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Linguistic expressions of despondency: an investigation of *Sangness*-related Chinese catchwords

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Abstract: Catchwords, as important social and cultural symbols, are the barometer of a country's society and culture. In China, various catchwords are coined and used every year by Chinese people, especially the young. Of these catchwords, one particular type that expresses despondency or *Sangness* is increasingly gaining scholarly attention. This study takes a socio-linguistic approach to investigating the most frequently used *Sangness*-related Chinese catchwords in the past ten years. By examining the annual top ten catchwords selected by *Biting Words* and *Chewing Words* between 2013 and 2022, it finds that the most frequently used *Sangness*-related Chinese catchwords in the past decade have been (1) *Ge You Slouch*, (2) feeling awful and wanting to cry, (3) Buddha-like, (4) 996 work schedule, (5) life is too hard for me, (6) laborer, (7) involution, (8) lying flat, and (9) mental internal friction. These catchwords mainly serve the functions of deconstructing mainstream values, expressing self-mockery, and seeking value recognition. The development of these *Sangness*-related catchwords is characterized by an increasing diversity and a stronger applicability.

Keywords: Chinese catchwords; developmental features; most frequently used catchwords; *Sang* subculture or *Sangness*; social functions

1 Introduction

Language is not only “a semiotic system made up of linguistic signs or symbols” (Kramsch 2021: 4), but also a social phenomenon (Chen 2004). Not only does language

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have the symbolic power to construct the social reality (Kramsch 2021), but also develops with the development of society. Owing to the advancement of network communication technology, words that convey the strong emotions of language users and reflect the social and cultural aspects of the world are frequently used on various social media platforms, becoming catchwords¹ on the Internet within a short span of time. As symbols of popular culture, catchwords constitute a ubiquitous social phenomenon (Li 2011). Chinese catchwords are the barometer of Chinese society. As Hou (2007: 50) indicates, “[a]n understanding of the role of catchwords offers an important social-psychological window on Chinese society that provides a knowledgeable observer with key insights”.

丧, which is spelled as *Sang* in Chinese pinyin, is a Chinese character with more than one pronunciation and one meaning. When it is pronounced with a high and level tone, it has something to do with the deceased and their funerals. When it is pronounced with a falling tone, it becomes a linguistic expression of despondency. In recent years, a youth subculture taking the name of *Sang* pronounced in the falling tone has emerged in China, especially in the Chinese cyberspace. The *Sang* subculture refers to words, sentences or pictures that are popular among the contemporary Chinese youth and are suggestive of negative emotions such as depression, despair and pessimism. This is a brand-new manifestation of the youth subculture in modern day society, denoting the inferiority complex and decadent spiritual characteristics of the contemporary youth, as well as a sense of collective anxiety in the face of today's life. To a certain extent, the *Sang* subculture is a reflection of the social mentality of the youth and the social psychology of the general public in the new era. As Tan and Cheng (2020: 1) point out, the “*Sang* subculture is a current of thought-feeling due to a perceived incapacity by Chinese youths to live up to the ideological re-positioning within official consciousness”.

Language can be viewed as a representation of human thought and used as a window on human cognition (Tenbrink 2020). That is to say, the language a person uses can indicate what is in his or her mind. Under the influence of the *Sang* subculture, a wide variety of Chinese words reflecting this social mentality have come into being. Some of these are so widely used that they have become catchwords of the Chinese language. Given that Zhang and Li (2022) briefly summarize the essence of the *Sang* subculture in a self-coined Chinese pinyin *Sang*-ness, this study decides to follow their lead to term Chinese catchwords related to the *Sang* subculture as *Sang*-ness-related catchwords. To simplify the spelling of this term, this study makes a minor modification of deleting the hyphen between *Sang* and *ness*, thus coming up with the term *Sangness*. Furthermore, this study will take

¹ Catchwords are also termed as buzzwords with the former being British English while the latter American English.

Sangness-related catchwords as its object of investigation, examining the most frequently used ones, their major functions and developmental features.

2 Literature review

2.1 Overview of Chinese catchwords

Catchwords are a form of discourse commonly used by people in a certain period of time and within a certain community (Yang 2002). They are a comprehensive product of social, political, economic, cultural, environmental, and psychological activities within a certain period of time. Catchwords should include words, word clusters (or meaningful strings), phrases, sentences, or specific sentence patterns at different levels of language units (Yang 2004). Catchwords are often used in oral communication, but to a certain extent they also affect people's written expressions. As a linguistic fashion, they are used by many people, especially the young. The quick advancement of Internet technologies has accelerated the use and spread of catchwords. Today catchwords have gained a social identity, emerging as a special social and cultural symbol (Chen 2013). As Ye and Zheng (2012) suggest, catchwords are the most revealing language elements to reflect the focus of modern day society.

Chinese catchwords gained widespread attention from the general public and the academic sector when *Yaowen Jiaozi* or *Biting Words and Chewing Words*,² a Chinese journal aimed at the standardized use of the Chinese language, introduced its annual selection of the top ten catchwords of the year in 2008. Chinese catchwords gained international recognition when *Qin Gang*, the then Chinese ambassador to the United States, introduced seven Chinese catchwords to the American people in a keynote speech he delivered at the Forum on Tourism, Hospitality and Cultural Exchange organized by the US-Asia Institute on October 6th, 2021.

Young people are the major creators and users of catchwords, which in turn can reflect their likes and dislikes, joys and sorrows, and dreams and setbacks. Catchwords can thus serve as a window through which the mentality of youth can be seen. According to Zhao (2022), the developmental trend of Chinese catchwords is characterized by a contradictory coexistence of deconstruction and construction,

2 Launched in 2005, *Yao Wen Jiao Zi* or *Biting Words and Chewing Words* is a Chinese language journal with a considerable social influence. This journal has been included in databases such as “*Zhongguo Zhiwang* or *China National Knowledge Infrastructure*” and “*Chaoxing Qikan* or *Chaoxing Periodicals*”. It was honored as one of the “Top 100 Chinese Social Science Journals” in both 2015 and 2018. Since 2008, *Biting Words and Chewing Words* started its annual selection of Top 10 catchwords at the end of each year, which has become a topic of hot discussion among Chinese netizens.

rebellion and trust, banter and seriousness, Buddha-like spirit and enterprising spirit, and the small ego and the big ego.

2.2 Previous studies of *Sangness*-related Chinese catchwords

Studies of *Sangness*-related Chinese catchwords are often conducted on an individual word basis. That is, they tend to focus on a single *Sangness*-related catchword rather than a cluster of catchwords. Yan and Yang (2018) explore how 葛优躺 (*Ge You Slouch*) as a new construction is formed and communicated. They find that *Ge You Slouch*, which originally refers to the listless way of sitting on the sofa by the famous Chinese actor *Ge You*, has now become an expression of mental decadence. Its popularity is related to the fast-paced life and stressful work environment that some Chinese people are faced with.

Tian (2020) analyzes reasons for the popularity of 我太难了 (life is too hard for me). She finds that there are linguistic and social causes for the popularity of this catchword. Linguistically, there is a Chinese construction 我太x了 (it is too x for me). Socially, an Internet celebrity made an outcry of 我太难了 (life is too hard for me) in a short video he posted on the Internet, thus striking an immediate chord with thousands of viewers. Tian suggests that the most important cause of the popularity of this catchword is the *Sang* subculture, which is prevalent among Chinese young people.

Zhang (2020) takes a semiotic perspective to exploring the popularity of 佛系 (Buddha-like), which portrays a non-competitive, nonchalant way of life and work. Initially used to refer to the Japanese young men who have low desires for life and prefer to live in solitude and singlehood, Buddha-like is gaining popularity among Chinese young people. Zhang suggests that Buddha-like is encoded to express a tendency to live one's life instead of living up to social expectations. The spread of Buddha-like ideas, words and actions represents an uprising by the grassroots people, posing a challenge to mainstream social values.

Ma and Du (2021) expound that 躺平 (lying flat) is used by Chinese netizens, especially the young, to express an unwillingness to aim higher and to be better. Although it is a linguistic symbol, it can be put into the ready practice of giving up trying and not making any efforts at all. Ma and Du suggest that the major pragmatic function of lying flat is self-mocking, through which young people complain about the formidable difficulties or daunting challenges that come up in their study and lives.

It can be seen that the existing studies on *Sangness*-related Chinese catchwords seldom take a holistic perspective or examine how these words evolve with the passing of time. This study attempts to fill in these gaps by investigating *Sangness*-

related Chinese catchwords that have been selected by *Biting Words and Chewing Words* as the annual top ten catchwords in the past decade. To be specific, it will take a socio-linguistic approach to examining the most frequently used *Sangness*-related Chinese catchwords between 2013 and 2022.

3 Research design

3.1 Research objectives

This study sets itself three research objectives. First, it will identify the most frequently used *Sangness*-related Chinese catchwords within a time span from 2013 to 2022. Second, it will explore how these catchwords evolve linguistically with the passing of time. Third, it will analyze the social roles that *Sangness*-related catchwords may play in Chinese society.

3.2 Research questions

Along with the research objectives, this study intends to answer three research questions.

1. What have been the most frequently used *Sangness*-related Chinese catchwords in the past ten years from 2013 to 2022?
2. What functions do these *Sangness*-related Chinese catchwords mainly serve?
3. What developmental features do these *Sangness*-related Chinese catchwords have?

It is hoped that by seeking answers to the above three research questions this study can arrive at a quick, in-depth understanding of *Sangness*-related catchwords that are popular among the Chinese people, especially the young. It is further hoped that these catchwords can serve as a unique window through which certain aspects of current Chinese society can be viewed and understood.

3.3 Research methods

This study employed a combination of field investigation and discourse analysis. Given that digital technology has immensely enhanced language users' symbolic power (Kramsch 2021), the field investigation was conducted on the Internet to collect Chinese netizens' language output of *Sangness*-related Chinese catchwords.

This was accomplished through an extensive search on a popular Chinese social media platform where netizens tend to express their feelings and voice their opinions. The discourse analysis was performed by examining the actual words used in the sentences that accompanied the *Sangness*-related catchwords. By delving deeper into the context and meaning of these linguistic expressions, the study was able to uncover underlying attitudes of the Chinese netizens towards *Sangness*-related issues.

3.4 Research procedure

3.4.1 Target word identification

This study is focused on the *Sangness*-related catchwords that have been selected as the annual top ten catchwords by *Biting Words and Chewing Words* in the past ten years.

This study followed three major criteria to decide whether a Chinese catchword in Table 1 was *Sangness*-related or not. These three criteria are in fact the three essential features of the *Sang* discourse suggested by Xue (2019): (1) describing the current state of life lived by the youth group and denoting a sense of negativity, (2) running counter to the mainstream culture and eliciting a sense of ritual resistance, and (3) self-satirizing and self-mocking so as to give up struggles. A Chinese catchword must be found to have all the three features before it can be categorized as *Sangness*-related. For instance, 躺平 (lying flat) is identified as a *Sangness*-related catchword in that it meets all the three criteria of expressing negativity, disagreeing with the mainstream Chinese social value of working hard and mocking oneself for not trying and having a tendency to stop working. In contrast, 杠精 (contrarian) is not considered a *Sangness*-related catchword because it does not imply a possible refusal to work hard, despite the fact that it is negative in meaning and incongruent with the mainstream social value of being kind and tolerant.

3.4.2 Target sentence collection and analysis

The present study tried to collect target sentences from *Weibo*, a prominent Chinese social media platform with functional similarity to Twitter (Li et al. 2020). To be specific, it used the *Weibo* search engine to look for sentences containing each and every one of the target words. Of the many sentences that contain the target words, only those suggestive of a strong despondency were kept for further analysis. When

Table 1: Annual top ten Chinese catchwords between 2013 and 2022.

Year	Annual top ten Chinese catchwords
2013	中国梦 (the Chinese Dream); 光盘 (clean your plate); 倒逼 (reversed transmission of the pressure to get something done); 逆袭 (counter-attack under unfavorable circumstances); 微xx (Micro-); 大V (social media influencer); 女汉子 (tough girl or manly woman); 土豪 (flashy high roller); 奇葩 (weirdo); 点赞 (like)
2014	顶层设计 (top-level design); 新常态 (new normal); 打虎拍蝇 (take out tigers, swat flies); 断崖式 (cliff-like); 你懂得 (you know what I mean); 断舍离 (simplify life); 失联 (lose contact with somebody); 神器 (fabulous tool); 高大上 (fancy, marvelous, gorgeous); 萌萌哒 (adorable)
2015	获得感 (sense of obtainment); 互联网+ (Internet plus); 颜值 (facial attractiveness); 宝宝 (baby); 创客 (maker); 脑洞大开 (greatly enrich one's mind); 任性 (capricious); 剁手党 (hands-chopping people); 网红 (Internet celebrity); 主要看气质 (focus on aura)
2016	洪荒之力 (pre-historical powers); 吃瓜群众 (onlookers); 工匠精神 (craftsmanship); 小目标 (a small target); 友谊的小船, 说翻就翻 (friendship ends abruptly); 一言不合就xxx (Whenever we disagree with each other, ...); 供给侧 (supply-side); 葛优躺 (<i>Ge You Slouch</i>); 套路 (trick); 蓝瘦, 香菇 (feeling awful and wanting to cry)
2017	不忘初心 (remain true to the original aspiration); 砥砺前行 (forge ahead); 共享 (sharing); 有温度 (warm and cozy); 流量 (commercially viable); 可能xxx假xxx (might encounter something fake or do something in an inauthentic way); 油腻 (greasy or fulsome); 尬 (embarrassing); 怼 (lash out); 打call (cheer for someone)
2018	命运共同体 (a community of shared future); 锦鲤 (lucky dog); 店小二 (public servant); 教科书式 (a textbook example); 官宣 (official announcement); 确认过眼神 (I know you are my Mr. Right); 退群 (leave a group); 佛系 (Buddha-like); 巨婴 (mama's boy); 杠精 (contrarian)
2019	文明互鉴 (mutual learning among civilizations); 区块链 (block chain); 硬核 (hardcore); 融梗 (mixing up punch lines/plots); xx千万条, xx第一条 (Among tens of thousands of..., ... is the very first); 柠檬精 (green as a lemon elf with envy); 996 (996 work schedule); 我太难/南了 (life is too hard for me); 我不要你觉得, 我要我觉得 (I don't want to hear what you think about it, I want it my way); 霸凌主义 (bullying)
2020	人民至上, 生命至上 (people first, lives first); 逆行者 (heroes in harm's way); 飒 (valiant); 后浪 (surging waves); 神兽 (mythical creatures); 直播带货 (live-stream selling); 双循环 (dual circulation); 打工人 (laborer); 内卷 (involution); 凡尔赛文学 (Versailles literature)
2021	百年未有之大变局 (profound changes unseen in a century); 小康 (moderate prosperity); 赶考 (go on a journey to take a civil service exam); 双减 (double reduction); 碳达峰, 碳中和 (carbon emission peaking, carbon neutrality); 野性消费 (irrational consumption); 破防 (overwhelmed); 鸡娃 (tiger parenting); 躺平 (lying flat); 元宇宙 (meta-verse)
2022	踔厉奋发、勇毅前行 (work hard and move forward with determination); 中国式现代化 (modernization in the Chinese way); 新赛道 (new track); 大白 (the forefront medical workers); 烟火气 (hustle and bustle); 天花板 (ceiling); 拿捏 (nail); 雪糕刺客 (ice cream assassin); 精神内耗 (mental internal friction); 沉浸式 (immersive)

analyzing the functions of target sentences, emphasis was placed on the target words. To present the selected sentences as they were, no improvements were made in the writing of this article even when typos or inaccurate punctuations were detected. To illustrate, a screenshot of collecting target sentences on *Weibo* is given.

Figure 1 shows that a search for 内卷 (involution) on *Weibo* produced a Chinese sentence “就业难已经不是新鲜事, 985毕业生及硕士生竞聘卷烟厂一线流水岗, 竞争都已经呈现白热化的趋势, 出现了‘就业内卷’”. This Chinese sentence is a run-on sentence in that it overused commas, some of which should be replaced by full stops. However, to present this sentence in the most authentic way, no efforts were made to correct its punctuations when it was later used as a sample sentence for analysis.

4 Findings

4.1 Most frequently used *Sangness*-related Chinese catchwords

This study found that the annual top ten catchwords selected by *Biting Words and Chewing Words* from 2013 to 2022 did not exclusively pertain to *Sangness*. In fact, only a small portion of these words were deemed *Sangness*-related. While small in number, they were arguably the most frequently used *Sangness*-related catchwords of the past decade.

Table 2 shows that nine *Sangness*-related catchwords have been selected as part of the top ten annual catchwords in the past ten years from 2013 to 2022. It is worth noting that they have been included for five consecutive years from 2018 to 2022. It is therefore clear that *Sangness*-related catchwords have become a regular component of the annual top ten Chinese catchwords in the past five years. The fact that two *Sangness*-related catchwords are included in the top ten catchwords in a single calendar year in 2016, 2019 and 2020 indicates the important place of *Sangness* in the Chinese language and Chinese society as well.

The nine *Sangness*-related catchwords which have been selected as part of the top ten annual catchwords are (1) *Geyou Slouch*, (2) feeling awful and wanting to cry,



Figure 1: A screenshot of searching for *Sangness*-related catchwords and sample sentences on *Weibo*.

Table 2: Most-frequently-used *Sangness*-related Chinese catchwords in the past ten years.

Year	Number	<i>Sangness</i> -related Chinese catchwords
2013	0	
2014	0	
2015	0	
2016	2	葛优躺 (<i>Ge You Slouch</i>); 蓝瘦, 香菇 (feeling awful and wanting to cry)
2017	0	
2018	1	佛系 (Buddha-like)
2019	2	996 (996 work schedule); 我太难/南了 (life is too hard for me)
2020	2	打工人 (laborer); 内卷 (involution)
2021	1	躺平 (lying flat)
2022	1	精神内耗 (mental internal friction)

(3) Buddha-like, (4) 996 work schedule, (5) life is too difficult for me, (6) laborer, (7) involution, (8) lying flat, and (9) mental internal friction. They are elaborated on sequentially in the following sections.

4.1.1 *Ge You Slouch*

Ge You Slouch refers to the posture of *Ge You*, a famous Chinese comedian, when he acted in a popular Chinese sitcom *I Love My Family*, which was shown on TV in 1993. Lying on the sofa, *Ge You* stared into the distance with empty eyes, his clothes sloppy, his muscles flappy and his expression spiritless, as if there was nothing in the world that could arouse his interest (see Figure 2). It came as a surprise that the still of *Ge*



Figure 2: Still of *Ge You Slouch* from the Chinese TV series *I Love My Family*.

You Slouch and the phrase itself went viral more than twenty years after the sitcom was first showed on TV. Given that *Ge You Slouch* suggested a strong sense of laziness and aloofness, *Ge You Slouch* was used to refer to a state of resigning oneself to fate and not trying any more. This meme is thought to be the origin of the *Sang* subculture.

4.1.2 Feeling awful and wanting to cry

The meaning of feeling awful and wanting to cry is so self-evident that it renders any linguistic explanation unnecessary. What is worth mentioning, however, is how this catchword came into being, which has an unexpected touch of humor. In October 2016, a young man from Nanning City, Guangxi Province lamented his sad feelings in a video after breaking up with his girlfriend. Because his Mandarin is not standard, he mispronounced “Nan Shou” (sad) as “Lan Shou” (blue and thin) and “Xiang Ku” (wanting to cry) as “Xiang Gu” (fragrant mushroom). His poor pronunciation entertained his viewers so much that they quickly spread his video and pronunciation wide and far. In this way this phrase became a Chinese catchword, which is used to express people’s frustrations and sadness in a humorous way. The popularity of this catchword may be related to the current social reality that many Chinese people are living under stress, looking for a channel to vent their repressed emotions.

4.1.3 Buddha-like

Buddha-like refers to a lifestyle or an attitude towards life that takes everything lightly, shows little interest in the worldly affairs and involves living one’s life according to one’s own will. This word originated from a Japanese magazine which in 2014 reported a group of Buddha-like men. These men were preoccupied with themselves, believing it too troublesome to date females and get married. Buddha-like is not only an Internet catchword, but also a cultural phenomenon. It is used to express giving up personal standpoints or struggles, resigning oneself to fate or blindly following other people’s suit. The fact that a considerable number of Chinese young people scramble to describe themselves as Buddha-like indicates they are, in the face of increasing competition and pressure, lowering their expectations. As a self-mocking term, Buddha-like implies a decadent, negative attitude towards life.

4.1.4 996 work schedule

996 work schedule refers to the working system of starting working at 9:00 A.M. and finishing working at 9:00 P.M., taking 1 h or less off at noon and evening, working for

more than 10 h a day 6 days a week. This working system was exposed on March 27th, 2019 when a project with the name of “996. ICU” was launched on GitHub, which is a world-famous hosting platform for computer programmers. In this project, Chinese computer programmers exposed the “996. ICU” Internet companies they were working for, calling for a boycott of the 996 working system. The 996 working system is in clear violation of the current Labor Law of the People’s Republic of China, which clearly stipulates that the daily working hours of workers cannot exceed 8 h and the average weekly working hours cannot exceed 44 h. It is used by Chinese IT workers to protest against the overtime culture of Chinese Internet enterprises.

4.1.5 Life is too hard for me

Life is too hard for me as a catchword dates back to a short video released by an Internet celebrity with the name of *Giao Ge* (Brother Giao). In this video, Brother Giao knitted his eyebrows and said: “life is too hard for me, my friend. I have been under a lot of pressure recently.” Brother Giao’s expression of frustrations was so genuine that he struck an instant chord with his viewers, many of whom were actually feeling the same way. Living in a fast-changing society such as China, many people feel that they have little time to rest. Burdened by the external expectations or pressure, they find it difficult to vent their true feelings. The popularity of this zinger reflects the pressure of the contemporary Chinese youth and the difficult life they are living. “Wo (I) tai (too) nan (south) le (interjection mark)” (Life is too south for me) is the homophonic of “Wo (I) tai (too) nan (hard) le (interjection mark)” (Life is too hard for me). The two can be used interchangeably to let out the mounting pressure and increasing helplessness felt by the Chinese young people.

4.1.6 Laborer

Laborer is a general address term for people engaged in either manual work or technical work. It can be used to refer to blue-collared construction workers, white-collared office workers, intermediate-level company leaders or self-made entrepreneurs. On September 22nd, 2020, a netizen with the name of *Chouxian Dai Lanzi* (Abstract Belt Basket) posted a short self-portrait video on the Internet. In this video, he made the appearance of going out to work, using the caption that “the hardworking man (referring to himself) has already run to the tower crane, but you (referring to the video viewers) are stretching yourself in the quilt. You don’t take your life seriously at all. Good morning, laborer!” He deliberately boasted his identity as a laborer in a joking way. This video attracted a great deal of attention and imitation, as a result of which the term “laborer” became an immediate popular term on the Chinese Internet. Behind the popularity of laborer is the self-ridicule of young

people about their heavy life burden, their dissatisfaction with the high-pressure environment, and their unwillingness to resign to a mediocre life. The term “laborer” is thus a kind of black humor among Chinese adults, especially the young.

4.1.7 Involution

Involution, which literally means evolving inward or circling, refers to excessive competition or meaningless consumption. It occurs when a certain social resource is limited, but there are an increasing number of people competing for it with the result that everyone involved gains progressively less but pays more, and everyone involved feels gradually more tired or disillusioned. For individuals, involution is a silent, unconscious consumption of personal resources. For the society, involution is a pitiful waste of social resources, lowering its overall efficiency and external competitiveness. Involution as a catchword is used to mock the current social reality that people are confronted with excessive competition and crushing pressure.

4.1.8 Lying flat

Lying flat as a catchword was popularized by *Luo Huazhong*, who in April 2021 wrote a blog post about the new laid-back lifestyle he had adopted since quitting his job as a factory worker. The title of the blog post translated into English as “lying flat is justice” and featured a photo of him literally lying flat on his back. He wrote about his plan to live off savings while relaxing in his home and living a less materialistic life. The post went viral on the Chinese Internet, attracting many others to join the movement as an anti-consumerist pushback against the hypercompetitive and high-pressured corporate culture as well as other societal expectations.

4.1.9 Mental internal friction

Mental internal friction, which is a technical term in mental health, refers to the need for people to use psychological resources when they want to exercise self-control. When resources are insufficient, people are likely to be trapped in a state of the so-called internal exhaustion. The long-term existence of internal exhaustion could make people feel tired. This kind of fatigue is not caused by physical fatigue. It is a subjective psychological feeling and a mental state caused by individual psychological losses. Mental internal friction often leads to negative feelings such as anxiety, tension, confusion, regret, and suspicion. Long-term mental internal frictions could destroy a person’s enthusiasm and capability, inducing a sense of self-blame and self-denial. The popularity of this catchword mirrors the increasing anxiety and pressure that are felt by many Chinese people.

4.2 Major functions of *Sangness*-related Chinese catchwords

4.2.1 Deconstructing mainstream values

“Language is not only an instrument of communication or even of knowledge, but also an instrument of power” (Bourdieu 1977: 645, cited in Thompson 1984: 46). The *Sang* subculture is reflected in language by reversing or deconstructing the linguistic expressions of the mainstream values (Liu 2018). Youth subcultural groups, when attempting to construct a discourse of their own, are driven by a spontaneous urge to be different from their parents (Hall and Jefferson 2015). As the earliest and most frequent users of the Chinese Internet, the Chinese youth tried on the onset to shake off the moral constraints imposed on them, breaking away from the culture developed by their parents. However, their resistance attempts were severely thwarted by the huge economic pressure of purchasing a car or an apartment and the increasing difficulty of enhancing their social class and realizing their personal values. In the present day, under such circumstances, they may feel powerless and become disillusioned, thus developing negativities which are not part of the mainstream values. For example, the mainstream Chinese working culture advocates that workers should devote themselves to work, not objecting to overtime work; whereas the *Sang* subculture stresses that working overtime is an exploitation act of the cruel capitalists, calling for workers to loaf on their jobs. This can be seen clearly from *Weibo* discourses containing the *Sangness*-related Chinese catchwords.

- (1) 周一没有不疯的打工人³

No **laborer** is exempt from being driven crazy on Mondays.

In Example (1), the *Sangness*-related Chinese catchword *laborer* is depicted as the sad victim of the over-demanding working requirement, thus reversing the traditional image of the laborer portrayed by the mainstream culture. When the work of the laborer is only measured by financial terms, which is what the *Sang* subculture suggests, it is inevitable the value of work and the image of the laborer will be downplayed.

- (2) 在上班和上进之间, 我选择了上香, 在关系和体系之间, 我选择了佛系
Between going to work and climbing the social ladder, I chose to prey to the Buddha. Between building interpersonal relationships and striving for a stable profession, I chose to be **Buddha-like**.

3 When appearing in sample sentences, the *Sangness*-related Chinese catchwords and their English translations are written in bold-types for the purpose of better illustrations.

In Example (2), the *Sangness*-related Chinese catchword *Buddha-like* is used to reverse the implications of building interpersonal relationships and striving for a stable profession. This is made possible by the fact that *Buddha-like* contains a passive, inactive philosophy of doing nothing at all, giving up all aspirations or attempts to live up to the expectations of the mainstream society.

- (3) 就业难已经不是新鲜事, 985 毕业生及硕士生竞聘卷烟厂一线流水岗, 竞争都已经呈现白热化的趋势, 出现了“就业内卷”

The fact that gaining employment is difficult is not a new phenomenon. Even students graduating from Project 985 universities with bachelor and master's degrees are competing for front-line assembly posts in cigarette factories. Thus, job competition is showing a throat-cutting trend, triggering an employment **involution**.

In Example (3), the *Sangness*-related Chinese catchword *involution* is used to refer to the intense competition in job hunting. The intensity of the competition is so strong that the *Weibo* user finds the neutral word *competition* inadequate, thus resorting to the negative word *involution*.

4.2.2 Expressing self-mockery

Self-mockery is a speech act in which one makes fun of oneself. A striking feature of self-mocking is that its literal meaning may not be its intended meaning. That is, what is said may deviate from or even run opposite to what is meant. Self-mocking is frequently used in the discourse construction of the *Sang* subculture in that it can highlight the effect of the narrative but obscure its cause, thus generating the pragmatic expression of affirmation through negation. Qi (2018) suggests that *Sangness*-related Chinese catchwords denote a strong self-mockery. On the surface, these words portray a decadent mentality of not wanting to work and feeling depressed. In actuality, however, users of such words do not truly agree with the negativities embedded in the *Sang* subculture. Qi goes on to say that *Sangness*-related Chinese catchwords are linguistic means of self-mockery and stress-relief used by people who are faced with the huge pressure of life.

- (4) 回到家什么都不想做, 只想葛优躺

When I get home, I don't want to do anything but **Ge You Slouch**.

In Example (4), the *Weibo* user makes an explicit use of the *Sangness*-related Chinese catchword *Ge You Slouch* to convey a sense of despondency. However, no mention is made of the cause of such a discourse that despite the great efforts this person is making, he is not getting anywhere. This is the learned helplessness suggested by Du

(2017). The same thing can be found in other examples containing the *Sangness*-related Chinese catchwords.

- (5) 遇到卷王了, 昨晚睡前卷了他五分, 今早起来被超三千, 我彻底躺平了。
I'm dealing with the king of involution. I surpassed him by five points before going to bed yesterday. This morning, however, I was overtaken by him by three thousand points. I'm completely **lying flat**.

In Example (5), the *Sangness*-related catchword *lying flat* is used by a student *Weibo* user to ridicule the fact that although he is burning the mid-night oil to study, he still lags far behind his fellow student in academic performance.

- (6) 人到中年不如狗, 蓝瘦、香菇
The life of a middle-aged man is even worse than that of a dog. I'm **feeling awful and wanting to cry**.

In Example (6), the *Weibo* user, who is faced with a mounting mid-life pressure, complains about the unsatisfying life he is living by the loud cry of the *Sangness*-related catchword *feeling awful and wanting to cry*. Despite the Chinese cultural tradition that men should not shed tears capriciously, this man gives up his manly dignity and gets ready to cry with the purpose of mocking at the hard life he is living.

- (7) 二月三月实战收益原地踏步, 我太难了
In February and March, investment returns in the stock market showed no signs of gains. **Life is too hard for me**.

In Example (7), the *Weibo* user is using the *Sangness*-related catchword *life is too hard for me* to mock the stalemate he has met in the stock market. Given the great risks involved in the stock investments, this investor cannot be considered as a loser because he is not losing money. His worry rests in the fact that he is not making big profits. Unhappy with his meagre returns he is yielding, this investor complains that life is too difficult for him, which is not a harsh criticism made by other people, but a bitter self-mockery made by himself.

4.2.3 Seeking value recognition

According to Willis (2013), in the internal structure of every unique subculture, each part is organically connected with other parts. It is through such connections that subcultural members understand the world they live in. Compared with the classic subcultural groups such as hippies and punks, the Internet youth subcultural groups, due to the changes in media and activity spaces, find it hard to identify with each other by appearance or image characteristics. The *Sang* subcultural groups, however, are capable of seeking value recognition from each other by

accumulating negative feelings and encoding them in linguistic means. As the vast majority of the young people living in the fast-developing Internet age are faced with problems such as increasing competitions, repeated setbacks, great stresses and a loss of motivations, they can easily identify with the *Sangness*-related Chinese catchwords.

(8) 让996走开 拥抱888

Say no to the 996 work schedule and advocate the 888 time arrangement.

In Example (8), the *Sangness*-related Chinese catchword *996 work schedule* is used to refer to the harsh reality that some Chinese companies demand that their workers start working at 9 A.M. and finish working at 9 P.M. and work 6 days a week. This over-demanding work schedule is in sharp contrast to 888 which suggests spending each day by working 8 h, sleeping 8 h and entertaining 8 h. Over-burdened by the long working hours demanded of them, young Chinese IT workers easily empathize with each other by the use of 996.

(9) 为什么总是精神内耗啊 不洒脱还要假装洒脱

Why are you always afflicted with **mental internal frictions**? Why do you pretend to be happy when you are not happy?

In Example (9), the *Sangness*-related Chinese catchword *mental internal friction* is used to expose a particular spiritual agony that is afflicting an increasing number of Chinese young people. Mental internal friction is the emotional expression used by young people to describe the profound doubt they have about themselves and the deep regrets they have about their past. This emotion is so strong that it cannot be dismissed through self-regulation, thus forming an internal friction. The permeating despondency on the Internet makes it possible for young people to realize they are not alone in having such a problem. When they find that they themselves are not an island, there appears a venue for them to ease their internal friction. Through group interactions of the *Sang* subculture, the youth group is able to obtain an emotional relief in the way of value recognition. This has actually become another important function of the *Sangness*-related Chinese catchwords.

4.3 Developmental features of *Sangness*-related Chinese catchwords

4.3.1 An increasing diversity

The first developmental feature of *Sangness*-related Chinese catchwords is an increasing diversity. This can be seen from the digital growth of such words from

zero to nine. In the first four years of the past decade from 2013 to 2022, no *Sangness*-related catchwords were selected by *Biting Words and Chewing Words* as the top ten annual Chinese catchwords. In the ensuing six years from 2017 to 2022, however, nine of such words were selected. Given that each and every one of these words has its unique form, it is possible to say that they are becoming increasingly diverse. In addition to form, the diversity of *Sangness*-related catchwords can also be found in content in that some deal with behavior and attitude (i.e., *Ge You Slouch*, Buddha-like, and lying flat), some touch upon emotions (i.e., feeling awful and wanting to cry, and life is too hard for me), some explore causes (i.e., 996 work schedule, involution and mental internal friction) while others reveal identity (i.e., laborer). Furthermore, origins of *Sangness*-related catchwords are diverse, too, as some derive from the pop culture (i.e., *Ge You Slouch*, feeling awful and wanting to cry, life is too hard for me, Buddha-like, and lying flat), some stem from the corporate culture (i.e., 996 work schedule and laborer), while others can be traced back to economics (i.e., involution) and psychology (i.e., mental internal friction). The increasing diversity of *Sangness*-related catchwords suggests that *Sangness*-related events and activities have constituted an important aspect of Chinese society.

4.3.2 A stronger applicability

The second developmental feature of *Sangness*-related Chinese catchwords is a stronger applicability. A case in point is the perceived difference between *Ge You Slouch*, Buddha-like, and lying flat. According to McLuhan (2000), media can, according to the explicitness of information and audience involvement, be divided into cold media and hot media. For the cold media, the information explicitness is low while the audience involvement is high. For the hot media, however, the opposite is true. The distinction between hot media and cold media can be found in the respective use of *Ge You Slouch*, Buddha-like, and lying flat. The communication of *Ge You Slouch* can be considered as a hot media as it is often accompanied by the use of explanatory words or stickers. By the high involvement of the audience, the low level of information explicitness of *Ge You Slouch* is improved. A similar pattern can be found in the communication of Buddha-like, but to a lesser extent. The communication pattern of lying flat must be considered as a cold media because it is seldom supplied with explanatory words or stickers. The high information explicitness and low audience involvement of lying flat suggest that it can be easily understood and communicated by people. Therefore, a gradual shift from a hot media to a cold media can be found in the separate communication of *Ge You Slouch*, Buddha-like and lying flat. This shift indicates that Chinese *Sangness*-related catchwords are gradually becoming more applicable.

5 Discussion

5.1 Knowing youth mentality through *Sangness*-related catchwords

Given that “[l]anguage has become less a mode of information than a mode of impression management and emotional manipulation” (Kramsch 2021: 9), it is possible to know youth mentality through their frequent use of *Sangness*-related catchwords. As Zhao (2022: 70) suggests, “diverse catchwords, which are seen as a language game on the surface, can in actuality delineate the mental trajectory of young people”. As an important part of the Chinese catchwords, *Sangness*-related catchwords can provide a quick glimpse into the spiritual world of the contemporary Chinese youth. On the one hand, the spiritual core of these words is developing with the passing of time, gaining a wide popularity among young people. On the other hand, these *Sangness*-related catchwords point to the worsening mental problems that are afflicting the Chinese youth. The continuous popularity of *Sangness*-related Chinese catchwords highlights an alarming fact that some Chinese young people are becoming utilitarian and hedonistic. That is, the traditional Chinese mainstream values of hard work and self-sacrifice are giving way to hedonism and egoism. When young people’s dreams of personal growth and material wealth are obstructed by the stark reality of hard work and fierce competition, they would rather lie flat than overcome any difficulties.

5.2 Putting linguistic expressions of despondency into perspective

Given the continuous popularity of *Sangness*-related Chinese catchwords, it is of great importance to put them into perspective. First, linguistic expressions of despondency do not constitute the entire landscape of the language. As a matter of fact, they are only a small part of the Chinese language. As far as the top ten annual catchwords selected by *Biting Words and Chewing Words* are concerned, there are not only *Sangness*-related catchwords, but also linguistic expressions of other feelings. For example, 飒 (valiant) conveys bravery and pride whereas 后浪 (surging waves) refers to young people who are not afraid of any difficulty or hardship, always ready to overcome challenges. Second, linguistic expressions of despondency do not necessarily lead to inaction or giving up efforts. Cognitively speaking, the use of *Sangness*-related language does not necessarily entail a state of life like this in that there may exist a gap between emotion venting and action taking (Luo and Zhi 2019).

Kang and Xue (2002) caution against the magnifying effect of the catchword of lying flat. According to their investigation of more than 4000 students in Shanghai-based universities, a small proportion of college students are indeed lying flat whereas the vast majority of them are working hard. Third, linguistic expressions of despondency should be properly guided. Given that such expressions run counter to the mainstream values of positive energy and hard work, they may exert a negative influence on the social mentality. Young people who are still at the stage of building their world views, views on life and values are particularly susceptible to such influences. Therefore, efforts should be made by the government to guide the creation, communication, and evolution of the linguistic expressions of despondency.

6 Conclusions

Catchwords are not only a part of the current linguistic landscape, but also a social phenomenon. In recent years, a dazzling array of catchwords have been coined by Chinese young people. Owing to the powerful IT technology, these catchwords often go viral in a short span of time, attracting much attention not only from the general public, but also from the academic community. Of the various Chinese catchwords, those related to *Sangness* may have gained more attention than others. This study has taken a socio-linguistic approach to investigating the most frequently used *Sangness*-related Chinese catchwords in the past ten years. By tracking the annual top ten Chinese catchwords selected by *Biting Words* and *Chewing Words* in the past decade, it finds that (1) *Ge You Slouch*, (2) feeling awful and wanting to cry, (3) Buddha-like, (4) 996 work schedule, (5) life is too hard for me, (6) laborer, (7) involution, (8) lying flat, and (9) mental internal friction have been the most frequently used *Sangness*-related Chinese catchwords between 2013 and 2022. Discourse analysis of *Weibo* users shows that these words can serve three major functions, namely deconstructing mainstream value, expressing self-mockery and seeking value recognition. Viewed as a whole and over a number of years, these words are found to have the developmental features of an increasing diversity and a stronger applicability. This study argues that it is of great importance to handle *Sangness*-related Chinese catchwords in a scientific way. On the one hand, these words bring to light the negative emotions and mental distresses of the contemporary youth, which should gain attention from the Chinese central government and relevant departments. On the other hand, these words are only one aspect of understanding Chinese youth story with the result that they cannot truly describe or define contemporary Chinese youth.

Finally, it is necessary to point out the limitations of this study. First, the number of *Sangness*-related Chinese catchwords investigated in this study is not sufficient

enough to produce a panoramic view of linguistic expressions of despondency. Second, no interviews have been included in this study to analyze the functions of *Sangness*-related Chinese catchwords. Future studies are recommended to collect a larger number of *Sangness*-related Chinese catchwords and interview the actual users of these words either through spoken, written, computer based or telephone interviews. Given the fact that this study is focused on the linguistic expressions of despondency, future studies are also recommended to explore the para-linguistic expressions of despondency such as emojis and stickers.

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