2001) and is used to describe people who are bereft of dreams and aspirations in life. The analogy between a state of disenchantment and leading a zombie-like existence becomes highly relevant in the context of President Xi’s discourse of ‘Chinese Dream’. According to an official article from People.cn, the Chinese Dream ‘belongs to the state, the nation, as well as every individual Chinese’ (Liang, 2018). The dream of individuals is positively aligned with the national dream of ‘great rejuvenation’ (伟大复兴) of China since ‘the people will be bullied and humiliated if the nation is not strong’ (Liang, 2018). This dream of ‘rejuvenation’ can trace its roots to the trauma and shame suffered during the colonial period of the Opium War, which, according to the same article, imparts an invaluable moral: ‘to lag behind is to be beaten’ (落后就要挨打) (Liang, 2018).

The ‘Salted Fish’ meme is depicted as a hybridised monstrosity with legs, and as ‘a fish out of water’, this signifies that its disenchantment is out of step with the national dream of positivity and progress. It is appropriated as a form of self-representation by youth in its oppositional interpretation towards the ‘Chinese Dream’. The ‘Salted Fish’ meme is circulated within *Sang* culture to articulate the disenchantment of youth towards social pressure and material problems experienced in their daily lives, which is placed under erasure by the official discourses of positive energy and Chinese dream. In this way, the dream of national rejuvenation has also created an enervative environment for youth whose incapacity to realise their dreams is experienced as a form of death (Figures 4 to 6).

![Figure 4. ‘Just ignore me, let me die alone’.](image1.png)

![Figure 5. ‘Don’t stop me, I’ll jump into the sea to kill myself’.](image2.png)

![Figure 6. ‘Heartbroken enough to hang myself’.](image3.png)
'Sad Toad': Sang as disconsolation

The ‘Sad Toad’ meme is adapted from ‘Pepe the Frog’ created by American cartoonist Matt Furie in 2015. While ‘Pepe the Frog’ was used to convey various feelings of sadness, sympathy and political hate within the American context (Pelletier-Gagnon & Pérez Trujillo Diniz, 2018), the meme is generally used to express disconsolation in Sang culture and bears a resemblance to Jiang Zemin whose doctrine of ‘Three Represents’ is widely satirised in e’gao. With its sickly green colour and exaggerated curved mouth, the ‘Sad Toad’ represents youth as being disconsolate in response to the official discourses of harmony, positivity and dreams. The ambiguity of the tears is visually resolved by the exaggerated upward or downward curves of the mouth to denote either joy or sadness. In doing so, the decoding of the image gives precedence to the mouth, which is visually more prominent, as an anchor to the overall meaning. However, the efficacy of this meme as a political satire lies in a veiled cultural reference to a commonly used Chinese proverb (口是心非), which literally means ‘the mouth says yes but the heart says otherwise’. This points to the duplicity of official discourses along with the ambiguous affect experienced by youths in complying with them (Figures 7 to 10).

![Figure 7. ‘Sad Toad with noose’.](image1)
![Figure 8. ‘Sad Toad sobbing’.](image2)
![Figure 9. ‘Smiling Sad Toad’.](image3)
![Figure 10. ‘Sad Toad with tears of joy’.](image4)

The semiotic analyses of ‘Paralysed Geyou’, ‘Salted Fish’ and ‘Sad Toad’ memes exhibit ‘affective elements of consciousness and relationships’ (Williams, 1977, p. 132) in response to the ideological re-positioning of youth in post-reform China and may be considered as variations within a similar representation regime that ‘names a particularizing, shared, affective quality’ (Anderson, 2014, p. 119). To further understand Sang as a signifying practice and what it reveals about the subjectivity of its participants, we will next consider their responses in semi-structured interviews. Where this is available, the corresponding meme used by the interviewee will be indicated in italics.

**Interviews: Sang in practice**

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 participants aged between 18 and 26 who provided 23 episodes in total of Sang experiences from their recollection. Based on first-hand accounts from interviewees, episodes were thematically coded and organised in three broad areas: school, marriage and society. We found that the term Sang was used interchangeably as a noun (e.g. ‘my Sang’) or an adjective (e.g. ‘a Sang experience’) to express the affects of defeatism, disconsolation and disenchantment. For the participants, school and marriage featured more prominently, and setbacks in academic performance were cited most frequently as a
trigger of Sang experience due to the loss of acceptance or legitimacy in front of parents, peers and teachers. For instance,

I failed in an exam once. Usually I ranked at 6th or 7th but that time I ranked lower than 10th . . . I could feel that my parents were very disappointed at me. When I saw their disappointed faces, I was suddenly aware of that thing, a deep feeling of Sang . . . (Interviewee 2, ref. Figure 2)

In the case of interviewee 2, the disappointed look on his parents’ face made him ‘suddenly aware of that thing’, and the intimate disconsolation he experienced lay in the reproduction of the ideological norm where individual pursuit is construed as a collectivistic demand, surrendering internal motivation to external evaluation. Other similar examples included interviewee 4’s failure to successfully obtain her Master’s degree, and this rendered her feeling Sang as it was a mark of degradation from her sister, who held a PhD, causing her to feel she was wasting her life (ref. Figure 3). A total of 14 out of 20 participants related Sang to their experience of being compared to other children by their parents or relatives.

However, as the interviews progressed, many interviewees began to describe Sang in terms of defeatism and nihilism: ‘I believe my life is over after I failed gaokao . . . after that I do not have goals anymore, just muddling along aimlessly’ (interviewee 4). Four other participants expressed a similar view when they described Sang as a state of ‘limbo’. Interviewees 5 and 11 mentioned a lack of personal aim and based the meaning of their life on parental projection: ‘I have no ideas about myself. Everything I did was for them (parents) . . . if they pass away, I think I will leave this world as well’ (interviewee 5). Both interviewees 4 and 5 referred to Figure 4 to express their desire to die alone as a consequence.

Although education was traditionally seen as a path to upward mobility and material success, it was not viewed as constructive to personal development for five interviewees which resulted in a sense of disconsolation: ‘We were all put into a mould to succeed through exams, but it doesn’t work for everyone . . . it is miserable that I don’t know who I am even in university’ (interviewee 7, ref. Figure 8). Similarly, interviewee 3 felt that her life was characterised by a sense of deep-seated boredom: ‘This is what it is, my life, very boring. I study, study and study as I was told . . . so if my study does not prove any reward, what is the meaning of life?’ (interviewee 3, ref. Figure 10). From these accounts, we can observe a sense of defeatism and disconsolation as interviewees were unable to see beyond the futility in their own lives if external expectations from family and school were to collapse.

As many Chinese young people tend to marry in their early or mid-20s or are pressured into doing so, Sang was also closely associated with marriage and the social expectations surrounding it. In particular, the feeling of Sang appeared to be exacerbated by the wider social context of soaring house prices and the single-child generation in China. Five interviewees mentioned that a trigger of Sang was the filial responsibility expected of the single child following marriage, which was described as a ‘2 vs 8 model (single-child couple vs two sets of parents and grandparents on both sides)’. Purchasing property for young couples is a key rite of passage and in many cases a precondition for marriage, with the ability to do so deemed as a crucial symbol of personal success and family status. However, this is becoming increasingly difficult due to the inflation of housing prices in China since 2004 (Cui, 2016). This sentiment of disconsolation was shared by eight interviewees, who felt it was nearly impossible to materialise the social expectation of purchasing on their own a house or apartment in major cities like Shanghai or Beijing (ref. Figure 7). Interviewee 13 described the dilemma in the following terms:
To get the best paying jobs it is ideal to go to Shanghai, Beijing or Shenzhen but it is impossible to buy an apartment there and find a partner at the same time because of the ‘996’ work culture. No matter how hard I work I can never catch up with my friends whose parents give them everything from birth. This makes me feel Sang. (Interviewee 13, ref. Figure 6)

‘996’ is a term popularised by Jack Ma celebrating the culture of working over-time for 12 hours a day (9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m.) for 6 days per week. Five interviewees expressed their sense of disconsolation at the inability to balance competing demands on their time to fulfil what others expect from them (ref. Figure 9):

In high school and university my parents used to disapprove of me dating because I needed the grades for a good future. Now that I started working they pressure me to find a partner soon. The moment I find one, they’ll tell me it’s better to have a child while I’m still young. Then I will have to look after them when they get old. When will it ever be about me? (Interviewee 17, ref. Figure 7)

Sang is also used to express more generally the sense of disenchantment with society and the inability to effect any change:

Sometimes our society also make me Sang . . . I live in this society and I know both positive and negative things happen. If only the positive ones are reported, it makes me feel that the leaders of this state cannot see our hardship . . . and if I post anything to criticise it, it will just be deleted. This makes me very sad. (Interviewee 2, ref. Figure 6)

Although individual rights and democracy are included within the official discourse in China, there remain significant differences in terms of its implementation from the West, and Chinese youths receive very little institutional support from the state to engage in political issues (Szablewicz, 2010). Attempts at political engagement by youth have also failed to produce concrete changes in policy (Meng, 2011), and this is reflected in the responses of interviewees 1 and 6, who used Sang to register their disappointment towards the neglect of sexual abuse of young girls within the Chinese legal system: ‘If even the law does not provide any protection then what can I do with my own effort?’ (interviewee 1, ref. Figure 5). In light of the student protests in Hong Kong between June and December 2019, four interviewees felt pessimistic that this was not likely to bring about any real change, with three interviewees adding that this made them feel Sang because ‘at least they could express their dissatisfaction while we can only smile or pretend to distract ourselves’ (interviewee 18, ref. Figure 10).

However, sharing Sang memes with friends was also seen as a form of catharsis. Fifteen out of 20 interviewees mentioned how Sang memes could effectively convey their negative feelings such as worthlessness, anxiety and disappointment, which are not normally communicated within Chinese society otherwise. In addition, the suicidal and defeatist images were described by interviewees to show their emotions ‘vividly’ (interviewees 5, 7, 13), ‘powerfully’ (interviewees 1, 9, 14, 18) or ‘in a flooding way’ (interviewees 4, 15, 20), and through this help them achieve a sense of psychological ‘relief’ (interviewees 2, 4, 6, 7, 15–18). The use of humour is used to intentionally mitigate or obfuscate their own negative or nihilistic feelings to ‘avoid being hated by people who generally prefer positive atmosphere’ (interviewee 1) or hedge them from parents who ‘cannot accept it if it’s expressed directly’ (interviewee 5).
Apart from individual catharsis, Sang subculture also involves a form of group activity akin to self-help. This is generally described by interviewees as ‘talking about the upset things with each other’. This type of activity might be called ‘speaking bitterness’ (诉苦) or confiding in each other, a term Cockain (2012) used to describe the communications among Chinese youth where they ‘articulate themselves . . . as harrowed and powerless’ in an attempt to ‘define their place in contemporary Chinese society’ (pp. 98–99). For interviewee 1, the willingness to participate in ‘speaking bitterness’ is an important characteristic which distinguishes Sang youth from others: ‘Seventy-percent of my friends are Sang, usually we talk about depressing events in life, and the atmosphere could be quite pessimistic [laughs] . . . People who are not Sang will just turn away’ (interviewee 1, ref. Figure 10).

Speaking bitterness was also seen as an important part of Sang subculture as a communicative practice where ‘we can resonate with each other’ (interviewee 2) and the ‘vulnerabilities of young people could be expressed’ (interviewee 7). This normally takes place among a handful of close friends in private communications during moments of Sang experience rather than a deliberate or organised subcultural activity. Interviewee 6 explained, ‘We don’t talk about negative things for the sake of Sang, but after a gloomy conversation we all know it is Sang culture’. Although Sang as an affect may seem amorphous or ambiguous depending on the circumstances it is triggered, it was a structure in the sense that you could perceive it operating in one work after another which weren’t otherwise connected – people weren’t learning it from each other; yet it was one of feeling much more than thought . . . (Williams, 1979, p. 159)

**Conclusion**

This article analysed Sang subculture as a current of thought-feeling among Chinese youths by employing Raymond Williams’ structure of thought, in response to the ideological re-positioning of youth by official state discourses of positive energy and upward mobility, where individual pursuits of youths are subjected to the collective and normative expectations of the family, school and state. Sang subculture parodies these idealised subject positions through sharing memes of defeatism, disenchantment and disconsolation, revealing in the process an affective identification of loss due to the disjuncture between official consciousness and the actual consequences of living within it.

By sharing memes and ‘speaking bitterness’ with each other, Sang participants were able to engage in a temporary form of catharsis as well as reflecting on hegemonic social values. The perceived incapacity by youths to live out the Chinese dream, along with the lack of possibilities for upward mobility and growing awareness of income inequality was also observed by Szablewicz (2014), and more specifically at the privileged upper classes of Chinese youth who had inherited their wealth rather than being self-made. The sense of defeatism and loss may stem from a general feeling that the current economic success is due to structural reforms, and that the post-1990s generation had lost out on the once-in-a-generation opportunity no matter how hard they might work to achieve a similar expectation of success. Future research might look at the relationship between ‘996’ work culture and Sang subculture to understand how this sense of perceived incapacity might be perpetuated due to structural forces.

The two limitations to the current study are related to both gender and class. First, interviewees were drawn from middle-class backgrounds using snowball sampling, and this may influence the level of cultural capital they have in sharing memes online, their anxiety regarding house purchase in cities such as Shanghai and Beijing, and the level of social expectations that were foisted upon
them. Further research on Sang culture might examine whether this activity takes place outside of middle-class youths in order to ascertain its reach as well as evaluate its wider significance.

Second, there was a significant disparity between the number of male interviewees in relation to female interviewees (6:14), and while potential male interviewees were approached, most of them were more reluctant to identify themselves as Sang although they engaged in sharing Sang memes. In other words, there was a distinction between what male interviewees saw as a harmless activity to let off steam rather than a form of affective identification. Future research might take this into consideration regarding the participation in Sang subculture by Chinese male youths, since Chinese society remains largely patriarchal with gender essentialism embedded in both its public and online discourses, to understand the potential reasons for their reticence.

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**ORCID iD**

K Cohen Tan https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6484-7209

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**Author biographies**

**K Cohen Tan** is Assistant Professor of Digital Media and Communication at University of Nottingham Ningbo China. His research interest includes Critical Theory, Cultural Studies and Digital Media.

**Shuxin Cheng** is a Research Assistant in the School of International Communications at the University of Nottingham Ningbo China.