Moments of "Madness"

Cynicism in Times of COVID

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Abstract

This paper zeroes in on several transient yet significant moments that emerged in China during November to December 2022, when the country's strict zero-COVID policy transitioned to an abrupt lift of all restrictions. It analyzes three types of phenomena to deepen our understanding of how cynicism operates as a coping mechanism for individuals to make sense of their everyday lives: (1) "literatures of madness" (*fafeng wenxue*), (2) group crawls on college campuses, and (3) pandemic jokes (*duanzi*) satirizing policy changes. The explored scenes illustrate a spectrum of cynical responses that challenge the distinctions between the real and the fictional, truths and rumors, and the playful and the political. Consequently, cynicism emerges as a diverse set of strategies on both textual and performative levels, aiding in the interpretation of the absurd. Further, an investigation of these cases sheds light on understanding contemporary youth culture in the context of a global health crisis. Amid the popular rhetoric about the youth celebrating passivity, all three cases illustrate the liminal space in which youths navigate between passivity and agency, between disillusionment and hope.

Keywords: literatures of madness, group crawls, pandemic jokes, youth culture, cynicism

Introduction

On May 5, 2023, the World Health Organization declared the end of the Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) for COVID-19. Since its initial outbreak in January 2020, the global death toll from COVID has reached nearly seven million.[1] This pandemic has not only posed a severe health crisis but has also exposed and intensified various societal issues, including class disparities, global inequities, and geopolitical conflicts.

The Chinese government's response to COVID-19 has been characterized by its extensive use of lockdowns and associated measures, including widespread testing, contact tracing, and quarantine mandates. Initially lauded for their effectiveness in containing the virus's spread, over time, these measures have drawn substantial criticism. Concerns have been raised regarding such issues as a lack of transparency, threats to privacy, restrictions on freedom of expression, and the stringent enforcement of containment measures.[2] According to Jiacheng Liu, "The response to the coronavirus in China unfolded as a highly contested public performance, where loyalty was tested, political order was questioned, and an ideological crisis became evident."[3] Liu sees this as the "transformation of personal suffering into a public spectacle,"[4] constituting a series of ongoing social dramas interwoven with the evolving pandemic. Focusing on the less sensational aspect of "social drama," this essay is a study of a handful of transient yet significant

1. Giulia Heyward and Marc Silver, "WHO Ends Global Health Emergency Declaration for COVID-19," NPR, May 5, 2023, https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2023/05/05/1174269442/who-ends-global-health-emergency-declaration-for-covid-19.
2. Eva Pils, "China's Response to the Coronavirus Pandemic: Fighting Two Enemies," *VerfBlog*, May 25, 2020, https://verfassungsblog.de/chinas-response-to-the-coronavirus-pandemic-fighting-two-enemies.
3. Jiacheng Liu, "From Social Drama to Political Performance: China's Multi-front Combat with the Covid-19 Epidemic," *Critical Asian Studies* 52, no. 4 (2020): 475.
4. Liu, "From Social Drama to Political Performance," 476.

scenes in response to the pandemic in China. It argues for the significance of investigating transitory occurrences of moments of "madness" in the context of everyday life.

Notably, the term *madness* is a homophone of *lockdowns*, thereby, metaphorically, hinting at the collective state of upheaval experienced during the ongoing pandemic. Originally, the notion of "moments of madness" referred to outbursts seen in radical social movements during tumultuous historical eras, primarily focusing on political conflicts and contentious events.[5] Moving beyond the scope of these moments tied to political movements, an examination of instances of "madness" in everyday life unveils their role as a means of social commentary. They highlight the creativity and resilience of individuals grappling with adversity and offer a platform for a diverse range of experiences to be shared. Further, in a Foucauldian sense, *madness* is defined by those who possess the authority to determine what is normal and abnormal. Thus, madness is not purely an individual condition but a product of broader societal mechanisms.[6] Institutions such as asylums and psychiatric hospitals functioned as mechanisms of social control, which reinforces the dominance of rationality and marginalizes those who deviated from established norms.[7] Consequently, investigating instances of "madness" within everyday life offers pivotal moments of truth, which provides critical insights into the varied nature of social responses to the health crisis. In this light, the essay seeks to answer two key questions: What kind of frames of reference can we use to make sense of pandemic experiences? How can the concept of cynicism enrich our understanding of the pandemic experiences?

To address these questions, I identified, tracked, and recorded content posted on two social media platforms, Weibo and WeChat, as well as two popular websites, Douban and Zhihu, during November and December 2022. I examine three types of phenomena that emerged during the

5. Aristide R. Zolberg, "Moments of Madness," *Politics & Society* 2 (1972): 183–207.
6. Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965).
7. Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*.

pandemic: (1) "literatures of madness" (*fafeng wenxue*), (2) group crawls on college campuses, and (3) pandemic jokes (*duanzi*) satirizing policy changes. In analyzing these phenomena, I illustrate how cynicism operates as a coping mechanism for individuals trying to make sense of their everyday lives. These responses effectively bring the unseen to light and give voice to the unspoken. They showcase the ways in which transient moments bear significant implications for the dialectics of agency and passivity surrounding pandemic politics. Moreover, my investigation into these cases sheds light on understanding contemporary youth culture in the context of a global health crisis. At a time when popular rhetoric is concerned with how youths celebrate passivity, all three cases involve the opening up of liminal spaces in which young individuals grapple with the delicate balance between disillusionment and hope and between embracing passivity versus asserting agency.

Literature Review: Narrating the Pandemic

The question of how to narrate the pandemic is a battleground with various participants. On a global scale, the othering of the virus in liberal democracies highlights the lack of compassion between populations and a tendency to unscrupulously associate the virus with particular political systems.[8] Consequently, a collective memory lapse occurs, wherein the initial account of failure and the corresponding pleas for accountability are eclipsed by conflicting narratives of systemic supremacy or inadequacy.[9] The politics of laying blame between China and the United States, for instance, showcases

8. Marius Meinhof, "Othering the Virus," Discovering Society, March 21, 2020, https://archive.discoversociety.org/2020/03/21/othering-the-virus/.
9. Yawen Li and Marius Meinhof, "Imagining Pandemic as a Failure: Writing, Memory, and Forgetting under COVID-19 in China," in *COVID-19 in International Media: Global Pandemic Perspectives*, eds. John C. Pollock and Douglas A. Vakoch (New York: Routledge, 2021), 87.

how both countries react to each other's discourse and engage in competing narratives about the origin of COVID and racial profiling.[10] In addition, popular memories about the pandemic are soon appropriated by various actors to fulfill their particular agendas.[11] Two early examples of this appropriation are Li Wenliang, a whistleblower who passed away during the outbreak in Wuhan, and Fang Fang, a writer whose posts on lockdowns sparked controversy. The Chinese government reacted differently to the two cases, commemorating Li as a national hero while remaining mostly silent about Fang. What the two cases have in common is that their public stories were appropriated to demonstrate the failure of liberal democracy in the Western context.[12]

That narrating the pandemic produces such a hotbed of discursive competition demonstrates the importance of entry points when telling a pandemic story. The early successful stories of "containing" the virus in China contribute to sustaining the political legitimacy of the Xi Jinping administration.[13] The state soon appropriated these stories to consolidate the dominant order by having tragic memories rewritten.[14] Narratives about the pandemic appearing in television drama series, for instance, adopt a humanistic approach to evoke a sense of collectivism.[15] In contrast, the richness of digital memories complements and contests the official narrative and draws public attention to the importance of remembrance. Survivors of COVID

10. Bernadette Nadya Jaworsky and Runya Qiaoan, "The Politics of Blaming: The Narrative Battle between China and the US over COVID-19," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 26 (2021): 295–315.
11. Li and Meinhof, "Imagining Pandemic as a Failure."
12. Li and Meinhof.
13. Ran Ran and Yan Jian, "When Transparency Meets Accountability: How the Fight against the COVID-19 Pandemic Became a Blame Game in Wuhan," *China Review* 21, no. 1 (2021): 7–36.
14. Jeroen de Kloet, Jian Lin, and Jueling Hu, "The Politics of Emotion during COVID-19: Turning Fear into Pride in China's WeChat Discourse," *China Information* 35, no. 3 (2021): 366–92.
15. YunYun Zhou and KaiLing Xie, "Gendering National Sacrifices: The Making of New Heroines in China's Counter-COVID-19 TV Series," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 15, no. 3 (2022): 372–92.

have narrated their experiences of suffering from exclusion, discrimination, and stigmatization, factors neglected by the state-led memory-making process.[16] New forms of political participation have also emerged. The collective mourning in the comments section of Dr. Li Wenliang's Weibo account moves beyond conventional contentious politics and expands the scope of activism.[17] Revisiting Li's Weibo at different moments, netizens formulate alternative narrations of the pandemic by transforming personal experiences into collective memories, a process that defends social justice and advocates citizens' rights.[18]

Insightful as these studies are, they mostly focus on sensational political and media events, as well as the documented experiences of witnesses to those events. This paper instead focuses on the mundane moments of everyday life that are typically characterized by incoherence, fragmentation, and ephemerality. It adopts what Guobin Yang calls a "scenic view." Yang notes, "Scenes are dynamic moments of action in concrete settings. Not structures or institutions, they enact and encapsulate social structures and institutions in powerful ways."[19] Consequently, a " 'scenic' view . . . promises an open, multilayered, and dialogic understanding of . . . politics and society more broadly."[20] For Kimberly Creasap, a scene must be conceptualized as "a process" instead of "as a stable context where political activity happens."[21] Both approaches would reject a fixed reading of pandemic stories and would instead advocate analysis situated within particular circumstances. Given the ever-changing landscape of the pandemic, adopting a scenic approach helps to unveil the transient,

16. Yi Yang, "Pandemic and Memory: Online Memory Narratives of COVID-19 Survivors in China," *Chinese Journal of Communication* 15, no. 4 (2022): 611–34.
17. Xun Cao, Runxi Zeng, and Richard Evans, "Digital Activism and Collective Mourning by Chinese Netizens during COVID-19," *China Information* 36, no. 2 (2022): 159–79.
18. Cao, Zeng, and Evans, "Digital Activism and Collective Mourning."
19. Guobin Yang, *The Wuhan Lockdown* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 212.
20. Yang, *The Wuhan Lockdown*, xvii.
21. Kimberly Creasap, "Social Movement Scenes: Place-Based Politics and Everyday Resistance," *Sociology Compass* 6, no. 2 (2012): 182.

situation-dependent moments experienced by groups and individuals during this time, along with the innovative ways individuals have responded to them.

Methods and Data

The scenic view for this article is taken via case studies. I conducted a qualitative content analysis focusing on posts published online during November and December 2022. This time frame marked a significant shift in China's approach to the COVID-19 pandemic, an abrupt transition from stringent lockdowns to reopening. In the middle of this period, college students joined protestors to memorialize those who tragically died by fire in Ürümqi, Xinjiang, on November 24, 2022. Holding blank pieces of paper, students from a total of fifty-three universities demanded the end of the country's zero-COVID policy on November 27, 2022.[22] Soon after, on December 7, 2022, all restrictions were abruptly lifted, resulting in an unprecedented surge of COVID-19 cases nationwide.

Throughout these two months, I visited the four sites, Weibo, WeChat, Douban, and Zhihu, on a daily basis. I employed key words search such as "pandemic" (*yiqing* or *xinguan*), "pandemic humor" (*yiqing youmo*), "hell jokes" (*diyu xiaohua*), "pandemic memories" (*yiqing jiyi*), and "pandemic narratives" (*yiqing xushi*) to collect content relevant to my study. These key words were selected to gather content encompassing a wide array of perspectives and expressions related to the pandemic. In organizing the collected content, my selection criteria were shaped by the prevalent themes that surfaced, leading to categorization of online content that shared similar themes or subjects. During the data collection phase, I assumed the role of

22. Manya Koetse, "The 'Blank White Paper Protest in Beijing' and Online Discussion on 'Outside Forces,'" What's on Weibo, November 27, 2022, https://www.whatsonweibo.com/the-blank-white-paper-protest-in-beijing-and-online-discussions-on-outside-forces/.

an observer and refrained from participating in discussions to avoid any potential disruption to the dynamics of online communities. All collected data were organized and stored in a password-protected Word file. While the majority of this content remains accessible online, some of it has disappeared. Given the anonymity of content contributors, I attribute their online aliases when quoting their posts.

It should be noted that some content was posted prior to the designated data collection period, while most emerged during the specified time frame. Given the constantly evolving nature of the pandemic, my analysis is intended to capture a snapshot of the then ongoing phenomena, shedding light on facets that may have been underrepresented and underexplored in scholarly discussions. All the posts are originally published in Chinese, and all translations are mine.

Cynicism in Times of Uncertainty

Moments of uncertainty, especially during times of drastic societal transformation, serve as fertile ground for nurturing a rise in cynicism. In analyzing discourses surrounding cynicism and moral decay in Russia, Nancy Ries observes the ways in which cynical discourse provides effective metaphors individuals can use to make sense of Russia's post-socialist transformation:

> Through talk about cynicism (and through cynical talk), people actively deconstruct whatever legitimizing discourses or practices are presented on behalf of the reformulated political-economic order, and thus regularly inoculate themselves against any naive belief in state or market ideology; at the same time, the notion of ubiquitous cynicism explains and justifies their own less than honest actions—actions such as misrepresenting their income on tax declarations or as criminal as hijacking trucks or perpetrating scams. Finally, but perhaps most importantly, cynicism in its

> many guises is metaphoric shorthand—a way of encapsulating, depicting, and circulating a view of the present world.[23]

Alexei Yurchak analyzes the use of cynicism as a form of noninvolvement during official events. Writing about the period of late socialism in the Soviet Union, Yurchak draws a distinction between official events and what he calls "parallel events," as part of a "parallel culture," noting that the latter "stress[es] their grounding in personal noninvolvement in the official sphere."[24] Cynicism matters less in terms of the extent to which people believe in official ideologies than how it relates "to the official representation . . . based on intricate strategies of simulated support and on 'nonofficial' practices behind the official scenes. This relation between subject and power gradually brought about a major crisis of the system and provided the inner logics of change [in the Soviet Union] in the mid-1980s."[25] Consequently, cynicism not only serves as a helpful lens individuals can use to make sense of drastic societal transformations but also has the potential to foster political changes.

Contextualizing the discourse of cynicism under a contemporary authoritarian regime, Kevin Latham delineates three types of cynicism that characterize Internet use and regulation in China. First, there is cynicism prevalent within particular social circles, as well as among those who are excluded from these circles. Second, cynicism exists among the general population skeptical about government propaganda. Lastly, cynicism is present from within the party and government itself, as they harbor a sense of distrust toward their own propaganda.[26] While these three types of cynicism

23. Nancy Ries, "'Honest Bandits' and 'Warped People': Russian Narratives about Money, Corruption, and Moral Decay," in *Ethnography in Unstable Places: Everyday Lives in Contexts of Dramatic Political Change*, eds. Elizabeth Mertz, Kay B. B. Warren, and Carol J. Greenhouse (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 277.
24. Alexei Yurchak, "The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism: Power, Pretense, and the Anekdot," *Public Culture* 9, no. 2 (1997): 163.
25. Yurchak, "The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism."
26. Kevin Latham, "Differentiating Cynicisms: Irony, Cynicism and New Media in Contemporary China," In *Irony, Cynicism and the Chinese State*, eds. Hans Steinmüller and Susanne Brandtstädter (New York: Routledge, 2015), 173–91.

manifest in distinct ways, they all share a common thread—lack of trust in official ideologies—and are observed in both nonstate players and state actors.

Drawing on these findings, this essay analyzes three pandemic-era scenes that have given rise to novel manifestations of cynicism in reaction to official policies and rhetoric. I elucidate how the creative practices manifested within these three scenarios exemplify various cynical strategies that challenge social norms and lampoon the absurdity of society. Analyzing these practices can enrich our current understanding of cynicism, and I seek to demonstrate that what may be perceived as political apathy can, in fact, be harnessed to actively engage in political discourse.

Scene 1: Literature of Madness

Around 2021, a genre of Internet posts called "literature of madness" (*fafeng wenxue*) went viral online. As the name suggests, the genre uses incoherent language to simulate the words spoken by a person during a state of madness, creating a sense of irrationality and expressing intense emotions.[27] For instance, one message complaining about poor customer service reads:

> I understand that I do not deserve to get my shipping order processed. Everyone else has had theirs processed, while I, on the other hand, have to be extra cautious even when following up with the shipment schedule, becoming a subject of ridicule. I have a rough life, subject to cold gazes from everyone. Even online, I know I do not deserve to meet the threshold for an early scheduled delivery. I want to speak up for myself. I swear

27. Yu Bingyue 余冰玥, "'Feihua wenxue' 'fafeng wenxue' . . . weishenme dajia xihuan bu haohao jianghua" "废话文学""发疯文学" . . . 为什么大家喜欢不好好讲话 (Literature of madness and literature of nonsense: Why do people enjoy speaking improperly), *zhongguo qingnian* 中国青年 (Chinese youth), September 28, 2021, http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2021-09/28/nw.D110000zgqnb_20210928_2-09.htm.

> to the cold, ruthless night and the icy wall that I want to be part of it. But I am incapable. Oh my god, I am exactly a wandering pumpkin seed floating restlessly in the corn and pumpkin soup.[28]

Another example goes as follows: "It's okay, I'm not important. I'm just a withered fallen leaf, drifting away with the wind."[29]

Both examples employ a self-deprecating tone to convey sentiments and states of emotion, conveying the futility of harboring such mundane desires as expecting timely order deliveries when one lacks the authority to make such demands. This discursive act shares similarities with the theater of the absurd, in which "the dialogue . . . consists of meaningless cliches and the mechanical, circular repetition of stereotyped phrases."[30] The incorporation of this rhetorical style into everyday conversations underscores the absurdity inherent in certain mundane activities. It appears that this narration, being a novel approach to expressing consumer dissatisfaction, has proven to be an effective strategy for customers to engage with customer service representatives. Subsequently, this discursive pattern was quickly adapted to portray diverse situations related to the pandemic.

Playing on the homophonic association between *feng*, meaning "insanity," and *feng*, meaning "lockdowns," the literature of madness captures the ironic aspects of everyday life during the pandemic. This creative avenue extends to the realm of parody, wherein classical literary works are reinvented to satirize contemporary circumstances, reflecting the zeitgeist of the times. On March 18, 2022, a user with the handle @K posted an update on Douban that imitated the opening of *The Metamorphosis* by Kafka: "One

28. Dazongshizengjia 大宗师曾迦, "Fafeng wenxue shi shenmegeng" 发疯文学是什么梗 (What is literature of madness), Zhihu, March 17, 2022, https://www.zhihu.com/question/483823561/answer/2393983881.
29. "Fafeng wenxue: nianqingren de jiaoliu mima" "发疯文学", 年轻人的交流密码 (Literature of madness: The secret code of communication among young people), Sohu, October 29, 2022, https://www.sohu.com/a/600753604_120546417.
30. Martin Esslin, "The Theatre of the Absurd," *Tulane Drama Review* 4, no. 4 (1960): 5.

morning, Gregor Samsa woke up from an uneasy dream to find out that his neighborhood had been locked down." Netizens began to share @K's post and create new content in a similar style. An online community known for its users interested in literature and arts, Douban received thousands of submissions. These iterations drew inspirations from various sources, including classic literary works, screenplays, popular songs, and poems to describe the repetitive experiences of COVID testing, quarantine, and contact tracing. Below is a small selection of examples of this genre:

[Example 1]

> Baoyu changed into the crimson gold python-patterned jacket with fox fur trim and adorned with stone-blue sash and tassels. He was about to go and visit Lin Daiyu, who had been confined for a week. He wondered if she was feeling better. Just then, Xi Ren hurriedly came out and stopped him, "Madam Lian has already said that even if you have a green code, you can't go out. Whoever goes out must take precautions!" But Baoyu refused to listen, hastily saying that he just wanted to see her for a moment. Unable to persuade him, Xi Ren couldn't help but shed tears in sadness. Truly, they were a pair of unfortunate adversaries.[31]

[Example 2]

> As the conversation was about to end, Colonel Aureliano Buendía looked at the long line of nucleic acid tests, the people wearing masks with blurred faces, and felt lost in loneliness. Sadly, he typed the message: "Nucleic acid test in the neighborhood." There was a long silence on the other end, indicating that the other person was typing. Suddenly a cold WeChat message popped up from Colonel Aureliano Buendía: "Don't be

31. aaron, "Yitiao douban dongtai yinfa de 'yiqing wenxue' fuxing" 一条豆瓣动态引发的"疫情文学"复兴 (A renaissance of "pandemic literature" inspired by a post on Douban), Douban, March 19, 2022, https://www.douban.com/note/827837123/?_i=1770292JTVe8hD.

> silly, Aureliano. To tell the truth: Nucleic acid tests in the neighborhood are the norm."[32]

[Example 3]

> He [Runtu] stopped, his masked face showing a mixture of joy and desolation. Holding a cotton swab, he remained silent. He finally turned stern, and clearly exclaimed, "Open your mouth." A shiver ran down my spine; I knew that a sorrowful barrier had formed between us.[33]

[Example 4]

> As the post is already made visible to oneself only, let's try the comment. How I wish I could go back to the time of doing nucleic acid tests while not thinking about the absurd aspect of it. In fact, today, my memory of those nucleic acid tests itself is where the absurdity lies.[34]

Example 1 changes the setting of the classic novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*, bringing it to a contemporary age of quarantine, with protagonist Baoyu insisting on visiting Lin Daiyu despite her confinement and COVID precautions. Example 2 summons up the character of Colonel Aureliano Buendía to convey his sense of detachment as he observes the long lines and masked faces during nucleic acid testing, presenting the normalized nature of COVID testing and conveying a resigned acceptance of the situation. Example 3 captures the mixture of emotions experienced during a COVID test. The story the post parodies, Lu Xun's "Hometown," depicts the estrangement that has developed between the narrator and his childhood friend Runtu due to years of separation. The rewrite showcases the unsettling nature of the authoritative imperative to "open your mouth." This gesture generates a feeling of unease and establishes a psychological barrier

32. aaron, "Yitiao douban dongtai yinfa de 'yiqing wenxue' fuxing."
33. aaron.
34. aaron.

between the individual undergoing the test and the person administering it. Example 4 reflects frustration and a longing for a simpler time when COVID testing wasn't a constant practice. The post highlights how one's memory of the tests becomes a source of absurdity in the present moment. It also hints at the practice of censorship. When a post is set to be visible only to the poster, it implies that those within the poster's friend circle can't access it. If the poster isn't aware of this, there's a presumption that the post is published. Seasoned Internet users often comment on such posts to test if fellow posters have access to the content.

These four examples of the literature of madness capture mundane moments typical of life during the pandemic and draw on literary classics, both domestic and foreign, as the sources for their parody. While these sources are both short stories and novels, the parodies are only a few sentences long. The brevity of the genre aligns with the episodic nature of such real-life activities as COVID testing, which disrupts the rhythm of everyday life and makes the abnormal normal. Taking a departure from the "moments of madness" that are oriented toward political movements,[35] the literature of madness exemplifies a micro level of social commentary that is satirical, episodic, and minimal.

Further, the "madness" of such literature refers to the act of "embracing eccentricity" or "acting crazy" (*fafeng*) at a textual level, a response to sociopolitical circumstances that push individuals toward a state of irrationality. This emerging genre of humorous storytelling embraces an unorthodox narrative style to articulate ideas that the official system would prohibit. A case in point is Lu Xun's seminal 1918 work "Diary of a Madman," which follows the descent into madness of the narrator as he gradually comes to believe that the people around him are cannibals. The presentation of the narrator's mental status in the form of a diary is conducive to conveying how the established societal order can drive individuals to a state of psychological turmoil. Similarly, texts in the literature of madness genre take advantage of

35. Zolberg, "Moments of Madness."

their form and its brevity in their portrayal of scenes related to pandemic experiences. Moreover, the literature of madness genre lends novel interpretations to the act of parodying the literary canon, a prevalent practice that initially gained traction online during the late 1990s.

The contemporary trend of works that parody texts from the literary canon is largely inspired by the 1994 movie *A Chinese Odyssey*, a playful adaptation of the literary classic *Journey to the West*. Such works challenge cultural authorities and bear "implications for the spread of cynicism and political apathy amongst Chinese youth."[36] The growing sense of cynicism among youth in that era, the 1990s, was connected to the concurrent drastic societal transformation as China transitioned to the socialist market economy and the accompanying decline in ideological beliefs in the 1990s. In comparison, the literature of madness appropriates the canon to blur the boundaries between reality and fiction, offering alternative perspectives that invite critical reflection on dominant discourses. Herein, reappropriation of the literary canon legitimizes Internet users' endeavor to satirize the status quo and constitutes one of the many cynical strategies that construct a reality that could not be otherwise articulated.

Scene 2: Performing Madness

Since the 2010s, Internet buzzwords such as "involution" (*nei juan*), "lying flat" (*tang ping*), "Buddhist youth" (*foxi qingnian*), and "feeling like a loser" (*sang*) have gained widespread cultural popularity. The latter three Internet memes promote an escapist attitude toward life and celebrate passivity. The term "Buddhist youth" describes the younger generation who opt for an indifferent lifestyle, distancing themselves from the competitive work culture that dominates contemporary society. Another noteworthy lexicon,

36. Dongfeng Tao, "Making Fun of the Canon in Contemporary China: Literature and Cynicism in a Post-Totalitarian Society," *Cultural Politics* 3, no. 2 (2007): 205.

"lying flat," gained traction between April and July 2021. When an individual chooses to "lie flat," they are making a statement of opting out of intense competition. The bodily position of "lying flat," therefore, symbolizes a way of reclaiming autonomy over one's own body and time. These terms may be read in reaction to the discourse surrounding "involution," a recently coined term depicting the youth's "feelings of burnout, ennui, and despair" amid the intense competition prevalent in contemporary society.[37]

Scholars hold different interpretations about the "lying flat" phenomenon. Zixuan Zhang and Ke Li argue that the wide circulation of memes related to these terms showcases how young people are constructing counter-narratives about the prevalent sentiments of anxiety.[38] In contrast, Junqi Peng proposes that while young people may engage with the rhetoric of "lying flat" as a means of stress relief and self-mockery, most come from middle-class families and eagerly strive to achieve according to the models of success defined by mainstream society.[39] Yanqiu Zhou suggests that youth responses to the term "lying flat" from across the world on Reddit, a global platform, demonstrate that the feeling of defeatism is prevalent worldwide.[40] Wendy Su argues for a more nuanced understanding of "lying-flatism" (*tang ping zhuyi*), as it is "nonconformist vis-à-vis official ideology and doctrine" yet "falls short of being a radical movement with a revolutionary spirit."[41] Diego Gullotta and Lili Lin describe how discourses about youth since the early twentieth

37. Yi-Ling Liu, "China's 'Involuted' Generation," *New Yorker*, May 14, 2021, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/chinas-involuted-generation.
38. Zixuan Zhang and Ke Li, "So you Choose to 'Lie Flat?' 'Sang-ness,' Affective Economies, and the 'Lying Flat' Movement," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 109, no. 1 (2023): 48–69.
39. Junqi Peng, "Chinese Youth from *Diaosi* to *Sang*: The Cyberculture of Self-Mockery and Self-Defeat in the 2010s" (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Hong Kong Baptist University, 2023).
40. Yanqiu Rachel Zhou, "The Lying Flat Movement, Global Youth, and Globality: A Case of Collective Reading on Reddit," *Globalizations* 20, no. 8 (2023): 679–95, https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2023.2165377.
41. Wendy Su, "'Lie Flat'—Chinese Youth Subculture in the Context of the Pandemic and National Rejuvenation," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 37, no. 1 (2023): 11, https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2023.2190059.

century have gradually shifted from framing young people as revolutionary subjects to urban subjects rooted in middle-class upbringings. In discussing three types of cultural practices among youth, they argue that "the fluidity of youth continues to exceed the fixed positioning of the dominant culture":

> The emergent cultural practices on the one hand have the potential to exceed the demands of the market and the state, and open up a space for critical engagement and reflection, or even social intervention. The emergent practices characterized by excess and fluidity call into question the very existence of a subject: it emerges at times but disappears at other times; when it emerges, it is denied, and when it affirms itself, it disperses to find itself elsewhere.[42]

Adaptable and dynamic, analyzing "lying-flatism" within youth culture avoids a rigid approach when examining urban phenomena like group crawls. On November 9, 2022, an anonymous message was posted to the online forum of the Communication University of China that asked whether people would be shocked to see someone crawling across campus and announced the poster's intent to do so the following day. Responses soon followed, with one person asking if they could join, saying they hadn't done something so silly in quite some time, while another person expressed concern over their own mental state. Soon after, a photo circulated online showing a group of students crawling together in front of the library and southern sports field at the Communication University of China. The trend then spread to other universities in and outside of Beijing, including Tsinghua University, Renmin University, and the University of International Business and Economics. Memes, jokes, and posts related to group crawling soon propagated online.

42. Diego Gullotta and Lili Lin, "Beyond 'Rising Tides' and 'Lying Flat': Emergent Cultural Practices Among Youth in Urban China," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 24, no. 1 (2022): 8–9, https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.4292.

Reversing the body language of lying flat, these group acts of crawling not only provided companionship for college students but also served as a reminder of the resilience and creativity of the human spirit in the face of adversity. In the context of human behavior, crawling is typically associated with animals or infants, emphasizing a position of submission and vulnerability. In the context of lockdowns, however, the act of crawling is subversive precisely because it embraces a self-alienating gesture that disconnects an individual from one's inherent human qualities or dignity. By engaging in an act that diminishes the traditional human stance, individuals demonstrate a willingness to defy norms.

The predecessor to group crawls was the activity of making cardboard pets, mostly dogs, and walking them on college campuses.[43] Creating and walking cardboard pets, inanimate objects, may be read as a response to the lack of mobility and agency during times of lockdown. One comment voicing support for this trend noted that cardboard pets won't get disinfected, alluding to an incident in which a pet died at the hands of local health workers who had come to disinfect a home while its owner was under quarantine elsewhere.[44] Transitioning from cardboard pets to crawling—emulating the movement of these inanimate objects—completes the process of self-dehumanization.

Moreover, the absurdity of these group acts functions as social commentary on the absurdity of the era, in which one or two COVID cases could result in group quarantine, community lockdowns, and disinfection of the

43. Mandy Zuo, "'Cute but Sad': Bored, Lonely Chinese University Students Are Making Cardboard Pets to Relieve Tedium of Campus Coronavirus Lockdowns," *South China Morning Post*, November 4, 2022, https://www.scmp.com/news/people-culture/trending-china/article/3198263/cute-sad-bored-lonely-chinese-university-students-are-making-cardboard-pets-relieve-tedium-campus.

44. Li Zhen 李震, "Yangwan 'zhigou' kaishi 'xue goupa'? Daxue xiaoyuan liuxing 'yuepa', xuesheng huiying: paxing keyi xuanxie qingxu" 养完"纸狗"开始"学狗爬"？大学校园流行"约爬"，学生回应：爬行可以宣泄情绪 (After raising the "paper dog," start "learning to crawl like a dog"? "Group crawls" become popular on university campuses; students respond that crawling serves as a means to release emotions), *Xin huanghe* 新黄河 (The new Yellow River), November 21, 2022, https://www.sohu.com/a/608646901_121347613.

entire neighborhood. One new invention put forward by the Chinese state and Internet companies during the pandemic was a health code system. Initially widely acclaimed, health codes divided users into three groups: green, red, and orange. Tracking individuals' locations and other data through their smartphones, the system is ubiquitous—health codes monitor the movement of individuals and restrict the mobility of those who happen to have been in areas with identified cases. Mobile phones thus become an extension of and synonymous with the body, as the color of codes determines the extent to which an individual may be allowed to move around.[45]

Situated in this context, such acts as group crawls and walking cardboard pets draw public attention to the absurd elements of living in the pandemic. As Susan Brownell writes, "The culture of the body is strongly shaped by power relations, including state/society, class, gender, and ethnic relations, as well as the international relations between nations; attention should be paid to the ways in which power affects the culture of the body."[46] The movements of students' bodies are responses to the restrictions imposed on their bodily movements by authorities and, in a way, declare the right to take control of one's own body. Performative gestures of subordination act as a defiant response to oppressive control measures, generating an alternative narrative to the rigidity of lockdown policies. By surrendering the act of standing upright, this gesture represents a conscious rejection of the conventional standards that dictate how one should behave or present themselves. Collective acts of relinquishment can also be a form of solidarity that showcases unity in challenging the established order, evoking a sense of empowerment among participants. Consequently, through collective, symbolic, and performative acts of relinquishment, these gestures may function as potent demonstrations.

45. Haiqing Yu, "Living in the Era of Codes: A Reflection on China's Health Code System," *Biosocieties* (2022): 1–18.
46. Susan Brownell, *Training the Body for China: Sports in the Moral Order of the People's Republic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 8.

As explored earlier in the discussion of cynicism's role as disengagement, in response to disbelief of official ideologies, here we witness how ostensibly insane acts—such as group crawls—morph into a form of participation with potential for subversion. A group crawl, much like the fluidity inherent in lying-flatism, is a multifaceted thing, at once playful, unconventional, and therapeutic, as well as containing a thread of cynicism. Such atypical practices also recall the ancient Greek philosopher Diogenes of Sinope, known as Diogenes the Cynic, for his defiance of societal norms. Like Diogenes's choice to sleep in a barrel, group crawls serve as a cynical rebellion against the dominant societal rule. Indeed, mere weeks after group crawls captured so much attention, students took to the streets in protest against the country's zero-COVID policy, illustrating the political potential inherent in cynicism and the blurred line between the playful and the political.

Scene 3: Laughing Madness

Perhaps the most popular genre of "madness" during the COVID lockdowns was pandemic jokes, known as *duanzi* in Chinese. Originally a term from the traditional comedic art form known as "crosstalk" (*xiangsheng* 相声), *duanzi* evolved to mean "online jokes" with the rise of mobile phones in the 1990s.[47] This transformation coincided with the introduction of affordable short message services (SMS) in 2000, which soon surpassed phone calls in popularity.[48] *Duanzi* has numerous functions: seasonal greetings, social satire, and as part of daily communication in interpersonal relationships. Typically quite brief, ranging from one-liners to short paragraphs, *duanzi*

47. Guobin Yang and Min Jiang, "The Networked Practice of Online Political Satire in China: Between Ritual and Resistance," *International Communication Gazette* 77, no. 3 (2015): 226–27.
48. Jingting Shen, "SMS Down as Wireless Data Texting Rises," *China Daily*, September 10, 2012, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2012-09/10/content_15746798.htmn.

employs narrative techniques such as suspense, plot twists, and contrasts to generate ironic effects.

Widely produced and shared, *duanzi* circulates without credited authorship. Early on, studies of the phenomenon attest to the value of *duanzi* in offering alternative viewpoints on current affairs, diverging from official narratives. Scholars like Zhou He argue that the Internet and SMS platforms serve as "a major carrier of the nonofficial discourse universe."[49] Haiqing Yu's research on jokes shared via SMS details the role they played as a "third realm," bridging the state and civil society during the SARS outbreak in China.[50] Mobile technologies have enabled the creation, rapid distribution, and occasional modification of *duanzi* as a "networked social practice."[51] Newer platforms such as blogs, microblogs, and WeChat have further accelerated the circulation of *duanzi*.

The emergence of pandemic jokes echoes the history of *duanzi* and SMS. These jokes chart new territory in their diverse subject matter, an expansion due in part to the ease of creating memes in the 2020s and to the stringent measures of control enacted in China over the span of four years. This has paved the way for an outpouring of pandemic humor that satirizes nearly every facet of prevalent living conditions. According to Cristina Moreno-Almeida, while Internet memes were first created for entertainment or as outlets for humor, they have the power to cultivate communities of participation and ignite political engagement. Such memes thus catalyze political discussions that would otherwise be underrepresented.[52] Similarly, pandemic jokes provide a glimpse into COVID experiences that often remain obscured in official narratives.

49. Zhou He, "SMS in China: A Major Carrier of the Nonofficial Discourse Universe," *Information Society* 24 (2008): 182–90.
50. Haiqing Yu, "The Power of Thumbs: The Politics of SMS in Urban China," *Graduate Journal of Asia-Pacific Studies* 2, no. 2 (2004): 30–43.
51. Yang and Jiang, "The Networked Practice of Online Political Satire in China."
52. Cristina Moreno-Almeida, "Memes as Snapshots of Participation: The Role of Digital Amateur Activists in Authoritarian Regimes," *New Media & Society* 23, no. 6 (2021): 1545–66.

In one revealing case, following the lifting of the Shanghai lockdown in summer 2022, despite prior accounts of food and medical scarcities experienced during the lockdown, the then party chief, Li Qiang, declared victory in the battle to safeguard Shanghai.[53] Then, two months after easing COVID restrictions, the Politburo Standing Committee announced a "decisive victory" over the pandemic, touting China's shift away from a zero-COVID policy as a "miracle."[54] These heroic official narratives stand in stark contrast to the gritty reality portrayed through pandemic jokes, which strive to make sense of everyday life in a world of chaos. The following are a few examples of pandemic jokes that circulated around this time:

[Example 1]

[In the midst of the Shanghai lockdown, two individuals encounter each other on the deserted streets.]

A: Hey, hey! You there! Show me your pass!

B: What pass?

A: How dare you roam without a pass?!

B: Why? What's the matter?

A: Shanghai is under lockdown, didn't you know that?

B: I honestly had no idea. I was just released from prison.

A: I see, no wonder. What were you in for?

B: I got charged for spreading a rumor half a month ago, claiming that Shanghai was going to be locked down.[55]

53. Pinghui Zhuang, "Shanghai Party Chief Declares Victory in Covid Battle as City Records Zero Cases at Start of Major Political Meeting," June 25, 2022, *South China Morning Post*, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3183075/shanghai-party-chief-declares-victory-covid-battle-city-records.

54. Amber Wang, "Chinese Leadership Hails 'Decisive Victory' over Pandemic in Ending Zero-Covid Policy," February 17, 2023, *South China Morning Post*, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3210487/chinese-leadership-declares-decisive-victory-over-pandemic-ending-zero-covid-policy.

55. "Shanghai yiqing xianzhuang tai 'mohuan' bifeng jumin, zhongguoshi sulian xiaohua wanglu fengchuan" 上海疫情现状太「魔幻」逼疯居民 中国式苏联笑话网路疯传 (The current COVID-19 situation in Shanghai is so "surreal" that it's driving residents crazy;

[Example 2]

Journalist: When will the restrictions be lifted?

Expert: 10.

Journalist: 10 months?

Expert: 9.

Journalist: 9 weeks?

Expert: 8.

Journalist: 8 days?

Expert: 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, lifted.[56]

[Example 3]

> Question: Lockdown has been lifted. Why are there still no people on the streets?
> Illustration: When I was little, I was prohibited from going outside, reportedly due to the presence of wolves in the vicinity. Now, as an adult, I'm cautioned against leaving my home due to the prevalence of sheep [a homophone for "positive," alluding to COVID-positive cases] in the area.
> Answer: [The reasons are that] some are at home battling a fever of 38.6 degrees Celsius [101.5 degrees Fahrenheit]. Some have acquired the necessary medication and are awaiting a 38.6 fever to arrive. Others are busy taking care of those battling a 38.6 fever. Simply put, everyone's too busy [to get out].[57] (See figure 1)

These three examples contain a cynicism that creates its own pandemic narrative. In the dystopia of a locked-down Shanghai, a chance encounter between two individuals highlights the absurdity of the situation. The first person, representing the authoritarian measures, demands to see identification. The second person is taken aback by this abrupt inquiry, which points

Chinese-style Soviet jokes are going viral on the Internet), *Ziyou shibao* 自由时报 (Liberty times), April 23, 2022, https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/world/breakingnews/3903088.

56. Weibo account of Qihuo laosiji (期货老司机), December 8, 2022. https://weibo.com/u/1353879573.

57. Weibo account of Haibao 049100 (海宝940199), December 21, 2022.

Figure 1: "Why are the streets deserted after the lockdown has been lifted?"
Source: Weibo

to the excess nature of this level of control. This cynical depiction serves as a satirical commentary on the heavy-handed measures taken in response to COVID-related crises. Even more ironically, the second individual had previously received a prison sentence for "spreading rumors" that foretold the very event that transpired shortly afterward. Consequently, the boundary

between established facts and speculative rumors blurs, and the credibility of authorities comes into question.

Example 2 is a humorous play on the question of when restrictions will be lifted. The journalist is seeking a specific time frame, but the expert's responses are intentionally vague. The expert's answers of "10," "9," and "8" create a sense of anticipation, leading the journalist to ask about progressively shorter time intervals. The punch line arrives when the expert responds with a countdown from 7 to 1, followed by "lifted." The contrast between the journalist's inquiry about a precise timeline and the expert's evasive responses satirizes official discourses that tend to be vague, equivocal, and lack transparency.

Example 3 describes the aftermath of a lockdown once it has been lifted. The streets are empty because three groups of people, which apparently encompass everyone, are otherwise occupied: those who have COVID, those who are waiting to find out whether they have COVID, and those busy taking care of COVID patients. The illustration contrasts past and present circumstances. While definitions of threats may shift over time, one thing is constant: individuals find themselves without decision-making power, obliged to follow directives from authorities. Even amid all the dramatic shifts in COVID policies, the fundamental logic of governance remained unaltered. Authorities insisted on unwavering compliance with orders from above, allowing minimal space for deliberation or adaptability.

These three jokes encapsulate distinct phases of the pandemic, providing glimpses into life during the Shanghai lockdown, the period preceding the easing of COVID restrictions, and the immediate aftermath of reopening. All three instances adhere to the tradition of *duanzi*, employing narrative devices like contrast and humor to comment on social realities. As Susan Stewart notes, "The humor is derived not from an inversion within the narrative itself, but from the frame that says that the joke is and is not a joke at the same time."[58] The mixture between the real and the fictional thus

58. Susan Stewart, *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 78.

present valuable snapshots of the era, functioning as expressions of cynicism that describe a reality that often defies logic. However, while they serve as comic relief, pandemic jokes offer little solace to those who have endured medical shortages, lost loved ones, grappled with financial instability, and faced food insecurity during these unprecedented times. While humor in this vein may satirize the state of affairs, it does not address the underlying factors that have led to the situations they lampoon.

Conclusion

This essay examines three transient scenes of "madness" that occurred during the pandemic, deciphering their inherent links to cynicism. In the literature of madness, pandemic experiences are incorporated into influential texts, blurring the lines between reality and fiction, and infusing nonsense into the commonplace to offer insight into the present. The collective generation of parodies of classic texts enables individuals to justify their acts and derive meaning from the absurd conditions of living in the present. In the context of group crawls on college campuses, the performative aspects of "madness" cast a hazy line between whimsical play and political involvement. Lastly, the laughter directed at the prevailing sense of "madness" serves as a protective shield for individuals to navigate the demanding transition into a post-pandemic era. Utilizing narrative techniques like contrast, irony, and humor, these jokes construct scenarios in which the demarcation between reality and speculation is subjected to debate.

Exploring these occurrences in everyday life deepens understanding of how "madness" is employed at various levels—textual, physical, and visual—as a response to the challenging circumstances of lockdowns. These actions defy the concept of a singular reality. Through these episodes, cynicism has proven to function as a hidden but provocative mode of dissent from officially sanctioned discourses about China's zero-COVID policies.

The role of cynicism in the realm of social disobedience has sparked enduring debates. Some scholars have depicted cynicism as a manifestation of political disengagement, particularly within authoritarian regimes.[59] It has also been characterized as a gesture that appears to operate within a binary framework, suggesting closure and negation.[60] In comparison, Helen Small posits that cynicism serves as the "testing edge of dissent," which introduces a critical dimension to discussions concerning public morality and shared values, carving out a space for more provocative forms of engagement in public discourse.[61] This outlook involves challenging tacitly accepted conventions, providing a means for individuals to question the status quo and push the boundaries of societal norms.[62]

Examining contemporary cultural production in China, especially in the domains of commercial cinema and avant-garde theater, reveals a fascinating interplay between seriousness and playfulness,[63] cynicism and idealism.[64] This delicate dance between opposing elements serves as a powerful tool for engaging in political and social commentary. The fluid dynamics at play here underscore the malleable nature of cynicism that transcends the confines of a rigid binary framework. It is within this adaptability that highlights the role of cynicism within the context of authoritarian regimes.

In this light, the three scenarios continue the tradition of cynicism within cultural production, offering a rich spectrum of cynical responses that blur the boundaries between reality and fiction, truths and rumors, and the realms of playfulness and political engagement. More importantly, these

59. Yurchak, "The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism."
60. Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 35.
61. Helen Small, *The Function of Cynicism at the Present Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 2.
62. Small, *The Function of Cynicism at the Present Time*.
63. Yung-Hang Bruce Lai, "Neoliberal Subjectivities and Cynicism in China: Feng Xiaogang's Dream-play Comedies," *Archiv Orientální* 90, no. 3 (2022): 473–501.
64. Hongjian Wang, "Theatre of 'Disbelief': Meng Jinghui's Cynical Metatheatre in Contemporary China," *Asian Theatre Journal* 37, no. 2 (2020): 376–97.

scenarios provide valuable insights into the myriad forms and creativity of everyday resistance[65] that emerge during extraordinary times. Cynicism, in its multifaceted nature, contributes to creating a space for dissent in a world where conformity frequently prevails. In doing so, it opens up new avenues for probing the boundaries of human resilience, adaptability, and creative agency in times of COVID.

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65. James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985).