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# Youth culture of self-mockery: bodily memes and economies of affect in China's online space

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## ABSTRACT

This article provides a general picture of the decade-long self-mockery culture in China's online space, unraveling its generative mechanism in the mediascape from both macro and micro perspectives. On the macro level, it historicizes the emergence of three emblematic cases: *diaosi* (dick hair), *sang* (grieving), and *tang ping* (lying flat), highlighting the central roles of digital media and the attention economy while teasing out the evolving affects and consistent threads, including the recurring theme of the body. On the micro level, the article probes into the agency of actual meme users, employing focus group discussions and interviews. It discovers their varied interpretations, practices, and motivations while uncovering the performativity, contradictions, and transformations of emotions embedded in the memetic articulations. The article concludes by proposing a dual-economy model, in which the affective economy interacts with the attention economy and operates at both the macro level of cultural production and the micro level of everyday communication.

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## Introduction

In August 2023, *The Economist* reported that “the mood of young Chinese is growing ever darker” based on the increasing presence of nihilistic vocabulary such as *bai lan* (let it rot) on China's social media and ascribed it to China's recent economic downturns (China's Defeated Youth, 2023). However, despondent forms of online self-mockery have been consistent throughout the last decade, such as the massive identification with *diaosi* (dick hair) in the early 2010s, *sang* (grieving) starting in the mid-2010s, and *tang ping* (lying flat) in the early 2020s. Likewise, scholarship interpreted them as affective identifications of disillusionment, loss, or anxiety permeated among Chinese youth, reflecting their passive revolt toward certain circumstances, such as the lack of opportunities for upward mobility (Szablewicz, 2014), the hegemonic campaigns of positive energy and Chinese dream (Tan & Cheng, 2020), the state-capitalist system (Pang, 2022), mounting living pressure (Zhang & Li, 2023), or harsh Covid control (Su, 2023). While the unpleasant realities were certainly relevant,

the roles of digital media and users' varied memetic practices and motivations require further attention. Regarding the affective dimension, few studies focus on the contradictory and transforming emotions embedded in expressions of negative memes such as positive senses of play and pride, indicating a more complex picture of the affective mechanism. It is thus simplistic to conclude that the increasing prevalence of passive vocabulary on social media accurately reflects the declining mood of Chinese youth.

This article fills these research gaps by investigating the economies of self-mockery memes and related emotions or, in other words, how they were produced, circulated, and consumed. It first adopts a historical approach to the case study of *diaosi*, *sang*, and *tang ping*, underlining the larger sociocultural contexts and constitutive forces of their prevalence, especially the attention economy propelling these terms as topics on mass media agendas. While single buzzwords rose and fell due to different circumstances, consistent forms and affects shared by multiple memes that spanned a decade or more reveal certain deeper structures. The first section utilizes discursive representations and narratives of the three meme events, including related media reports, academic studies, online posts and discussions, and user reflections, to investigate the phenomenon.

I have chosen these three cases because they were extensively circulated and covered in media and academic works, making it easier to track their rise. Moreover, they epitomize the semantic development across a network of self-mockery expressions and three evolutionary stages of the affective discourse with increasing emotional appeal. Built on shared disappointment, the related affects shifted from proudly feeling like "losers" (*diaosi*) to an embrace of negativity and passivity (*sang*) to an urge to resign (*tang ping*). I understand the risk of placing the three terms on equal footing, as "*sang* culture" in popular discourse refers to a youth subculture encompassing a series of related expressions (Tan & Cheng, 2020). However, "*sang* culture" itself, invented and taken for granted by mass media and academics, is an integral part of the *sang* phenomenon. Additionally, an internet meme is intrinsically plural due to its participatory nature, including a group of variants sharing common characteristics (Shifman, 2013). *Sang's* possibly outnumbered derivatives do not make it inherently different from *diaosi* and *tang ping*.

Further, the article focuses on the micro-contexts and agency of actual meme users, delving into their diversified practices, motivations, and emotions. The analysis uses data from two focus group discussions and 26 semi-structured interviews conducted between 2020 and 2022 as part of a larger project on China's self-mockery culture. Two focus groups were first held to gather an overview of the culture and reflexive insights of the jointly experienced meme events. The 14 participants in the study were undergraduate students recruited from a public elective course at a university in Guangdong province. In contrast, the interviews explored the informants' varied engagement and perceptions. While one interviewee was drawn from the focus group, others were recruited using a snowball sampling method, selected based on applications of popular self-mockery memes in social media posts or everyday online chats. The interviewees comprised 16 women and 10 men, aged between 18 and 36 years and belonging to various regions. While the majority (14) resided in China's first-tier cities of Beijing (11) and Guangzhou (3), 4 interviewees were based in

provincial capitals or municipalities of Nanjing, Zhengzhou, and Chongqing, 4 interviewees lived in smaller cities, and the other 4 were located overseas. The interviews, conducted online (18) or offline (8), ranged from 30–120 min. Regarding occupations, the interviewees turned out to be white-collar professionals (20) and college students (6), prompting the researcher to expand the scope of the research to include 12 additional talks with 8 deliverymen and 4 female domestic workers in Beijing, aged between 19 and 38 years, all without a college education. The broader sample highlights how social class and educational background affect users' responses to the cultural texts.

### **“Economies” of affect—a theoretical framework**

Ahmed (2004) finds the exchange and flow of emotions analogous to Marx's formula of money to commodity to money (M-C-M) and proposes an economic model of emotion wherein “the movement between signs converts into affect” (p. 120). Subsequent scholars add that an affective economy is the “exchange and circulation of affects through media” (Lehmann et al., 2019, p. 140). In the era of digital media characterized by oversaturated information, platforms and media producers capitalize on emotions for clicks and advertising revenue. As Boler and Davis (2020) argue, “the architecture of the information economy is based on emotional appeal” (p. 21); so, “attention economies are affective economies” (p. 18). At the individual level, emotional expressions are fundamentally strategic forms of self-presentation, often aimed at garnering attention. With the growth of the influencer economy, social media influencers intentionally build affective ties with followers through performed authenticity (Shtern et al., 2019). Acknowledged by the profitability and performativity of emotions online, this study adopts the plural sense of “economies” of affect in which the circulations of affect not just have a structural affinity with economic processes but also interrelate and interact with each other.

Regarding internet memes, they function as the abstraction and medium of affects or, in Ahmed's words, “sticky signs” binding subjects together (2004, p. 120). Memes propagate due to affective resonance between users on both personal and societal levels, bridging individual experience with collective cultural meaning (Milner, 2016). Users perform emotions by adding shared memetic templates with varied individual contexts, connecting individuals with shared experiences and fostering collective identities and communities (Gal et al., 2016; Miltner, 2014). In this sense, meme circulations embody an affective economy that may lead to group solidarity. Based on the theoretical navigation above, this study seeks to answer two general questions: (1) What are the driving forces in an affective economy? (2) How does the affective economy operate in the era of social media?

### **The macro-economy: the evolution and commodification of affect**

The rise of self-mockery culture is situated within the broader context of China's digital boom and platformization during the 2010s, defined by the rapid proliferation of internet users and social media platforms' full penetration into the everyday lives of Chinese (De Kloet et al., 2019). China's cyberspace today is characterized by “the

sophisticated and ubiquitous corporate management of user-generated content” and “the prominent visibility of state actors online” (Guo, 2024, p. 406). Digital media producers and platforms generally follow a depoliticization and e-commerce strategy and focus on soft content and aggregation (Fang, 2022), while endeavoring to “stir public sentiment in pursuit of increased web traffic” (Guo, 2024, p. 407). In this context, self-mockery memes like *diaosi*, *sang*, and *tang ping*, marked by self-involved yet affective nature, were widely adopted in the attention economy. The following parts tease out the relevant macro-contexts of the social milieu and media environment that determined the prevalence of *diaosi*, *sang*, *tang ping*, and associated affects.

### *Diaosi: proudly feeling like “losers”*

Surging to popularity in the early 2010s, the term *diaosi* initiated the affective discourse of self-deprecation. It appeared due to “trash-talking” between members of Liyi Ba—an online fan group of Chinese soccer player Liyi—and others on the platform of Baidu Tieba, a 4chan-like forum hosting discussion boards dedicated to a variety of topics (Szablewicz, 2014, p. 263). Combined with the vulgar term for penis *diao* and hair strands *si*, *diaosi* literally means male pubic hair or a penis as small as a hair, metaphorically derogating one’s personality or masculinity. However, Liyi Ba was noted for worshipping Liyi by bantering about him, and boards on Baidu Tieba were called the youth’s “emotional communities” due to shared disenfranchised feelings and the tradition of cynically commenting on social phenomena in the form of spoofs, satires, and self-deprecation (Liu, 2019, p. 132). Against this backdrop, Liyi Ba members embraced the mocking title, “taking pleasure and pride in embodying the mocked character” (Yang et al., 2015, p. 208). They further developed a genre of “*diaosi* literature” in which the short-poor-ugly (*ai-qiong-cuo*, a variant of *diaosi*) protagonists repetitively suffer from their unavailing commitment to the “goddess” (*nüshen*), a fantasized ideal woman who always refuses the poor men (He, 2016). In this sense, *diaosi* was not just a self-indulgent “object of emotion” (Ahmed, 2014) injected with users’ frustrated material and sexual desires but also a bodily projection of their perceived social status and “sexual impotence” (Cao, 2013).

Amid booming internet users and digital economy and high visibility of inequalities online, *diaosi*, a male-centered subcultural slang, gained mainstream access by turning the widespread sense of powerlessness, inferiority, and discontent into a sarcastic and cynical way of positioning oneself in opposition to what seemed unattainable (Kan, 2013). In September 2011, Baidu Tieba lifted all restrictions on membership and posting. As a result, Liyi Ba’s members skyrocketed from 40,000 to 400,000 within a single day, eventually amassing 20 million users at its peak (He, 2016). Capitalizing on this momentum, in 2012, Baidu partnered with Liyi Ba to inaugurate the *Diaosi* Festival, a marketing initiative with a series of campaigns designed to draw greater public engagement. Additionally, the state’s grip over the internet was relatively loose in the early 2010s, and China’s online space was “an agonistic public sphere” that buzzed with sensational news and discussions of injustice and inequality (Tong, 2015). Disclosing corruption-related information online or the so-called “internet anti-corruption” (*wangluo fanfu*) even received endorsement from the Hu-Wen administration between 2008 and 2012 (Xie, 2014). Given this context, portal sites celebrated

*diaosi* and some interpreted its spread as the “cultural success of ordinary people” against inequalities (Topic Today, 2012). The term evolved into an honorable and fashionable “proletarian identity,” contrasting with elites born with inherited privileges (Yang et al., 2015, p. 209). Although the renowned film director Feng Xiaogang criticized the self-proclaimed *diaosi* as “brainless” (*naocan*),<sup>1</sup> several other celebrities called themselves *diaosi* to show grassroots origins or laid-back lifestyles.<sup>2</sup> However, all these incidents became pivotal catalysts propelling its discussion and dissemination. Likewise, diversified media production back then, encompassing web series, variety shows, and online games (Cao, 2017; Szablewicz, 2014; Yang et al., 2015), competitively incorporated the buzzword, facilitating its full integration into popular discourse.

### ***Sang: embracing negativity and passivity***

The subsequent self-deprecating phenomenon that reached a comparable level of influence was *sang*, which advanced the culture into a new phase with diversified memetic expressions of negative emotions. The term, which originally referred to the act or status of deprivation, became a buzzword in 2016, delivering bodily sensations of loss and dispiritedness (Tan & Cheng, 2020). It could also be a defeatist identity, as some respondents called themselves “*sang* people” (*sang ren*) or “*sang* ghost” (*sang gui*). More notably, the term “*sang* culture” (*sang wenhua*) was coined around the same time. A 2016 online essay connected *sang*, stickers of defeatist characters, and the dispirited feelings of youth, defining them as elements of “*sang* culture” (Du, 2016). From July to August in 2016, the essay was reposted by various media outlets, quickly solidifying an emerging youth culture. While no respondent in this study would use the term in everyday language, “*sang* culture” has been broadly discussed in media content and academic writings from that time onwards, referring to a range of verbal and visual expressions that signify feelings of negativity. For example, the phrase “I am more or less a waste” (*wo chabuduo shige feiren le*), and photo-based memes of “Paralyzed Geyou,” “Salted Fish,” and “Sad Toad,” featuring weary or suffering figures (Tan & Cheng, 2020). The founding of “*sang* culture”, in turn, strengthened *sang*’s status as a “flagship meme,” sustaining its long-lasting circulation (Shifman, 2013, p. 132). According to previous literature, negative emotions involved in *sang* memes include disenchantment and disconsolation (Tan & Cheng, 2020), anxiety and dispiritedness (Zhang & Li, 2023), and pessimism and futility (Yang, 2021). Given that humor is fundamental to these memes, the affects of *sang* can be generalized as an embrace of negativity and passivity.

*Sang* emerged amid the full integration of platforms into everyday life in China. Messaging applications with meme-friendly designs, such as WeChat and DingTalk, became dominant communication channels and counterparts of email in China’s work and school environments. The constant and instantaneous connectivity led to intensified surveillance, prolonged work hours, and user anxieties (Huang & Zhang, 2019; Zhou & Xiang, 2021). Parallel to the ubiquity of platforms is the extensive growth of China’s digital industry and internet giants, boosted by the state’s “mass entrepreneurship and mass innovation” blueprint and “Internet Plus” strategy in 2015 (Yu, 2017). Intensive labor composed mainly of educated young professionals was recruited in metropolises where most internet and technology

companies are located. To compete for market share in the emerging sectors, the “996 working schedule” became prominent among these companies and resulted in the online protest of “996.ICU” led by Chinese developers in 2019 (Tan, 2022). Against this backdrop of communicative affordances, forced intimacy, and work pressure, *sang* memes became a popular language among digitally literate young people.

Meanwhile, commercial media facilitated the development of “*sang* culture.” For instance, “Buddha-like” (*foxi*) became viral following a 2017 WeChat essay that reported young people had recently embraced this detached, Zen-like attitude toward everyday life as a way of participating in the “*sang* culture” (Yang, 2021). *The Fair* (*Xin Shixiang*), the WeChat public account that published the essay, was a leading media brand with millions of subscribers. It was renowned for its emotionally charged content and provocative marketing planning, such as “Fleeing Beijing-Shanghai-Guangzhou After 4h,” a commercial campaign for the booking application Flight Manager (Huang, 2017). Similarly, platforms incorporated user-generated affective content for marketing. The music streaming platform NetEase Cloud Music was nicknamed “Net Depression Cloud,” a Chinese homophone, due to its association with misery and gloom, as reflected in users’ sad reflections shared pervasively in its comments section. In response, the platform organized campaigns featuring selected catchphrases displayed in subway stations, trains, and on walls and grounds in several cities, building emotional scenes and affective ties with users (Weavy, 2022). As a result of the reciprocal process, NetEase Music was recognized as a supportive community for youth. In another case, originally circulating as a joke on Weibo, “*Sang* Tea” (*sangcha*) became a physical Shanghai pop-up store in April 2017 through the joint effort of the food delivery application Ele.me and the news feed platform NetEase News. Due to its rapid popularity online, *Sang* Tea became a shorthand for “*sang* culture,” with the state media *People’s Daily* cautioning young people, “Don’t drink ‘*Sang* Tea’ laced with mental opium” (He, 2017). While commercial media and platforms exploited *sang* for marketing, state media disapproved and instructed the youth to be positive by applying the same vocabulary. These continuous interplays between users, commercial media, and state media embodied the buildup and spread of *sang* on the macro level.

### *Tang ping*: an urge to resign

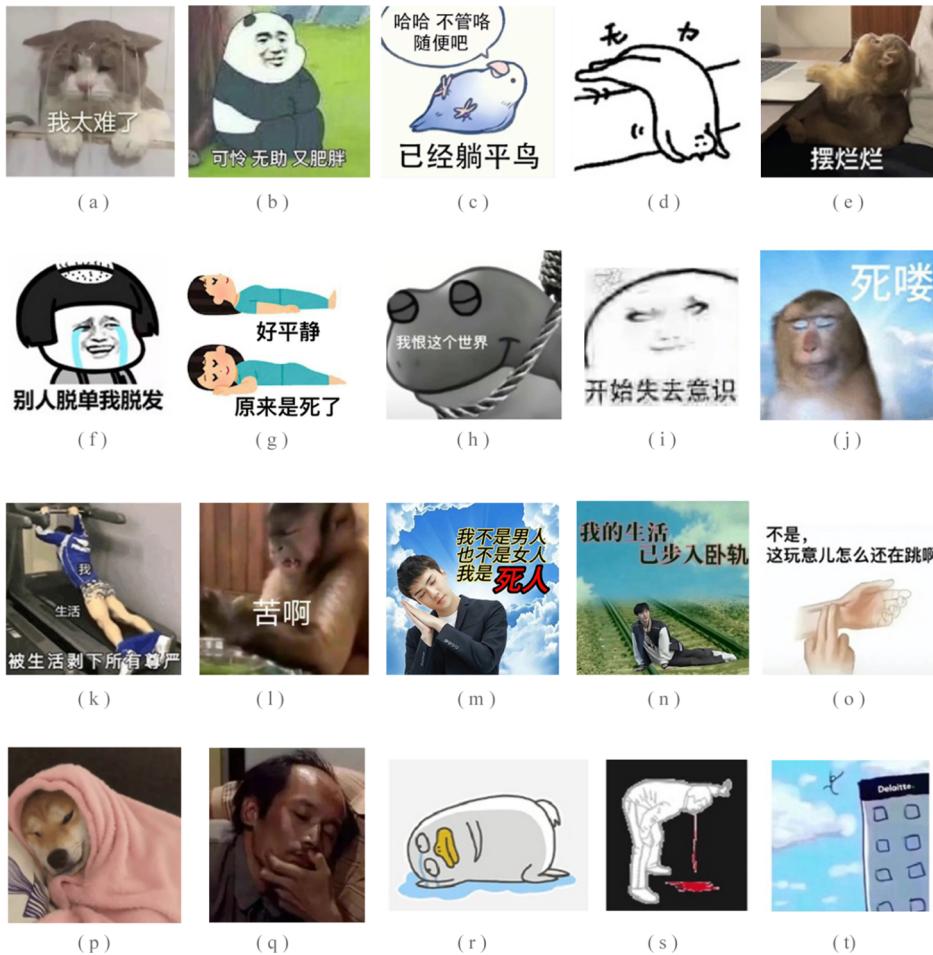
In addition to (1) derogatory names like *diaosi*, (2) negative sensations such as *sang*, and (3) cynical attitudes akin to *foxi*, the 2021 buzzword “lying flat” (*tang ping*) introduced the fourth mode of self-mockery: acts of resignation. With a shared sense of dispiritedness and disenchantment, *tang ping* can be counted as an instance of the *sang* culture (Zhang & Li, 2023). Whereas *sang* memes emphasize delivering negative sensations, *tang ping* conveys a stronger emotional appeal by advocating an actionable response to inadequate realities or negative feelings: opting out of the situation or system entirely. It was broadly applied as a reaction to *neijuan* (inside roll), another buzzword in 2021, referring to the social condition of malicious and endless competition. Unprecedentedly, the discourse of *tang ping* extended to provocative discussions about quitting the conventional life of job, marriage, home ownership, and childbearing (Su, 2023).

Similar to *diaosi* and *sang*, the amplification of *tang ping* discourse is marked by its spiral growth through interactions between users and divergent media outlets (Zhang & Li, 2023). Its commencement is widely believed to be linked to a Baidu Tieba post that went viral in April 2021. Titled “Lying Flat Is Justice” in Population Ba, it advocated a minimalistic lifestyle without work or family duties. The 31-year-old author later explained that the heated discussion regarding the Seventh National Population Census and China’s demographic crisis had spurred him to write the post, encouraging his followers to escape the norm and preserve ownership over their bodies (Chen, 2021). Shortly after this, media outlets reported on the post, using sensational headlines such as “Master of Lying Flat Already Got His Disciples” and “Master of Lying Flat and His Nation” across various platforms.<sup>3</sup> The phenomenon gained momentum thereafter, triggering a series of disapprovals and objections from the state and established figures, mostly from older generations. Commercial media further turned these anti-*tang ping* comments into content, leading to new waves of debate. For instance, “Tsinghua professor claimed that *tang ping* attitude was extremely irresponsible” became a top trending topic in Sina Weibo on May 28, 2021, receiving 140 million views and thousands of comments, composed mainly of criticisms and sarcasm.<sup>4</sup> The professor’s article rebuked young people for their irresponsible attitude that allegedly frustrated their parents and millions of taxpayers. However, the post was initially published on a WeChat public account with limited subscribers. It was the digital media outlets that discovered, paraphrased, and reposted the essay across various platforms with eye-catching titles.

In the last stage, *tang ping* became the everyday language of Chinese, applied in media content covering various topics such as education, housing, and sports with decreasing affective appeal (Zhang & Li, 2023). Meanwhile, amid the rise of short-form video platforms and the burgeoning internet microcelebrity industry, the attention economy expanded to content produced by individuals, compromising the distinction between professional and amateur and institutions and individuals. A simple search on platforms like Douyin and Bilibili reveals thousands of videos with *tang ping* in their titles, and many vloggers exhibit lives of idleness while sharing business contact information on homepages or selling products through digital shop windows.

### *The consistent threads and the body theme*

Despite the semantic and affective shifts, several enduring elements characterize the self-mockery memes in China’s online space. First is the central role of digital media, which discovers and defines the memes and facilitates and propels their spread, turning debates and divergent views into affective content. Second are the rhetorical devices of self-deprecation, cynicism, and humor, with comic effect primarily generated through hyperbole and incongruity, metaphorically degrading oneself or depicting negative feelings (Figure 1). Third are the sense of disappointment and the attitude of defeatism toward the normative narrative of upward mobility. Subsequent memes, sharing these traits, enhance the predecessors’ forms and themes, expanding the self-mockery lexicon as memetic variants. For example, Paralyzed Geyou—*sang*’s iconic meme depicting an exhausted balding man sinking into a couch—serves as a precursor to the catchphrase “lying flat.” The bodily resemblance between the two reflects



**Figure 1.** Graphic memes collected from respondents.

*Note.* The captions translate as follows: (a) Life is too harsh; (b) Poor, helpless, and fat; (c) Haha, never mind, whatever; Already a lying-flat bird; (d) Powerlessness; (e) Let it rot-rot; (f) Others get romance, I get hair loss; (g) So peaceful, oh, I am dead; (h) I hate this world; (i) Beginning to lose consciousness; (j) Dead; (k) Me. Life. Peeled off all dignities by life; (l) Bitter; (m) I am not a man, nor a woman, I am dead (man); (n) My life is already lying on the railway track; (o) No way, why is this still pulsing.

the recurring theme of the body. It is extensively displayed in verbal memes of body parts (*diaosi*), sensations (*sang*), and postures/actions (*tang ping*), and diversified graphic memes depicting depressed or suffering characters.

Additionally, photo-based bodily memes of self-mockery evolved from simple emoticons and emojis, such as the three-letter emoticon “orz” in the *diaosi* era, visually depicting a person kneeling on the ground and collapsing in defeat. Facilitated by the growing affordances of platforms, they flourished into a vast array of stickers, GIFs, and custom images during the period of *sang* (De Seta, 2018). The graphic meme opens a vast arena for users’ creative inventions and polyvocal expressions, expanding the vocabulary far more rapidly and extensively than the verbal one. The respondents of this study shared diversified graphic memes depicting weary, sick, painful, or dying figures, delivering various negative feelings and bodily sensations against the dominant body politics of obedience and positivity (Figure 1). Many

convey somber themes such as death or suicide (Figure 1(g, h, j, m, n, o, t)) through text or imagery. However, the shared rhetorical strategy of humor—realized by either wordplay or comic figures—offsets their emotional weight. The featured human or anthropomorphic character becomes the incarnation of the user, manifesting their feelings. At the intersection of affect, body, and digital artefacts, diversified bodily memes highlight the symbiotic relationship between the body and affect and their effectiveness in conveying emotions online. Acknowledging the memetic traditions and variations, the following section examines meme users' varied perceptions, practices, and motivations, together with the involved affective economies.

### The micro-economy: performed, transforming, and contradictory emotions

At the individual level, self-deprecating memes are often practiced with performative rituals and theatricality to attract attention, seek pleasure, or foster social interaction. Some scholars noticed that *diaosi* playfully compared each other's unfortunate circumstances on the blogosphere, which was described as "misery competition" (*bican*); (Kan, 2013). Similarly, *sang* culture "encouraged people to openly embrace and even competitively perform despair, burnout, misfortune, and everyday failures" (Yang, 2021, p. 135). This study finds that the self-mockery culture encompasses varying levels of immersion and forms of participation. While some informants regularly applied humorous memes to socialize with or entertain peers, others immersed themselves in defeatist feelings, consuming related media content but occasionally self-deprecated. The respondents concurred that they would not use memes when feeling seriously unhappy. Prior research has noted that an emotional expression or an "emotive" inherently consists of contradictions, for the ability to express reflexively erodes the negativity of what is being expressed (Reddy, 1997). These nuanced mechanisms, including mixed intentions and contradictory emotions, form the central focus of the following section.

#### Performed emotions in forming identities, sociality, and spaces

When asked why they embraced such self-mockery memes, which the interviewer had not encountered during his college years in the late 2000s, the undergraduate participants in the focus groups reached the consensus that digital media had a predominant role in the formation of their defeatist feelings and meme participation. As they self-reflexively explained, their exposure to digital media had resulted in hyperawareness of the cruel side of society even before they entered it and impressed them with senses of anxiety, powerlessness, and defeatism. They mentioned various content such as essays, short videos, web dramas, and variety shows released on platforms that covered the buzzwords and sensational topics of inequalities and over-competition. Another category is celebrities known for defeatist or pessimistic characteristics. One frequently mentioned example was Li Dan, a renowned stand-up comedian, whom some informants referred to as the spokesman for *sang*. "The human world is not worth it" (*renjian bu zhide*), a sentence from his social media postings, became a catchphrase in the late 2010s. One interviewee had once printed it out

and stuck it onto her laptop. In the reality show *Back to Field* (2017–2021) in which he starred, Li Dan constantly made defeatist or self-deprecating comments, escaped from labor, and lay flat to slack off, physically performing *sang* and *tang ping*. However, the audience celebrated his nonconformity as the episodes starring him received high ratings and became trending topics.<sup>5</sup>

In this sense, the entertainment media not just impressed young people with negative feelings but promoted self-denial and dispiritedness as authentic and fashionable ways of self-presentation, setting up role models for imitation. As one discussant observed, “Speaking *sang* is cool,” and “Self-deprecation has been increasingly popular.” For the undergraduate respondents, self-deprecating memes became desirable expressive repertoires to carry, deliver, and justify their unpleasant feelings derived from varied personal issues, such as academic performance, romance, relationships with their parents and peers, or various trivial matters. By incorporating self-mockery memes into everyday language, they reinforced the new norm of self-making and identity-building.

Further, users often develop personalized meme preferences for distinction. For instance, two female interlocutors preferred “ugly” (*chou*) memes such as the crying Pepe the Frog to distinguish themselves from the girls who use stereotypical memes of cute animals or babies. They defined *chou* as a style of authenticity, revealing genuine feelings. One male respondent, in contrast, exclusively identified with *diaosi* in 2022, dismissing subsequent memes like *sang* and *tang ping* as just passively “following the trend” (*genfeng*) and “lacking sincerity” (*bugou zhenzhi*). Moreover, some respondents rejected all the buzzwords mentioned in this article, deeming them “too mainstream,” and instead introduced the author to new terms, positioning themselves as the cultural core distinct from what they saw as peripheral followers.

In addition, varied memetic practices and rituals were strategically developed and employed to facilitate self-presentation. According to the undergraduate participants, sharing sentimental feelings was perceived as more effective in acting out one’s suffering when posted after midnight, a practice referred to as “night-come-non-mainstream” (*ye-lai-fei*) or “late-night emo” (*shenye* emo).<sup>6</sup> Some users would delete the posts shortly after or before the following morning, aiming to prevent older audiences, such as their parents and teachers, from seeing them. The participants also noted that the frequent change to one’s social media presence was a strategic way to demonstrate their fluctuating emotional states. Multiple respondents had more than one social media account, presenting versions of themselves catering to different audiences. “Moments (the social feed feature within WeChat), crowded with diverse acquaintances, is for projecting my good life and a positive image to comfort my parents and relatives and attract the guys I like.” According to one female student who was proud of her orchestrated self-presentations, “I choose Sina Weibo, a rubbish can to me, to let off *sang* feelings and reveal how miserable I am, catering to close friends and strangers.” In other words, she conformed to the discourse of positivity by showing an energetic self for the older generations while releasing negative feelings and presenting a depressed self in a curated time and space that was only available to strangers and selected peers.

Furthermore, exchanging self-mockery memes became a netiquette for networking and building interpersonal relationships. Some young professionals used them to begin conversations with old acquaintances. As they explained, sharing feelings of

frustration or humble self-presentations through humorous memes could quickly find resonance between interlocutors. Others close a business conversation with self-mockery memes. According to them, the exchange of self-deprecating stickers serves as a form of small talk that could smoothly end serious discussions, aligning and connecting the discussants.

Some online communities and spaces were sustained by certain forms of self-deprecation and relevant negative affects. The group interactions and sociality, in turn, spur more productions and circulations of memes and emotions. For example, the Douban group “985 Rubbish Import Plan” (*985 feiwu yinjin jihua*), founded in 2020, serves as a virtual community where thousands of elite university students mock themselves with particular memes such as “small-town swot” (*xiaozhen zuotijia*), vent defeatist feelings, and seek comfort from each other.<sup>7</sup> One graduate student said she had always enjoyed surfing Douban, an interest-based social networking platform hosting these groups, because “everyone calls themselves trash (*feiwu*) on it” and “shares this sense of failure.” Another undergraduate student claimed that the music streaming application NetEase Cloud Music was the one that understood her the most in this world, for she always resonated with its recommended songs and other users’ sentimental remarks. Private group chats composed of close colleagues or friends were another key venue for confiding in each other about upsetting matters and releasing everyday negative feelings. Some users named group chat titles with self-deprecating phrases or bodily terms, such as “Bald head and having hemorrhoids” (*tutou youzhi*). Although exchanges of unpleasant experiences and self-mockery memes often transform into a sense of futility as group members recognize a collective predicament of restricted agency, the communication process fosters senses of caring and alliance.

### *The converting and contradictory emotions*

Indeed, self-mockery is cathartic, therapeutic, or entertaining, alleviating the subjects’ negative emotions while generating positive senses of relief, amusement, and solidarity. “Calling oneself *diaosi* is taking pride in being ordinary,” the interviewee still using *diaosi* explained, “It is more of a self-healing act of repositioning to stop me from daydreaming or being anxious when people around me fiercely compete with each other.” Some memes, such as Buddha-like and lying flat, contain a positive attitude of “preserving oneself and adapting to changes rather than being too hard on oneself” (Yang, 2021, p. 135). While the consistent thread of humor helps the self-mockery memes bypass censorship, it also downplays the expression into jokes and laughter. During the interviews, the exchange of sticker collections was often the most fun part that respondents enjoyed. One claimed that she “badly needs them” because applying funny self-mockery memes in online chats would amuse her close friends. The group sharing increased the magnitude of fun and strengthened their bonding.

Although the respondents’ interpretations of the memes varied and sometimes contradicted, they reached a consensus on the criterion for choosing a favored self-mockery meme: positivity and lightness. For instance, one interviewee preferred *bai lan* (let it rot) to *tang ping*, for the former is more of “a temporary state” but the

latter is “a total withdrawal from reality that lasts forever.” In contrast, another participant preferred *tang ping* to *bai lan* because “*Tang ping* is to accept the reality after trying your best, but *bai lan* is more negative, indicating someone is intentionally giving up and letting things rot even though they could make a difference.” A third respondent expressed her preference for *tang* (lying) over *tang ping* (lying flat) because “Lying down is preparing to stand up again but one will never get up once they are lying flat.” The paradox persists, as one respondent said, “I don’t say *sang* because it is a heavy word with negative connotations of death. But ‘emo’ is much better for delivering similar negative feelings because it is lighter and cooler.” In this sense, the self-mockery culture reproduces the official discourse of positive energy (Chen & Wang, 2019).

Moreover, the antagonism and escapism contained in the expressions rarely translate to offline actions. The interviewees agreed that they knew no one who lay flat in real life. On the contrary, those who frequently applied the memes often worked harder than others, as they may be more aware of and driven by the goal of upward mobility. In this sense, self-mockery becomes a way of self-governance, motivating oneself to embrace mainstream values through self-blaming and self-denial. As opposed to this, articulating acts of escapism such as lying flat could feign a departure from the norm and a temporal release on the psychological level. In any case, the stance indicates users’ contradictory forms of subjectivity, longing for disentanglement and relief while profoundly embedded in the dominant discourse. As one interviewee exemplified, she enjoyed delivering negative feelings by speaking *sang*, *emo*, and even death (*siwang*) but rejected *tang ping* and *bai lan* because “I could always be in bad moods, but I could never accept that I stop moving.” It seems that this entanglement with normative values is the very cause of the contradictory emotions and rhetoric.

The paradox can be further revealed through another pair of contradictory emotions contained in the process of self-mockery: being ashamed and proud at the same time. As previous scholarship reveals, claiming oneself *diaosi* contains a “lack of self-confidence combined with pride in one’s self-effort and marked contempt for the privileged” (Kan, 2013, p. 68). In the process, shame is converted into pride by subverting what has been designated shameful by normative values, generating senses of enjoyment and excitement. Moreover, the humblebrag, a paradoxical combination of showing off and presenting a moderate self, is inherent in the psychological mechanism of self-deprecation (Lu & Fan, 2018). Some memes literally reflect the rhetoric by juxtaposing complimentary and derogatory terms. For example, one PhD student from an Ivy League university called herself “sea trash” (*haifei*), referring to returnees who graduated from overseas universities; an Alibaba programmer mocked himself as a “code peasant” (*ma nong*), “lifting bricks” (*ban zhuan*) in a “big factory” (*da chang*); another girl born in 1999 mocked herself the “old auntie of 1999” (*99 nian lao ayi*). The compound words suggest that only the well-educated, white-collar, and youngsters could afford to tease themselves as useless, underclass, and aged. This is in addition to the “985 Rubbish” group, taking pride in their elite university identity while debasing themselves as waste. Ironically, claiming one’s underprivileged status results ultimately in highlighting one’s privileged background.

The affordance of self-mockery hinges on two interconnected conditions: one’s meme literacy and cultural status. Previous surveys about *diaosi* (Enfodesk, 2013) and *sang* (UC Browser, 2017) indicate that the most active users were college students

and young professionals working in the tech and media sectors, mainly in metropolises. In contrast, the salesclerks, hairdressers, and property agents were reluctant to identify with *diaosi* or felt offended when being called so (Kan, 2013). Similarly, although young café workers without secondary education degrees occasionally call themselves “salted fish” in Shanghai, the utterance “does not exactly express disillusionment with reality but a reluctance against indulging in the comfort of repetitive routine” (Richaud, 2022, p. 346). Despite their daily hardships and stress, the domestic workers in Beijing generally “emphasize self-care and social support over negative feelings” in their social media postings (Wallis, 2018, p. 225). Their shared reluctance to self-deprecate or express negative feelings seems to show that those with less cultural capital are more bound by the discourse of positivity and the language of self-development. This study finds that the deliverymen and domestic workers included in the interviews were less literate in the vocabulary and practices mentioned above. When asked about buzzwords like *tang ping*, their understanding tended to be limited to the literal meanings. One 21-year-old deliveryman dismissed it, saying, “*Tang ping* is only for the wealthy. How could I *tang ping*?” Conversely, a rural-origin designer in Guangzhou revealed that she spoke *tang ping* or *bai lan* only with her colleagues rather than her childhood friends with blue-collar jobs. As Huang (2016) suggests in her analysis of *diaosi*, the self-mockery culture and its heated discussions, while appearing to amplify marginalized voices, may inadvertently obscure them.

### Conclusion: a dual-level approach and a dual-economy model

While Ahmed’s work (2004) on affect does not explicitly identify different actors in her analysis of the right-wing discourse, this study uncovers the interactions between individual users, media organizations, the state, and sociocultural contexts that gave rise to the self-mockery culture in China’s online space. Given that the goals of various stakeholders differed and the emotions operated at distinct scales, this study proposes a dual-level approach to the affective economy: examining both the macro level of structural forces and historical developments and the micro level of individual meme users. At the macro level, the study connects the self-mockery memes at different periods and generalizes their consistent threads and affective evolutions, highlighting the central roles of digital media and the attention economy against shifting circumstances.

On the micro level, the study underscores users’ diversified perceptions, practices, and emotional flows. Their motivations range from identity building and social bonding to seeking fun, cure, and attention. As users perform emotions by selecting preferred memes and adding shared templates with individual contexts, the meaning and affect conveyed through the memetic expressions vary with each occasion. In other words, these expressions give rise to “memetic affects” that incorporate users’ agency in imitation and transformation with contextualized variations. The rhetoric of the self-mockery meme also adds to its capacity to contain and deliver complex emotions. While humor elicits positivity, relief, and healing effects, self-denial provokes high-arousal negative emotions, such as anxiety and frustration. Self-involvement ensures its applicability across broad users in diversified contexts. Dual levels of economy intersect when media impress individuals with memetic and affective

repertoires, and conversely, when users' creative articulations feed into the feedback loops of media production and reproduction.

Moreover, this study suggests a dual-economy model to study the mechanism of affect in the era of social media: (1) the affective economy, in which emotions accumulate through the circulation of signs, aligning with Ahmed's original framework; and (2) the attention economy, in which media producers capitalize on popular memes and emotions to craft engaging content and compete for visibility. While the attention economy serves as the driving force of the affective economy, the prevailing affect and rhetoric in turn shape subsequent media reproductions. The dual model operates at macro and micro levels: digital media commodify clicks and engagement, while individual users often seek likes and responses, with both dynamics driving the circulation of signs and emotions. The dual-economy model and the dual-level lens may offer insights for future research on internet memes and emotions.

In a broad sense, the self-mockery culture aligns with the larger affective and therapeutic turn in China's reform era, which destigmatizes and normalizes the expression of personal and negative emotions while integrating state control and market logic (Yang, 2021; Zhang, 2018). The emotional expressions of negativity generate positive feelings, reproducing the neoliberal logic of self-help and self-therapy while reinforcing the official discourse of positive energy. Conversely, the consistent body theme indicates that corporal feelings serve as fertile ground, giving rise to self-reflexivity and imagination of alternative modes of existence. Facilitated by digital media, the pervasive spread of bodily memes advanced China's affective turn into a new phase in which the light-hearted self-deprecation saturated with sentiments of disillusionment, dispiritedness, or defeatism has become a legitimate and primary form of dissent among educated urban youth in China. Given the youth's entanglement with dominant values and reliance on social media, self-mockery could be an enduring cybercultural phenomenon. While this study preliminarily reveals the interconnection between cultural participation and social class, future research may delve into specific groups of participants, discovering how demographic factors such as gender, age, income, educational background, occupation, and location would affect their involvement.

## Notes

1. See the screenshot of Feng's post: <https://ent.163.com/special/fxgtandiaosi/>
2. See the examples of Hanhan and the rock band Mayday: <http://news.cjn.cn/nv/201204/t1747688.htm>; <https://style.sina.com.cn/cul/music/2012-04-12/101694552.shtml>.
3. While many early posts of *tang ping* in 2021 were deleted, see the two examples still remaining: <https://news.qq.com/rain/a/20210508A05CTI00>; [https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/ITynyOo80axJ\\_GBoC3Y97Q](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/ITynyOo80axJ_GBoC3Y97Q).
4. See screenshots of the top comments: [https://www.sohu.com/a/469161119\\_115479](https://www.sohu.com/a/469161119_115479).
5. See details on the show: [https://www.sohu.com/a/230597772\\_100137425](https://www.sohu.com/a/230597772_100137425)
6. Initially a rock music genre characterized by emotional lyrics, "emo" has evolved into an abbreviation for "emotional" and a synonym for *sang*, signifying feelings of melancholy or depression.
7. "985" refers to *Project 985*, a higher education development and sponsorship scheme launched by the Chinese government in May 1998 to build world-class universities. Thirty-nine institutions are now listed under the project, considered a mark of top-tier academic status.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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