

# Research Articles



# From *Diaosi* to *Sang* to *Tangping*

## The Chinese DST Youth Subculture Online

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### **Abstract**

*Diaosi*, Chinese slang for “underdogs,” first appeared on the Chinese Internet in 2010, capturing youth discontent amid the cutthroat competition in China. The term became the most popular word by 2012 but would soon be overtaken by *sang* (“bereavement”), a new youth phenomenon akin to beatnik/hippie/punk culture in the West, which manifested itself in a variety of catchphrases and memes that amplified the weary and suffering human body, eventually leading to the rise in 2021 of the *tangping* (“lying flat”) movement that called for a life free from societal pressures. This article traces the origin, evolution, and impact of this youth cyber culture, what we call DST. It explores the motivations, perspectives, and actions of participants as well as reactions and responses of the Chinese government and the media.

**Keywords:** diaosi, sang, lying flat, Chinese digital youth, Cyber culture

### **Introduction**

*Diaosi*, Chinese slang for “underdogs,” first appeared on the Chinese Internet in 2010, capturing the discontent with, and the determination to overcome the uneven playing ground amid, the cutthroat competition in China. Popular initially among less-privileged youth, the word soon went mainstream and viral, becoming the most popular term by 2012, the year

Xi Jinping took power.<sup>1</sup> A large-scale survey conducted in 2014 reported that three-fifths of the 213,000 respondents self-identified as *diaosi*.<sup>2</sup> With young Chinese from diverse walks of life embracing the term, a team of researchers declared in 2015 that *diaosi* constituted the most significant identity-making event in China in recent years.<sup>3</sup> As it entered its sixth year, *diaosi* would be overtaken by *sang* (“bereavement”), a new youth cultural phenomena akin to beatnik/hippie/punk culture in the West, albeit with Chinese characteristics that captured deepening youth frustration with widening gaps in educational and economic opportunities in a rapidly changing Chinese society.<sup>4</sup>

Emerging in 2016, *sang* soon replaced *diaosi* as the new buzzword. Frequently used as an adjective, *sang* connotes loss, deprivation, powerlessness, and hopelessness, registering a decisively more passive and pessimistic outlook on life than *diaosi*.<sup>5</sup> The *sang* phenomenon manifested itself in a variety of youth catchphrases and memes that amplified the weary and suffering human body.<sup>6</sup> Surveys reveal that urban youth in their twenties and early thirties were the leading demographic group who related to *diaosi* and *sang*.

1. Key, “10 Most Popular Internet Phrases in China in 2012,” ChinaHush, January 6, 2013, <http://www.chinahush.com/2013/01/06/10-most-popular-internet-phrases-in-china-in-2012>.
2. The online survey, which collected 21,3795 samples, was done by ganji.com, a Chinese life information website, and written by the Market Research and Media Center of Peking University in 2014. The respondents, who were also ganji.com users, worked in various professions and came from more than fifty Chinese cities on different scales. See the survey at “2014屌丝生存现状报告 [2014 *diaosi* survival condition report],” Ganji.com, October 2014, <http://doc.xueqiu.com/14973b22dea37b3fcf47fdd1.pdf>.
3. Peidong Yang, Lijun Tang, and Xuan Wang, “*Diaosi* as Infrapolitics: Scatological Tropes, Identity-Making and Cultural Intimacy on China’s Internet,” *Media, Culture and Society* 37, no. 2 (2015): 197.
4. David Cowhig, “Taking It Lying Down: China’s Bereavement Youth Culture,” *David Cowhig’s Translation Blog*, June 12, 2021, <https://gaodawei.wordpress.com/2021/06/12/taking-it-lying-down-chinas-bereavement-youth-culture/>.
5. Zeng Yuli, “Turn Off: Drop Out: Why Young Chinese Are Abandoning Ambition,” Sixth Tone, June 27, 2017, <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1000407/turn-off%2C-drop-out-why-young-chinese-are-abandoning-ambition>.
6. Chief among these are “feel like my body is hollowed out,” “I am almost a disabled person,” and “the human world is not worth it.”

sentiments and adopted *diaosi* and *sang* phrases and memes in their daily life. The popularity of these digital phrases and memes eventually led to the rise in 2021 of *tangping* ("lying flat"), yet another youth trend that advocated for a life away from the rat race. Framed as a "nonviolent, noncooperative, and passive resistance" against the authoritarian state by the Western media,<sup>7</sup> *tangping* became the top trending term in China in 2021.<sup>8</sup>

This article sets out to trace the origin, evolution, and impact of this particular type of youth cyber culture, which we call DST (*daosi*, *sang*, *tangping*) for easy reference and to differentiate it from other more upbeat youth trends in China. What conditions have given rise to the arrival of the DST phenomena and what accounts for the metamorphosis of youth sentiment from *diaosi* to *sang* to *tangping*? This article explores the generative mechanisms of DST and examines the motivations, perspectives, and actions as well as reactions of major stakeholders involving political, technological, economic, and public interests. It further examines the nature and characteristics of DST and its means of expression and circulation. It seeks to tease out common threads running through all three periods while laying out the intricate relationship among the major stakeholders involving the DST participants, the Chinese state, and the commercial sectors. In what

7. See, for example, David Bandurski, "The 'Lying Flat' Movement Standing in the Way of China's Innovation Drive," Brookings, July 8, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/the-lying-flat-movement-standing-in-the-way-of-chinas-innovation-drive/>; Pass Notes, "The Low-Desire Life: Why People in China Are Rejecting High-Pressure Jobs in Favour of 'Lying Flat,'" *Guardian*, July 5, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/05/the-low-desire-life-why-people-in-china-are-rejecting-high-pressure-jobs-in-favour-of-lying-flat>; Lily Kuo, "Young Chinese Take a Stand against Pressures of Modern Life by Lying Down," *Washington Post*, June 5, 2021, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/china-lying-flat-stress/2021/06/04/cef36902-c42f-11eb-89a4-b7ae22aa193e\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/china-lying-flat-stress/2021/06/04/cef36902-c42f-11eb-89a4-b7ae22aa193e_story.html); Elsie Chen, "These Chinese Millennials Are 'Chilling,' and Beijing Isn't Happy," *New York Times*, July 3, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/03/world/asia/china-slackers-tangping.html>.

8. According to the Sogou Pinyin method, the dominant input software in China, *tangping* was the most popular Chinese buzzword in 2021. See "搜狗输入法2021年度榜单出炉“躺平”排流行语第 [Sogou Input released annual list of buzzwords in 2021, *tangping* ranks the first]," qq.com, December 7, 2021, <<https://new.qq.com/rain/a/20211207A000P700>

follows, we will describe each phenomenon in a broad stroke, following a chronological order, with a main focus on the origin, contributing factors, and characteristics of the DST phenomenon. This bird's-eye view hopes to serve as a foundation for future research on the interplay between culture, politics, and commerce on the transformation of a particular brand of Chinese youth culture.

## *Diaosi/Underdogs*

A compound word of sexual nature in Chinese that describes someone who licks or kisses up, *diaosi* is literally and figuratively a sucker or a loser who kisses up. Self-identified *diaosi* embraced the term with good humor, turning biting satire into playful self-mockery, which has come to define the style of *diaosi*, making it cool and admirable.<sup>9</sup> As opposed to the more privileged youth of inherited wealth and power, a typical early *diaosi* was an Internet-savvy male college student with ample native intelligence but limited financial means and family connections to secure social mobility and romantic partners. One running joke among the bachelor *diaosi* was their collective desires for beautiful young women—what they called *nvshen* (“the goddess”)—who presumably would only date *fuerdai* (“the second-generation rich”), Chinese slang referring to the children of the rich and powerful. *Diaosi* became “losers” for their repeated failure in securing dates with goddesses.<sup>10</sup> *Diaosi*’s underdog status concealed the groups’ intense drive to

9. Yang et al., “*Diaosi* as Infrapolitics,” 202n3.

10. Incredulously, the sexist *diaosi* rubric was taken up by the party’s official organ *Global Times* in its special annual coverage of China and the world politics at the end of 2012. In *Global Times*’s analogy, China was *diaosi* and the United States the tall-rich-handsome. China was striking back and surpassing the US economy. China was depicted as chasing the effeminated fair-rich-beautiful Taiwan who seek protection from the alpha tall-rich-handsome United States. But the United States despises and ignores Taiwan. *Global Times* further portrayed North Korea as the underdog *diaosi* as opposed to the tall-rich-handsome South Korea, whereby North Korea struck back by successfully launching a rocket, and Sub-Saharan countries *diaosi* with their economy struck back in 2012 as

overcome. One popular *diaosi* catchphrase was *diaosi de nixi* (“*diaosi* strikes back”), which referred to one’s ability to beat the odds and eventually obtain wealth and marrying a goddess. With mostly single young males “congregating” on the online *diaosi* forums, misogyny prevailed. *Diaosi* objectified women, grading them by appearances and sexual appeal and ranking them into either goddesses or female *diaosi*. Up against their privileged counterparts, *diaosi* named the time they lived as the era of *pindie* (“competition of dads”) and came to equate themselves with “self-made” men. Hanhan (韩寒), a best-selling novelist and race-car driver of humble origin, claimed himself “a pure *diaosi* from the rural area of Shanghai,”<sup>11</sup> which set him apart from “the second-generation rich.”<sup>12</sup>

In a playful twist, young, Internet-savvy IT workers, a core group of self-claimed *diaosi*, facetiously called themselves *manong* (“code peasants”) and their jobs *banzhuan* (“moving the bricks”), which captured the repetitive nature of their coding jobs while showing off their highly sought-after IT profession, seen as a symbol of success. White-collar office workers called themselves *dagongren* (“laborers”) while creative practitioners and academics identified themselves as *yingshi mingong* (“film and TV migrant laborers”) and *xueshu mingong* (“academic migrant laborers”). But the irony was lost in mainstream media’s initial framing of *diaosi*. Mainstream media coverage characterized *diaosi* as an individual or a group of people of lower social strata doing the real manual labor of “moving the brick” at minimum wage and associated *diaosi* with losers or the subaltern.<sup>13</sup> ifeng.com, of the

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the result of Chinese aid. See “环球吐槽2012 [Global Tucao],” *Global Times*, accessed July 6, 2019, <http://world.huanqiu.com/special/tucao2012/index.html?agt=34474>.

11. Lai Lisi, “‘韩寒微博回应’代笔门”自称纯正上海农村屌丝 [Hanhan responds to counterfeit accusation and claims himself a pure Shanghai rural *diaosi*],” cjn.cn, April 6, 2012, <http://news.cjn.cn/nv/201204/t1747688.htm>.
12. David Cohen, “Could This Be China’s Youth Movement? David Cohen on the Rise of the ‘*Diaosi*’ Culture on the Chinese Internet and the terms Evolution and Meaning,” The Diplomat, March 30, 2013, <https://thediplomat.com/2013/03/could-this-be-chinas-youth-movement/>.
13. In addition to Yang et al., academic writings of *diaosi* as losers include Marcella Szablewicz, “The ‘Losers’ of China’s Internet: Memes as ‘Structures of Feeling’ for Disillusioned

independent but prostate Phoenix New Media, offered the first comprehensive coverage of *diaosi* in February 2012.<sup>14</sup> Within a few days, Tencent News followed up with its own full coverage.<sup>15</sup> NetEase soon followed suit, publishing “*Diaosi*, don’t feel ashamed of yourself; sisters do like you,” and “Loser, Otaku, and *Diaosi*.<sup>16</sup> The common conception of *diaosi* in mainstream reporting was people of rural origin with little social, cultural, and financial capital (see figure 1).

In reality, the self-identified *diaosi* were college-educated youth in affluent coastal cities,<sup>17</sup> with Shanghai having the highest *diaosi* identification rate (76.14 percent).<sup>18</sup> The style of humblebragging prevailed among the Internet-savvy urbanities, eventually crystallized for the mainstream media of *diaosi*’s more elite status. As *diaosi*’s disposable income fueled China’s nascent virtual economy, Chinese Internet companies quickly positioned to tap into *diaosi*’s purchasing power. Lei Jun, the founder of Xiaomi, China’s biggest

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Young Netizens,” *China Information* 28, no. 2 (2014): 259; Ngau-Ling Sum, “The Makings of Subaltern Subjects: Embodiment, Contradictory Consciousness, and Rehegemonization of the *Diaosi* in China,” [ *Globalizations* 14, no. 2 (2017): 298; Karita Kan, “The New ‘Lost Generation’: Inequality and Discontent among Chinese Youth,” *Current Affairs* 2 (2013): 67.

14. I-talk, “自由谈, 扇丝: 一个字头的诞生 [*Diaosi*: The birth of a buzzword],” ifeng.com, February 27, 2012, <https://news.ifeng.com/opinion/special/diaosi/>.
15. Topic Today, “扇丝: 庶民的文化胜利 [*Diaosi*: The cultural victory of ordinary people],” Tencent News, March 1, 2012, <https://view.news.qq.com/zt2012/diaosi/index.htm>.
16. NetEase Women, “扇丝弟弟别自卑, 姐姐也很喜欢你 [Little brother *Diaosi*, don’t feel ashamed of yourself; sisters do like you too],” NetEase, March 2, 2012, <https://www.163.com/lady/article/7RJPOL2J002649P6.html>; He Wei, “卢瑟、宅男与扇丝 [Loser, otaku, and *Diaosi*],” NetEase, March 19, 2012, <https://www.163.com/tech/article/7SU5LD4500094M0K.html>. *Otaku* in Japan refers to a young person who is obsessed with computers or particular aspects of popular culture to the detriment of their social skills.
17. Another survey of *diaosi* was done by Analysys in 2013, with 34,500 samples across thirty-one domestic provinces and sixty-seven global regions. Of these, 13,092 samples were gamers of the Internet game “仙侠世界 [The mythical realm].” See Analysys, “中国互联网‘扇丝’用户游戏行为调研报告 [China Internet ‘*Diaosi*’ user game behavior survey report],” Analysys, April 3, 2013, <https://www.analysys.cn/article/detail/9925>.
18. Analysys, “中国互联网‘扇丝’用户游戏行为调研报告 [China Internet].”

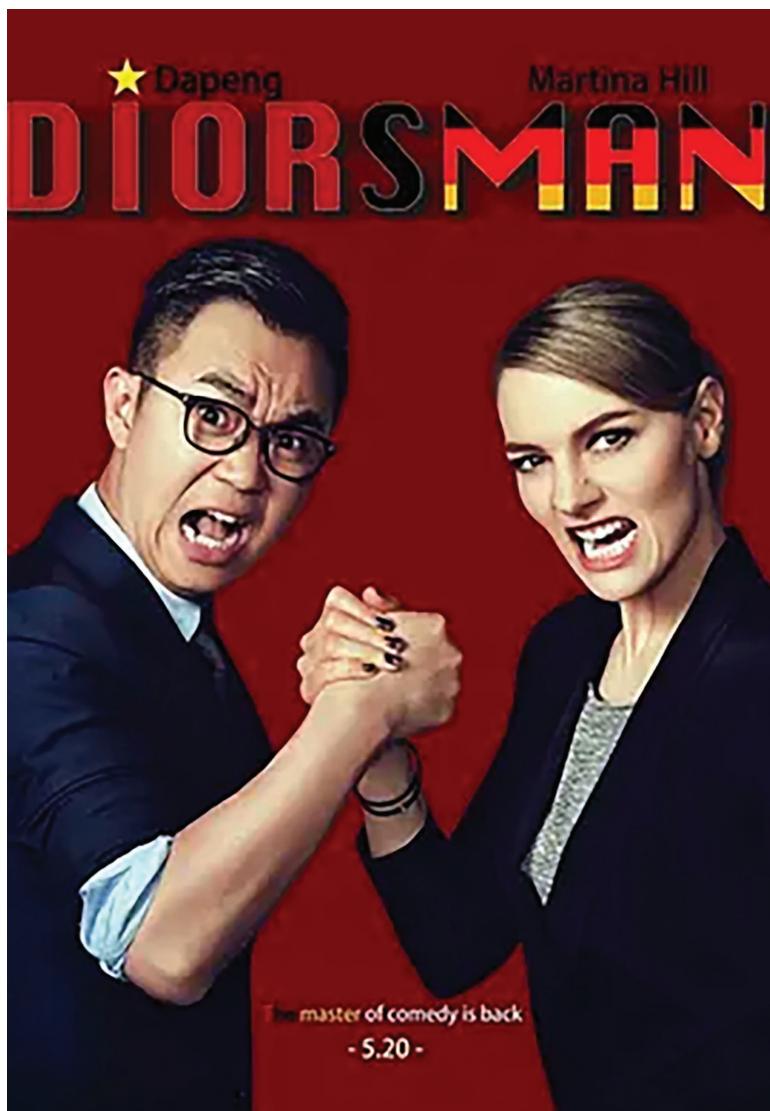


Figure1: Dapeng and Martina Hill appeared on the poster of the Chinese web series *Dior's Man*.

Source: sohu.com

cell phone company, called himself the leader of *diaosi*, and promoted Xiaomi's first smartphone release in 2011 as a phone made for *diaosi*.<sup>19</sup> Other companies soon followed suit, rushing to capitalize on *diaosi*. By early 2012, Sohu imported *Knallerfrauen* (2011–2015), a German TV sketch comedy, and gave it a Chinese title, *Diaosi Lady* (屌丝女士), never mind that the literal meaning of the original German title is closer to “the spicy lady” or “firecrackers.” The show was more successful in China than in Germany. Martina Hills, the show’s lead actress, was later invited to join the production of a similar Chinese sketch comedy called *Dior’s Man* (屌丝男士, 2012–2015). In April 2012, when *Titanic 3D* (2012) was released in China, the film was marketed as a typical *diaosi* strike-back narrative, with the “lower-class” Jack capturing the heart of the pale and beautiful “upper-class” girl, Rose.<sup>20</sup>

*Diaosi* found expression through low-budget, parodic, and farcical dramedies, which surged during the first half of the 2010s. Fast-paced and short (ranging from four to twenty minutes per episode), many of these web series were designed to be mobile-phone friendly, capable of generating millions of hits and thousands of comments in a short time span. Dialogue from these shows easily entered ordinary people’s daily lexicon.

Though an act of rebellion against the status quo, *diaosi* ultimately conformed to the established narrative of social mobility, which celebrated success.<sup>21</sup> State media eventually came to weakly endorse *diaosi* but sought to address the underlying social problems that led to the rise of it. On November 3, 2012, *People’s Daily*, the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), ran an article, “The Greatest Power Stimulating China Moving

19. Mai Tan Weng, “小米的屌丝烙印究竟从哪儿来的? [Where does Xiaomi’s *Diaosi* mark come from?],” zhihu.com, April 25, 2020, [https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/113564271?utm\\_oi=1135592776333946880](https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/113564271?utm_oi=1135592776333946880).

20. “泰坦尼克号: 白富美与穷苦逼的禁忌之恋 [Titanic: The taboo love between a fair-skinned-rich-beautiful and a poor-bitter-sucker],” Youjiu Comments, accessed August 20, 2020, <http://news.uuu9.com/shuoshi/ss76>.

21. Xinyu Huang, “Why Do Chinese Young People Call Themselves ‘Losers?’ *Diaosi*: A Counter-hegemony Identity,” *Gnovis* 17, no. 1 (2016): 39.

Forward,” for the party’s eighteenth National Congress,<sup>22</sup> which coined the term “*diaosi* mentality” (屌丝心态). At the conclusion of the National Congress of the CCP, Xi Jinping, the newly anointed CCP leader, launched an anti-corruption campaign to clean up malfeasance within party ranks seen as contributing to the rise of “*diaosi* mentality.” As the party’s wariness over youth negativity grew, a new term, “positive energy” (正能量), appeared in 2012 that called for uplifting messages as antidotes to the negative energy of *diaosi*.<sup>23</sup> As a direct response to the growing *diaosi* wave, Xi made a speech in early 2013, urging young people to “dare to dream” and “contribute to the nation’s revitalization.”<sup>24</sup>

In August 2013, Liao Hong, the president of *People's Daily* online, spoke at a conference admonishing the Chinese Internet to generate positive energy rather than functioning as a pressure-relief valve.<sup>25</sup> The term *positive energy* was elevated to become an official guideline at the Central Forum on Arts and Literature in Beijing in October 2013, after Xi gave a speech to remind artists that cultural creation should induce positive energy.<sup>26</sup> The Chinese state launched a sustained Internet Cleansing Campaign from 2013 to 2015 to wipe out “coarse” languages, including the very term *diaosi*.<sup>27</sup> The *Diaosi* phenomenon dwindled by the end of 2014.

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22. Chen Kun, “陈琨, 激发中国前行的最大力量 [The greatest power stimulating China moving forward],” *China Daily*, November 3, 2012, <https://www.12371.cn/2012/11/03/ARTI1351888114187839.shtml?from=groupmessage>.
23. CMP Staff, “The CMP Dictionary: Positive Energy,” China Media Project, April 16, 2021, [https://chinamediaproject.org/the\\_ccp\\_dictionary/positive-energy/](https://chinamediaproject.org/the_ccp_dictionary/positive-energy/).
24. Xi Jinping, “习近平：在同各界优秀青年代表座谈时的讲话(全文) [Xi Jingping: A talk with distinguished youth of all sectors (full text)],” *Xinhua News*, May 4, 2013, [http://www.gov.cn/lhd/2013-05/05/content\\_2395892.htm](http://www.gov.cn/lhd/2013-05/05/content_2395892.htm).
25. Liao Hong, “廖玒: 上网的人应该珍惜自己的麦克风 [Liaohong: People who go online should treasure their microphones],” CCTV, August 16, 2013, <http://news.cntv.cn/2013/08/11/ARTI1376199822669932.shtml>.
26. Xi Jinping, “在文艺工作座谈会上的讲话 [Talk on the symposium of literary and art work],” *Xinhua News*, October 14, 2015, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-10/14/c\\_1116825558.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-10/14/c_1116825558.htm).
27. Li Yiguan, “自我矮化可以休矣 [Self-degradation can be stopped],” *People's Daily*, December 2, 2014, <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n/2014/1202/c1003-26128810.html>.

## *Sang/Bereavement*

Barely two years after the disappearance of *diaosi*, a new youth online phenomenon in the form of shared expressions and memes of dejected sentiment quietly crept in. An assortment of despondent catchphrases such as “feel like my body is hollowed out,” “just want to lie down,” “I am almost a wasted person,” “the human world is not worth it,” etcetera, appeared on the Chinese Internet. These catchphrases soon evolved into popular Internet memes; one of which was the now iconic “Ge You Slouch,” the image of a skinny, balding, and middle-aged man sagging on a couch staring blandly into the distance. The man, Ge You, happened to be a well-liked comedian in China known for playing underdog characters in film and TV dramas. The couch meme is a screenshot from the Chinese sitcom classic *I Love My Family* (1994), in which Ge You played an idler living a parasitic life on the couch of a good Samaritan who kindly took him in. The couch scene occurred when family members urged him, whom they nicknamed loafer (二混子), to find a job and move on. In response, he threatened suicide but then quickly slouched back on the couch, complaining that he was too weak to work. The image was repurposed to epitomize feelings of apathy and exhaustion. “Ge You Slouch” spawned a variety of pictorial memes and multimedia remixes of creatures, from cute animals to cartoon characters, lying flat.

While *diaosi* was represented largely in web dramas, *sang* was expressed mostly in pictorial memes. A survey done in 2017 ranked “Ge You Slouch” as one of the six most popular *sang* memes.<sup>28</sup> An online article written by a citizen journalist, “Seeing Ge You Slouch Everywhere; *Sang* Culture All the Rage,” appeared on July 12, 2016, linking “Ge You Slouch” to the great

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28. The survey was done by UC Browser, one popular web browser in China. See UC Big Data, “‘小确丧’是年轻人对困境的温和反击 [‘Little-certain-sang’ is youth’s gentle resistance toward predicaments],” digitaling.com, June 23, 2017, <https://www.digitaling.com/articles/37990.html>.

resignation among young people who felt trapped and with no will or desire to fight.<sup>29</sup> Sympathetic toward the feelings of youth entrapment, the author predicted that a culture of *sang* was on the horizon. The article soon went viral, and by September 2016, the term *sang culture* was adopted by a major party newspaper, *Guangming Daily*, which urged Chinese youth to boycott *sang* culture.<sup>30</sup> The intervention by *Guangming Daily* brought the notion of *sang* culture to wider mainstream media and public attention. Businesses reacted quickly, eager to cash in on yet another potentially lucrative youth trend. A new milk tea brand, *Sang Cha/Sung Tea* (喪茶), which was a joint effort by Ele.me (饿了么, “Hungry?”), a food delivery application, and NetEase News, a news feed application, appeared in late April 2017, with its first store in Shanghai opening to instant popularity (see figure 2).

*Sung Tea* was positioned to counter China’s most popular milk tea brand, Hey Tea/Happy Tea (喜茶). *Sung Tea* stores sold six types of tea, with *sang*-inspired names ranging from “My-ex’s-life-is-better-than-mine red tea” to “No-end-to-work-overtime-and-no-hope-to-get-a-raise green tea” and “You-are-left-with-nothing-but-sickness oolong tea.”<sup>31</sup> *Sung Tea* soon became a *sang* icon. So much so that the state media People.cn published an article, “Don’t Drink ‘*Sang Tea*’ Added with Mental Opium,” urging people to boycott *Sung Tea*.<sup>32</sup> Criticism from state media did not deter other brands from adopting similar *sang* designs to reach the lucrative *sang*

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29. Du Lili, “杜莉莉, 到处都是“葛优躺,’因为‘丧文化’真的很流行啊啊啊 [‘Ge You Lie’ is everywhere, because ‘sang culture’ is really popular],” Pingwest, July 12, 2016, <https://www.pingwest.com/a/78751>.
  30. Xia Zhiyan, “引导青年人远离‘丧文化’侵蚀 [Guide young people to stay away from the erosion of sang culture],” *Guangming Daily*, September 30, 2016, [https://epaper.gmw.cn/gmrb/html/2016-09/30/nw.D110000gmrb\\_20160930\\_1-10.htm](https://epaper.gmw.cn/gmrb/html/2016-09/30/nw.D110000gmrb_20160930_1-10.htm).
  31. Ouyang Lining, “上海真开了家丧茶: 排队两小时, 限购两杯, 只营业4天 [A real Sang teahouse opens in Shanghai: Wait in line for two hours, each is limited to purchase two, and the shop only opens for four days],” ThePaper, April 29, 2017, [https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_1673835](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1673835).
  32. “加了精神鸦片的‘丧茶’喝不得 [Don’t drink ‘sang tea’ added with mental opium],” *People’s Daily*, August 16, 2017, <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0815/c1003-29472615.html>



Figure 2: People flocking to the opening of Sang Tea in Shanghai in April 2017.

Source: HK01

market. Slogans such as “Hopeless Yoghurt” and “Negative energy coffee” proliferated, transforming *sang* from an emotional expression into a purchasable commodity.<sup>33</sup>

The rise of *sang* owed much to the unprecedented growth of digital technology and economy in China. China’s economic growth rate dropped from 9.6 percent to 6.6 percent from 2011 to 2018; yet the digital economy’s share of China’s GDP increased from 9.5 percent to 34.4 percent during the same period. According to CNNIC data, broadband ports in China surged from 188 million to 762 million from 2010 to

33. Bingkuaine, “‘没希望’酸奶用负能量段子写成的广告文案 句句扎心 [‘No hope’ yogurt’s ad copies, written by negative energy jokes, strike people with every sentence],” 4A Advertising Circle, April 26, 2017, <https://www.digitaling.com/articles/36804.html>.

2017.<sup>34</sup> Internet users increased from 298 million in 2008 to 839 million in 2018. The rapid growth of the digital economy shifted labor-intensive activities from the previous manufacturing industry into the digital sector, burdening young tech workers with the so-called 996 work schedule (in office from 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m., six days a week). According to a survey in 2016, employees in Internet companies worked longer hours than people in other industries.<sup>35</sup> China's fast-developing mobile technology and instant message apps such as WeChat further extended working time, with employers bombarding young employees with work-related messages 24/7.<sup>36</sup> The overdrive of China's online sector took a toll on young techies. From 2013 to 2018, the average sleep hours of Chinese dropped from 8.8 to 6.5 hours. The top-ranked "sleepless cities" were Shanghai, Guangzhou, Beijing, and Shenzhen where more than 60 percent of Chinese Internet companies were located.<sup>37</sup>

If the *diaosi* generation benefited from the expansion of digital technology and connectivity in their aspirations for success, the *sang* generation fell victim to commercial forces that exploited *diaosi* buzzwords to encourage ever-expanding online labor without due compensation. Unlike *diaosi* whose satirical expressions belied their hidden ambition and desire to succeed, *sang* was genuinely burned out and wished to quit, or at least hit a pause. The discontent erupted into the 996. ICU online campaign in 2019,

34. See the CNNIC reports released in 2009, 2011, 2012, and 2019, China Internet Network Information Center, “中国互联网络发展状况统计报告 [Statistical report on internet development in China],” wap.cac.gov.cn, accessed June 20, 2019, [http://wap.cac.gov.cn/sjfw/hysj/A091601phoneindex\\_1.htm](http://wap.cac.gov.cn/sjfw/hysj/A091601phoneindex_1.htm).

35. Didi Media Research Center and CBNDATA, “2016智能出行大数据报告 [2016 intelligent commute big data report],” pdf.dfcfw.com, accessed June 20, 2019, [http://pdf.dfcfw.com/pdf/H3\\_AP201703210424075986\\_01.pdf](http://pdf.dfcfw.com/pdf/H3_AP201703210424075986_01.pdf).

36. Huang Vincent Lei and Zhang Ke, “Engagement, Formality, and Visibility: Managing Paradoxes of Using Mobile Instant Messaging for Work,” *International Journal of Communication* 13 (2019): 1919.

37. Chinese Medical Doctor Association Sleep Medicine Academy Society, “2018年中国睡眠指数报告 [2018 China sleep index report],” dydata.io, June 26, 2019, <https://www.dydata.io/datastore/detail/1755555620309831680/>.

crying out that “developers’ lives matter.” A 996. ICU repository appeared on GitHub, an online community where programmers worldwide share code and software tools. The repository received thousands of stars within a few days, making it the top trending topic on GitHub. Tech workers drew up a blacklist of hundreds of Internet companies requiring overtime work, either coercively or tacitly.<sup>38</sup> On the list were Alibaba, JD.com, ByteDance, and Huawei, China’s largest digital companies.

The rise of *sang* contradicted China’s state campaign of national rejuvenation/the Chinese Dream touted by Xi Jingping. The Chinese dream demanded Chinese youths to perform assiduously as workers and consumers so as to serve the collective needs of the Chinese society. Upward mobility through hard work, which *sang* called out as exploitative labor practices, was endowed with the national purpose of making China strong and prosperous.<sup>39</sup> Socialist collective values and capitalist individualism were now seamlessly integrated into the narrative of national rejuvenation. Yet individual youths who contributed to China’s exceptional growth suffered, their benefits slipping away as prices soared and incomes stagnated. Housing costs increased almost 20 percent from 2015 to 2017, especially in first-tier cities where technology companies were located and where young techies resided, making it practically impossible for the young to buy an apartment and start a family. Stagnation led to the prevailing sense of fatigue and hopelessness, which emerged as the most popular catchphrases of *sang*. Indeed, though inheriting humor and parody from *sang* took a gloomier and decisively pessimistic turn. Memes of psychological woes, such as insomnia, social phobia, and depression, and memes of physical woes, such as aging, hair loss, stomach discomfort, infertility, and even death, became predominant during the era of *sang*.

38. Yuan Yang, “China Tech Worker Protest against Long Working Hours Goes Viral,” *Financial Times*, April 3, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/72754638-55d1-11e9-91f9-b6515a54c5b1>.

39. K. Cohen Tan and Shuxin Cheng, “Sang Subculture in Post-Reform China,” *Global Media and China* 5, no. 1 (2020): 86.

The evolution of youth online culture from *diaosi* to *sang* was further shaped by the evolution and variation in digital platforms. *Diaosi* was the product of the earlier platform of Sina Weibo, in particular the more traditional community-based Baidu Forum. The arrival of more diverse platforms and applications on video streaming sites such as Youku, Bilibili, and TikTok; music platforms such as NetEase Cloud Music and QQ Music; social networking sites like Douban; and question-and-answer website zhihu.com led to the loss of a core community, the bedrock of *diaosi*. During the era of *sang*, relevant memes and catchphrases spontaneously spread throughout the whole network on diverse media platforms. The more focused *diaosi* subsequently gave way to a more diffused *sang*.

Bilibili.com, a video streaming platform for user-generated videos, became the most popular platform for *sang*. The platform's most prominent feature is the bullet comment, a subtitle system that displays user comments as streams of moving subtitles overlaid on the video playback screen. Previous comments become part of the video content for future viewers. It creates a chat room experience where users watch, resonate, and interact with others. Many videos on the website went viral as the result of bullet comments. As young people shared their pessimistic feelings by collectively venting through bullet comments, the *People's Daily* stepped in, accusing bullet comments of spreading negative energy.<sup>40</sup> Stricter regulations were called for, leading to Norms for the Administration of Online Short Video Platforms and Detailed Implementation Rules for Online Short Video Content Review Standards in January 2019, banning short videos, including titles, bullet comments, and memes purportedly promoting *sang* culture, suicide, and pessimistic views of life.<sup>41</sup>

40. “弹幕语言，多元也要有规范 [Danmu language, diverse but need to be regulated],” *People's Daily*, overseas edition, April 5, 2019, [https://www.sohu.com/a/306045576\\_157267](https://www.sohu.com/a/306045576_157267).

41. China Netcasting Services Association, “网络短视频内容审核标准细则 [Detailed rules for online short video content review standards],” cnsa.cn, January 9, 2019, [http://www.cnsa.cn/art/2019/1/9/art\\_1488\\_22441.html](http://www.cnsa.cn/art/2019/1/9/art_1488_22441.html).

One feature distinguishing *sang* memes was the emphasis on bodily suffering and its visual exhibition. The incessant and obsessive focus on the body eventually led to the rise of yet another youth online cultural phenomenon, the lying flat movement, or what the Chinese call *tangping*, a term that emerged in 2021.



Figure 3: Screenshot of the original post from “Kind-Hearted Traveller” on Baidu.

Source: Baidu Forum

## Tangping/Lying Flat

What ushered in the era of lying flat was an iconic posting made by a Baidu Forum user, Kind-Hearted Traveller, in April 2021, with the subject heading “Lying-flat is the right thing to do.” In the post, Traveller, whose real name is Luo Huazhong wrote that “lying flat is my intellectual movement of philosophy. Only by lying flat, man became the measure of everything.”<sup>42</sup> Probably not by coincidence, the declaration was posted on Baidu’s Population Forum (人口吧) at a time when China was anticipating the release of a national census predicting a looming demographic crisis of an aging population and low birth rates. Traveller’s posting equated the posture of lying flat with the need for bodily autonomy and for escaping the trap of mandatory childbearing. His became the manifesto of the lying flat movement.<sup>43</sup>

A high school dropout born in 1990, Luo traveled around the country, getting by with minimum needs while working part-time jobs. He documented his minimalistic lifestyle through online posts. To earn a few quick bucks, Luo travelled to Hengdian, the world’s largest film production backlot, to play minor roles, including appearing as a dead body, literally “lying flat,” in a variety of costume drama films and television serials. As Luo put it, “Life is about lying flat in different forms.” One or two months of performing death by lying flat could easily keep him afloat for an entire year. Luo’s minimalist practice earned him the nickname of the “Master of Lying-Flatism.”<sup>44</sup>

*Lying flat* became the trendiest term in China by 2021. Numerous memes about *tangping* were posted online, with young adults claiming to be lying flat and quitting the rat race, what the Chinese called “involution.” Compared with *diaosi* and *sang*, lying flat was a more explicit physical demonstration of refusal to participate in China’s national rejuvenation campaign.

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42. B. R. Deepak, “Chinese Millennials Take to Lying Flat,” *Sunday Guardian*, July 3, 2021, <https://www.sundayguardianlive.com/opinion/chinese-millennials-take-lying-flat>.

43. Chen, “These Chinese Millennials Are ‘Chilling.’”

44. Chen.

Public sentiment in China to lying flat was ambivalent. While some celebrated *tangping* as a manifesto against materialism and the state-capitalist system, others denounced it as nihilistic escapism.

The Seventh National Population Census was eventually released on May 11, 2021, confirming the slowest population growth in PRC history.<sup>45</sup> On May 20, 2021, *Nanfang Daily*, a party newspaper from Guangdong province, ran a commentary with the heading “Lying Flat Is a Shame, Not Justice.”<sup>46</sup> The same day, *Guangming Daily*, which was instrumental in leading the debate on *sang* in 2016, published an article by Wang Xingyu, the branch party secretary of the School of Economics and Management of the China Institute of Labour Relations, making it clear that “the ‘lying flat group’ clearly posed problems for China’s economic and social development” and that “we should be concerned about the ‘lying flat group’, particularly at a time of slowing birth rate.”<sup>47</sup> The article urged society “to cultivate a positive working environment for these young people and to promote positive values through the joint efforts of the state, society and schools.”<sup>48</sup> By May 28, 2021, Li Fengliang, the dean of the Institute of Education at Tsinghua University, published an article on *China Science Daily* and its public account on WeChat, denouncing *tangping* as “an extremely irresponsible attitude, which disappoints not only the youths’ parents but also millions of taxpayers.”<sup>49</sup>

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45. National Bureau of Statistics, “第七次全国人口普查主要数据情况 [Key data of the Seventh National Population Census],” stats.gov.cn, May 11, 2021, [http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/202105/t20210510\\_1817176.html](http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/202105/t20210510_1817176.html).
46. Wang Qingfeng, “‘躺平’可耻，哪来的正义感? [‘Lying flat’ is a shame, not justice],” *Nanfang Daily*, May 20, 2021, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/comments/2021-05/20/c\\_1127467232.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/comments/2021-05/20/c_1127467232.htm).
47. Wang Xingyu, “引导‘躺平族’珍惜韶华奋发有为 [Guide the ‘lying flat youth’ to treasure time and endeavor],” *Guangming Daily*, May 20, 2021, [https://epaper.gmw.cn/gmrb/html/2021-05/20/nw.D110000gmrb\\_20210520\\_2-11.htm](https://epaper.gmw.cn/gmrb/html/2021-05/20/nw.D110000gmrb_20210520_2-11.htm).
48. See the article reposted by the Communist Party of China News Network website: Wang Xingyu, “引导‘躺平族’珍惜韶华奋发有为 [Guide the ‘Lingping people’ to cherish their time and work hard to achieve success],” cpcnews.cn, May 20, 2021, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2021/0520/c40531-32108237.html>
49. Li Fengliang, “‘内卷’是教育发挥筛选功能的成本 [‘Involution’ is the cost of education for performing filtering function],” *China Science Daily*, May 5, 2021, <https://news.sciencenet.cn/sbhtmlnews/2021/5/362832.shtml>.

In an effort to avert a demographic crisis, China officially announced the Three-Children Policy on May 31, 2021, relaxing birth quota from two in recent years to three children per household moving forward. The state-allocated target in family planning was a reminder to young people that their bodies belonged to the state and served at the pleasure of the state. Lying flat renewed attention to the body as a locus of power struggles where the presence of the party-state loomed large. One meme that became popular among the lying flats was “green chives” (韭菜), a vegetable in China frequently linked to fecundity for easy growth and harvest. In recent years, green chives became a metaphor for ordinary Chinese toiling away to serve the rich and powerful.<sup>50</sup> The companion meme is the image of a sickle, a tool for harvesting that happens to be the symbol of the Communist Party, which has had a long tradition of disciplining and regulating the bodies of Chinese citizens. The only way for the green chives to escape from being harvested by a sickle was to lie flat because “a chive lying-flat is difficult to reap (躺平的韭菜不好割).” Green chive’s purported nourishing effects on male virility and female fertility makes lying flat an emancipatory act of evading harvest.

In July 2021, an article in *Deutsche Welle* linked *tangping* to the Three-Children Policy, predicting that the Chinese government would not be amused with youth withdrawal, especially at a time when China was trying to boost birth rates to ensure economic growth.<sup>51</sup> The article used *tangping*’s own slogan, “Don’t buy a house, don’t buy a car, don’t get married, don’t have children, don’t consume,” to capture the phenomenon. Sure enough, the concern over the lying flat phenomenon prompted the Chinese government to issue the Double Reduction (双减) measure in July, banning

50. Pang Laikwan, “China’s Post-Socialist Governmentality and the Garlic Chives Meme: Economic Sovereignty and Biopolitical Subjects,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 39, no. 1 (2022): 81.

51. He Sai, “中国‘躺平族’都是怎么想的? [What does China’s ‘tangping group’ think],” Deutsche Welle, June 8, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/zh/中国躺平族都是怎么想的/a-57814519>.

all for-profit, after-school tutoring programs to ease cost and pressure of child education.<sup>52</sup> In August, the Supreme People's Court and the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security published guidelines on labor law violations, signaling to the Big Tech firms the need to relax the notorious 996 overwork culture.<sup>53</sup> The same month, Xi Jinping mentioned that development opportunities should be afforded equally to more people to discourage *tangping*.<sup>54</sup>

## DST as Civic Engagement?

Young Chinese construct playful narratives of personal and social experience through web dramas, online catchphrases, and memes, as well as multimedia remixes, which allow the emergence of new forms of communities, identities, and authenticities. As political participation remains off-limits, online communities in China create, share, and trade playful memes and short videos as a form of civic participations. In discussing the rise of

52. See the General Office of the Central Committee of China's Communist Party and the General Office of the State Council, "Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Homework and Off-Campus Training for Compulsory Education Students," moe.gov.cn, July 24, 2021, [http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb\\_xxgk/moe\\_1777/moe\\_1778/202107/t20210724\\_546576.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xxgk/moe_1777/moe_1778/202107/t20210724_546576.html). The sudden major crackdown was so impactful that the whole after-school tutoring industry evaporated virtually overnight, with hundreds of billions of dollars in Chinese education technology companies stock value wiped out, and hundreds of thousands of workers have since been laid off. For more details, see Qin Chen, "The Turmoil Following China's Crackdown on Private Tutoring," TechNode, February 3, 2022, <https://technode.com/2022/02/03/lunar-new-year-special-the-turmoil-following-chinas-crackdown-on-private-tutoring/>.

53. The Ministry of Human Resources and the Supreme People's Court of the People's Republic of China, "The Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security and the Supreme People's Court Jointly Issue Typical Cases of Overtime Work Labor and Personnel Disputes," court.gov.cn, August 2021, <https://www.court.gov.cn/zixun-xiangqing-319161.html>.

54. Xi Jinping, "扎实推动共同富裕 [Solidly advance common prosperity]," Qiushi, October 15, 2021, [http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2021-10/15/c\\_1127959365.htm](http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2021-10/15/c_1127959365.htm). It is quoted from his speech in the tenth meeting of the Financial and Economic Commission of the CPC Central Committee on August 17, 2021.

the satirical TV programs that merge entertainment and politics, Jeffrey P. Jones highlights sarcastic expressions as an important mechanism for public engagement with legislative and electoral politics.<sup>55</sup> Though there is limited room for civic engagement and electoral politics in China, satire has become the dominant mood of expression in DST, evolving from *diaosi*'s playful optimism to *sang*'s sardonic pessimism and to *tangping*'s languid humor. In what he calls "cynicism,"<sup>56</sup> Peter Sloterdijk contends that irony and sarcasm can be a form of ideological subversion that rejects the official culture.<sup>57</sup> As Jones observes, ordinary citizens routinely encounter mediated politics through seemingly pedestrian pursuits of pleasure, distraction, curiosity, community, sociability, and happenstance.<sup>58</sup> Political engagements are thus embedded in everyday cultural discourse and practices on and offline. Looking at the specific instance of the Chinese Internet, Guobin Yang notes that "play has a spirit of irreverence. It always sits uncomfortably with power. . . . Chinese Internet culture, in general, is enlivened with this spirit of play."<sup>59</sup> Thomas Poell and colleagues argue that Chinese "netizens" have positioned themselves as a distinct component of the public who monitor social events discreetly while hiding behind the screen.<sup>60</sup> The collective and anonymous

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55. Jeffery P. Jones, *Entertaining Politics: Satiric Television and Political Engagement* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010).

56. Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

57. The everyday banality and to hold them up to ridicule, thus exposing the sublime noblesse of the ideological phrases the egotistical interests, the violence, the brutal claims to power. This procedure, then, is more pragmatic than argumentative: it subverts the official proposition by confronting it with the situation of its enunciation; it proceeds ad hominem (for example, when a politician preaches the duty of patriotic sacrifice, kynicism exposes the personal gain he is making from the sacrifice of others).

58. Jones, *Entertaining Politics*, 366n63.

59. Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 224.

60. Thomas Poell, Jeroen de Kloet, and Guohua Zeng, "Will the Real Weibo Please Stand Up? Chinese Online Contention and Actor-network Theory," *Chinese Journal of Communication* 7, no. 1 (2014): 12.

identity of netizens allows for civil participation and group solidarity without revealing individual identity.

The prevalence of satirical memes and remixes as both an outlet of expression and evasion of detection in China are the result of Internet censorship. Rather than eliminating political expression, Astrid Nordin and Lisa Richaud argue that censorship engenders the prevalent use of coded language in political satire.<sup>61</sup> The extensive use of humor can be seen as coded political resistance. In the 2000s, the buzzwords “river crab” (*hexie*, homophone of “harmony”) and “grass mud horse” (*caonima*, homophone of “fuck your mom”) as parodies of the government censorship stood out for their wide circulation. More than wordplays, these expressions are frequently accompanied by images, videos and music, and other forms of multimedia representations. *Egao* (online spoofs or wicked for fun), for instance, is a form of online parody that uses digital technology to make visual collages.<sup>62</sup> Satiric and ludicrous, *egao* playfully subverts a range of authoritative discourses and provides a vehicle for comic criticism and emotional catharsis. Bingchun Meng notes that *egao* “shares an artistic tradition with parody and satire” and “an anti-establishment spirit with medieval carnivals.”<sup>63</sup> Digital technology and networks brought new dimensions to the ancient tradition, furthering the fusion of entertainment and politics in China, establishing China-specific nonconfrontational cultural politics. Political connotations

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61. Astrid Nordin and Lisa Richaud, “Subverting Official Language and Discourse in China? Type River Crab for Harmony,” *China Information* 28, no. 1 (2014): 47.

62. *Egao* has been extensively written about. See Bingchun Meng, “From Steamed Bun to Grass Mud Horse: E Gao as Alternative Political Discourse on the Chinese Internet,” *Global Media and Communication* 7, no. 1 (2011): 33; Christopher G. Rea, “Spoofing (e’gao) Culture on the Chinese Internet,” in *Humour in Chinese Life and Culture: Resistance and Control in Modern Times*, ed. Jessica Milner Davis and Jocelyn Chey (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013); Haiqing Yu, “After the ‘Steamed Bun’: E’gao and Its Postsocialist Politics,” *Chinese Literature Today* 5, no. 1 (2015): 55; Haomin Gong and Xin Yang, “Digitized Parody: The Politics of Egao in Contemporary China,” *China Information* 24, no. 1 (2010): 3; Paola Voci, *China on Video: Smaller-Screen Realities* (London: Routledge, 2010).

63. Meng, “From Steamed Bun to Grass Mud Horse,” 47n72.

disguised in visually stimulating and pleasurable forms make the text more likely to be widely shared and remembered. As scholars observed a decade ago, visual trickery, symbolic manipulation, parody, humor, and intense interaction have become essential practices in China's online repertoire.<sup>64</sup>

On the other hand, recent studies on the Chinese Internet have sought to move beyond the singular focus on civic participation and political engagement. David Kurt Herold, for example, proposes to study the Internet as an online forum instead of a tool for political resistance.<sup>65</sup> Using the metaphorical notion of "online carnivals" to counter the perception of the Internet as a public sphere, Herold argued that the Internet serves as the "second life" of Chinese people, and carnivalesque empowerment "can be far more democratic (people-rule) than any representative democracy."<sup>66</sup> Scholars such as Haiqing Yu and Shaohua Guo further propose an alternative framework to look at the Chinese Internet. Addressing the dichotomy between control and resistance in scholarly and journalistic discourses, Yu shifts the focus from the usage and function of the Internet to how ordinary people imagine their relationship with the Internet.<sup>67</sup> By elaborating metaphorical views on the Internet as *jianghu* (the milieu or community in the Chinese martial arts world), battlefield and playground, Yu showcases the framing of the Chinese Internet by its users and goes beyond the binary power struggle to reflect more on the cultural-historical legacy and the quotidian needs of pleasure-seeking. Employing the concept of "the network of visibility," Guo shifts the focus from "what has been censored" to "what is visible," which

64. See Poell et al., "Will the Real Weibo Please Stand Up?" 7n69; Xiao Qiang, "The Rise of Online Public Opinion and Its Political Impact," in *Changing Media, Changing China*, ed. Susan L. Shirk (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China*, 68.

65. David Kurt Herold, "Noise, Spectacle, Politics: Carnival in Chinese Cyberspace," in *Online Society in China: Creating, Celebrating, and Instrumentalising the Online Carnival*, ed. David Kurt Herold and Peter Marolt (New York: Routledge, 2011), 15.

66. Herold, "Noise, Spectacle, Politics," 15.

67. Haiqing Yu, "Social Imaginaries of the Internet in China," in *The Routledge Companion to Global Internet Histories*, ed. Gerard Goggin and Mark J. McLelland (New York: Routledge, 2017).

highlights the negotiations and dynamics among multiple actors, including divergent layers of the state, netizens, and business.<sup>68</sup> Through a detailed description and situated analysis of landmark events in different sociohistorical periods, Guo showcases “the evolution of the Chinese Internet” by presenting and contextualizing the competition among diverse players for “visibility” and legitimacy, which are measured by market popularity and content authority. Yu and Guo’s approaches shed light on the nuances and complexity of the DST culture by directing us to look at how users make sense of their practices and how the youth online subculture is cocreated by multiple participants. As Richard Dawkins put it in his seminal book *The Selfish Gene*, which introduced *meme* as analogous to the *gene*, a cultural unit that can spread by replicating itself,<sup>69</sup> Internet memes or other means of expression do not emerge unless users respond to it, alter it, and enact it. User participation and the pleasure derived from participating thus become the driving force for the survival of memes and other online expressions.

## Conclusion

This article has traced, in broad strokes, the evolution of Chinese youth online subculture from *diaosi* to *sang* and finally to *tangping*. Expressed through web dramas, online memes, and multimedia remix, the evolution of Chinese youth sentiment from sarcastic yet upbeat *diaosi* in the early 2010s to the disillusioned *sang* by the mid-2010s and the resigned *tangping* since the early 2020s is indicative of China’s shifting political and economic milieu at large. In tracing and contextualizing the DST culture over the past decade, the article serves as a first step toward understanding motivations, perspectives, and actions and reactions of various stakeholders in the DST

68. Shaohua Guo, *The Evolution of the Chinese Internet: Creative Visibility in the Digital Public* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020).

69. Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 30th ann. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

phenomenon. It argues that the transformation of the DST from *diaosi* to *sang* and to *tangping* witnesses Chinese DST youth's gradual disenchantment with and an eventual disengagement from the established societal expectation as the young generation grew increasingly averse, indeed resistant, to partaking in China's national rejuvenation drive.

It will be fruitful for future study to look at how China's unique one-child policy, which lasted from 1979 to 2015, might have contributed to youth disillusionment. In 2004, anthropologist Vanessa Fong published groundbreaking ethnographic research on the social, economic, and psychological development of urban youth born under China's one-child policy. Fong discovered that the singletons carried the sole burden of parental expectations of upward social mobility across gender and family income divides. Growing up as the only child and the center of family attention, the singletons were groomed to be winners amid fierce competition. The zero-sum contest led to stress and eventual distress when reality took hold. What Fong described as the "incongruities between the status they expected and the status they attained" can perhaps partially account for the singletons' collective frustration and despair.<sup>70</sup> Fengshu Liu's research on China's E-generation, based on interviews with urban teenagers and young adults born into one-child families, reinforces Fong's observation. Liu points out further the contradictions for the one-child generation contending with the weight of parental expectations, an exam-oriented education system, and a competitive labor market while living with boredom, loneliness, and insolation without siblings and peers. Liu's interviewees stated that they turned to cyberspace and Internet cafés to escape from reality and parental, and by extension state, expectation and control.<sup>71</sup> The Internet provided the glue for the birth and growth of the DST phenomenon.

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70. Vanessa L. Fong, *Only Hope: Coming of Age under China's One-Child Policy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 98.

71. Fengshu Liu, "It Is Not Merely About Life on the Screen: Urban Chinese Youth and the Internet Café," *Journal of Youth Studies* 12, no. 2 (2009): 167.

A look at similar and parallel cyber subculture among youth elsewhere, including Japan, the United States, and beyond, will also be useful as we undertake a larger project concerning the origin, evolution, affect, and effect of the youth DST culture. Many catchphrases of *diaosi* and *sang* had their counterparts or origins from other countries or regions. *Foxi* (“Buddhist-like”), for instance, derived from a 2014 issue of *Non-no*, a Japanese women’s fashion magazine, referred to monk-like Japanese men who are too exhausted to interact with women and enjoy being alone. When *diaosi* went viral in China in the early 2010s, *lushe*, meaning “masturbating snake,” a homophone for loser, was trendy in Taiwan. Young people in Taiwan mocked themselves as a little snake (小蛇) or little *lu* (小魯) and called the wealthy and affluent people *wen na* or *wei jun* (“great king”), homophonous words of “winner.” The recognition of youth disenchantment and frustration across diverse cultures and regions will help us position DST as a global phenomenon.