Subcultures of Coping: The Idiosyncratic Trends of Koi and Sang Exhibited by Chinese Millennials

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Abstract

In recent years, a phenomenon has emerged and has soon become quite popular in China, which is the frequent appearance of “Sang” and “Koi” in Chinese online social media posts. The widespread use of the two terms online has drawn attention from the academic field, the media, as well as society at large. Many scholars, media producers, and even the public see the emergence of the Koi and Sang phenomenon as the establishment of new subcultures in China. Moreover, the majority of participants of the online social media platforms, where Koi and Sang are most commonly seen, are Chinese Millennials. As such, many have argued that the emergence of such online cultures unveils suppressed truths concerning the challenges faced by young adults in China and symbolizes pivotal issues that plague the greater Chinese society.

Keywords:  Koi; Sang; Chinese Millennials; Subculture; Online
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Chapter 1. Introduction

In recent years, a phenomenon has emerged and has become quite popular in China. That phenomenon is the frequent appearance of “Sang” and “Koi” in Chinese online social media posts. One can expect a considerable exposure to Koi on a daily basis, both in written text and images posted and circulated by users on social media, including Sina Weibo and WeChat. Koi often appears alongside reference to Sang and Sang culture, an umbrella term in the Chinese language that summarizes a series of negative emotions (Liu, 2018, p.82), through either direct expression or indirect suggestion. While young people are facing negative emotions or life struggles, they can go on Sina Weibo and post an image of Koi, with the captions demonstrating their frustrations in life and hoping for better luck. For instance, the following post on Sina Weibo states, “I was shopping for furniture today while it was 40 degrees outside. The sudden hail storm did not really make anything better for me. I have been too busy to eat recently, yet my weight kept on increasing. It feels like all the terrible things are happening at the same time. I feel extremely Sang, to the point that I almost can’t take it anymore. I even doubt that Koi can save me now.”

![Image of a post on Sina Weibo](image)

Figure 1.1. Posted by a Sina Weibo User

Note. User name is covered due to privacy.

The widespread use of Koi and Sang online has drawn attention from academic researchers, the media, as well as society. Many scholars, media producers, and even the public see the emergence of the Koi and Sang phenomenon as part of the development of new subcultures in China’s new cities.

Chinese Millennials are the dominant users of Koi and Sang references on online social media platforms. There is much ongoing discussion that the emergence of such online cultures is indicative of buried struggles plaguing young adults in China and
symbolizes intrinsic challenges present in Chinese society. That said, Koi is in fact, a traditional cultural product represented throughout Chinese history. While the meaning of Koi has not changed, the purpose that it serves has.

This research project examines the meaning of Koi Culture and Sang Culture, as well as the transition in the usage of Koi in recent years. The relationships between Koi and Sang are in turn explored, as part of a broader introduction to the everyday lives of Chinese Millennials. Methodologically, sentiment analysis is used to explore how Koi is being used and woven into the Sina Weibo community, specifically among Chinese Millennials. In the analysis, Sina Weibo posts featuring Koi are examined to determine the emotions and intentions behind the usage of this symbol.

To close, the cultural, political, and economic struggles of Chinese Millennials that have spurred the transition to a distinct usage of the concept of Koi are discussed. This project brings awareness to the Chinese Millennial’s current socioeconomic position and serves to identify and recognize their struggles. Chinese Millennials are the generation that will soon become the backbone of the country and the primary support system to an aging society caused by the one-child-policy. It matters that we acknowledge their well-being, value and unique experience in a society that is changing at an extraordinary pace.

1.1. Are Koi Culture and Sang Culture Considered Subcultures?

The concept of subculture originated in the West. According to Bennett (1999, p.600), subcultures were first used to understand the abnormal youth behaviours under specific social environments. More specifically, subcultures focused on “style-centred youth cultures,” which emerged in response to the urbanization of cities and the migration of households to developed areas during post-war Britain (Bennett, 1999, p.601). During the 1970s, the concept of the subculture, as adopted by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, was highly focused on the resistance of working-class youth towards the dominant ideologies of the British society. Similarly, Chicago School theorists argue that the concept of subculture is associated with deviant behaviours of youth (Bennett, 2004, p.1-3).
During the 1980’s and 1990’s, scholars such as McRobbie, Garber, and Muggleton, as quoted by Bennett (2004, p.6-7), argued that subculture is not always exclusively dominated by males, nor are they only part of the working class. Instead, Bennett (2004, p.8-10) argues that due to the development of youth consumerism, youth subculture was also in flux. As a result, new ways of describing the subculture had emerged. Instead of using subculture as a framework to study deviant behaviours and resistance, it was seen as neo-tribes and lifestyles (Bennett, 2004, p.13).

During the 2000’s to 2010’s, the complicated emergence of online cultures added a whole new complexity to youth subculture. It no longer only associated only to the West. Instead, it was becoming more global and diverse (Bennett, 2011, p.503). It involved new kinds of creative labour focused on social media and online communities. It was in this context that the idea of subculture as resistance had transitioned into a space of identity work, shaped by a complex focus on social change, technological development, and new conditions of global consumers (Bennett, 2004, p.163).

The concept of subculture could be used as a framework for understanding online cultures amongst Chinese Millennials. While the unrealistic expectations arising from Chinese society and mainstream norms created tensions between the mainstream culture and the young generation, young individuals could in turn feel displaced, alienated, and misunderstood. On one hand, Chinese millennials participate in Sang Culture and Koi Culture not as an overt rebellion but as part of the negotiation of the pressures brought about by urbanization, commercialization, and competitive living environments in contemporary China. The emergence of Sang Culture and Koi Culture provides a space where young individuals can find a sense of belonging with others who share similar life conditions, where they can be who they want to be instead of who the society requires them to be. While they consider themselves as outsiders of the mainstream culture, these subcultures have established a community where they can be insiders.

1.2. Historical Indications of Koi Culture

Koi Culture has a long history in China. It originated from the worship of female genitals in ancient China. According to Lu (2011, p.44), paintings of Koi were seen on potteries discovered at Banpo, an archaeological site associated with Yangshao Culture,
— a matriarchal society located in Xi'an province. Such paintings are believed to be the depiction of fish immolations. Since Koi fish are known for their reproductive capacity and vitality, they are considered to be the totem figure representing prosperity and strength amongst ancient Chinese clans.

Meanwhile, the shape of the fish (or sometimes double fish) is associated with female reproductive organs by the ancient people. Thus, a type of ceremonial sacrifice is created to simulate the Koi’s procreation capacity, during which females eat Koi to improve their reproductive abilities and increase the chances of pregnancy. This type of traditional thinking is present in later Chinese history. In the chapter of "Odes of Chen" in Books of Poetry (composed in the Zhou Dynasty), a passage called "Heng Men" makes a connection between Koi and marriage; Koi symbolizes familial prosperity and the development of a culture of family (Lu, 2011, p.45).

Koi is also deeply associated with spiritual abilities or gods in ancient China due to its perseverance, especially during floodings. Koi is known as "the master of all fish" with the ability to control the wind and the rain (Lu, 2011, p.45). According to Lu (2011), Chinese archaeologists have discovered the tradition of using fish as funerary sacrifices starting in the Shang and Zhou Dynasties (1600-256BC). This tradition is practiced so the soul of the dead could mount the Koi across the Styx River and arrive at the other world (Chen, 2019, p.130). In this context, Koi is seen as the sacred courier between the mortal and the immortal. *Lie Xian Zhuan*, also known as *The Biographies of Immortals*, is a Daosim book written by Liu Xiang (77-8BC) in the Western Han Dynasty. It describes seventy stories of the mythological immortals and saints, one of which is called "Qin Gao," who rides the Koi as his form of transportation to the water and the sky (Chen, 2019, p.130).

Koi is the symbolic figure for good fortune in life and career. The Chinese characters for Koi are 鲤 (pronounced as Li) 鱼 (pronounced as Yu). 鲤 is the homophone of the Chinese character 利, which means profit and wealth, while 鱼 is the homophone of 余, meaning abundance. Koi is often associated with fortune and success. Since the Han dynasty, Koi have been printed on Chinese currencies of varying time periods (Lu, 2011, p.47).
Sun (2017) has pointed out the significance of Koi culture from the Confucian, the Daoist, and the Buddhist perspectives, all of which are fundamental in religious and philosophical thinking in traditional Chinese culture. He suggests that “Koi/Fish Culture in China is a complicated psychological and social complex which encompasses metaphors, similes, and symbolic meanings of the totemic fish signifiers” (p.38). Liang (2018, p.45) argues that the demonstration of passion and love towards Koi Culture is so deeply embedded in the national complex that it has become a form of commonly shared imagery and has developed its own cultural standing.

A parallel example in the west can be found in the four-leaf clover, which is one of the most famous symbols of luck in the West. Since most of the clovers have only three-leaves, the four-leaf clover is considered an anomaly and a rarity. Each of the four leaves represents a positive element, including wealth, fame, love, and health (Oliver, 2010, p133). The four-leaf clover also has a long history beginning in the 17th and early 18th century. Historically speaking, it represents the inevitability of finding one’s soulmate and also denotes protection against undesired events (Oliver, 2010, p133). Nowadays, it has a more general meaning of luck (Oliver, 2010, p133). As a symbol of luck, the four-leaf clover has been adopted by multiple generations in the West. For instance, the four-leaf clover has been the lucky icon of Space Exploration Technologies (SpaceX) since 2008, when the company had its first launch of its rockets into space. The clover has even been placed at the bottom of SpaceX’s emblem (Pearlman, 2014). As such, one can see how a symbol can become a social complex throughout its historical developments, with an extraordinary cultural standing in the society.

In contemporary China, Koi could be found almost everywhere during the Spring Festival, the most important celebration of the year. There are twelve animals in the Chinese zodiac, with each representing an individual year in the twelve-year cycle. Each Lunar New Year, the animal of the year will be printed on various potteries, paintings, accessories, and wall arts. Even though Koi is not one of the animals, it is never absent from Chinese households. Its significance to Chinese people who collectively desire for domestic flourishing and better luck is impregnable.

One of the most commonly seen Koi elements is the paper-cut wall art made from red paper. Another example can be the paintings of the New Year Baby. As indicated earlier, Koi represents abundance—余. Thus, the appearance of Koi in these
artworks, usually combined with the phrase 年年有余 (to have abundant resources every year), is the universal aspiration of Chinese families to acquire more descendants, food, and income in the coming new year (Lu, 2011, p.47).

In addition, Koi also represents gifts, both from each other and from the gods. The character of gift—禮, is another homophone of Koi. Besides the artworks involving Koi, Koi is also an essential dish for the New-Years-Eve dinner. In general, since Koi represents all the optimistic outlooks outlined above, it is commonly used by Chinese people in hope for better luck at obtaining a material embodiment of the Koi’s spirit in their daily lives. Also, the use of Koi is especially prevalent in joyous occasions such as Chinese New Year or other traditionally celebrated festivals.

1.3. The Contemporary Meaning of Koi Culture

Contemporary Koi culture, which has become extremely popular on the Internet, is deeply rooted in the traditional meanings of Koi. In recent years, Koi Culture has been transformed by the online community into the trending online practice of referencing Koi for the purposes of obtaining luck. The referencing of Koi is done through either imagery or phrases. That said, the word Koi has become a popular modern vernacular that attracts much attention from millennials. Traditionally speaking, Koi symbolizes good luck in obtaining abundance and success. Nowadays it still symbolizes good luck, albeit partially. On the other hand, however, the word seems to have become the representation for “free lunch” (Chen, 2019, p.131).

For instance, before business meetings, exams, or other important occasions, Chinese Millennials tend to use their Sina Weibo accounts to repost Koi images with the captions of wishing themselves good luck and success. However, as indicated by the sentiment analysis of Koi posts on Sina Weibo, which will be further introduced later in another chapter, the examination of online Koi Culture also aids in uncovering the emotional states of Chinese Millennials and help in shedding light on their real-life struggles. Unlike older generations in China, who use Koi in a relatively more positive manner, Chinese Millennials are more inclined to use Koi as a coping mechanism while facing negative situations.
Koi Culture is not merely a modern product but rather a concept rooted deep in Chinese history. Even though the contemporary Koi Culture has a different kind of participatory platform — the Internet — the types of meanings associated with online Koi symbology references and to a certain extent, mirrors, the meanings exhibited by the traditional Koi culture. Koi has always been shared imagery representing luck to Chinese people who are attempting to bring good influences to reality. The use of the digital Koi on the Internet, which is popular among Chinese Millennials, is not much different from the paper-cut wall art popular amongst the older generations in terms of its symbolic meaning—but there is a major difference. Koi usage in the past was predicated on traditional customs, where there are no individualized expectations nor are there any specific negative life circumstances that spur that usage; its usage is generalized and universal and not situation-specific. Contemporary Koi usage, on the other hand, is highly individualized, linked to a specific negative event, and reference to Koi is understood as a guard against negative consequences in the future.

1.4. Sang Culture and Its Connections with Koi Culture

While online Koi Culture plays the role of an emotional outlet amongst Chinese Millennials, its usage is linked to another cultural phenomenon, Sang Culture. It is common for news media reports, academic scholars, and even Chinese Millennials themselves to make the connection between the Koi Culture and Sang Culture as they reveal the same struggles for the same group of individuals. Sang Culture is very common on Sina Weibo, as most users can apply the word Sang while describing their troubled situations. As such, the usage of both terms stem from negative catalysts in life. In the words of one Sina Weibo user, “I am feeling a bit Sang today, maybe I haven’t posted enough Koi”.

Sang (丧) is a Chinese character that describes depression, hopelessness, and sad feelings, all of which can be found in countless Sina Weibo posts featuring Koi. Sang culture is a “demotivational culture”, similar to the North American online subcultures of ‘foreveralone’. Its main participants are urban-dwelling young adults that face seemingly unsolvable life challenges such as stiff competition for career opportunities, marriage prospective, home-ownership and social status (Chen & Munroe, 2017). Like contemporary Koi culture, it is a reaction to negative stimuli. It is predicated
upon a raw epiphany that one does not measure up to the unrealistic expectations placed upon them by their parents, peers or society and the inability to change one’s life-course (Chen & Munroe, 2017). It is also predicated on irony-clad defeatism and despondency and self-mockery during times of reflection (Du, 2017, p.112). It could be argued that instead of revelling in sadness, those who identify with the Sang culture are in fact accepting reality as it is and are ironically laughing at the situation as a coping mechanism against the anxiety that they are facing, a way to find solidarity with others who share the pain, and a way to satirize the societal expectations.

BoJack Horseman, an animated half-man half-horse character in the Netflix series “BoJack Horseman,” is a prominent mascot of Sang Culture. His self-distain and sarcastic cynicism are vivid representations of the Sang Culture participants. Chung (2017) shows us two infamous quotes from the character, including “If you feel like you’re plain-looking, broke, and useless, don’t despair. Because at least your sense of judgment is intact.” And “There’s no point in setting a PIN for your savings account. Why use a six-digit number to protect a single-digit amount?” Both quotes reflect the reality of Chinese Millennials who adopt Sang Culture as a satirical and form of venting towards the unsatisfying realities. Another popular Sang element is the Ge You Slouch. It was originally from a TV series “I Love my Family,” in which a famous Chinese actor Ge You plays a middle-age freeloder who does not have a proper job and lays on the couch all day. The Ge You Slouch has inspired many reinterpretations and memes in the online community because it humorously express hopelessness and uselessness (Xiao, Chang, &Sun, 2017, p4).
There are three common conceptions of Sang Culture amongst Chinese scholars. First, various scholars think Sang Culture is a lifestyle embraced by individuals in an attempt to mentally cope with real-world pressures. Second, some other scholars think Sang Culture is a product of modern society; it is a culture of dark humour adopted by young folks who tend to use satire to mock their life conditions. Last, many others view Sang Culture as an adverse psychological acclimatization exhibited by Chinese Millennials to regular encounters with social conflicts in a changing society (Cheng, 2019, p. 144). In essence, both Koi Culture and Sang Culture have emerged as online embodiments of the Chinese Millennial’s offline struggles.

As it will be discussed in the following sentiment analysis, “Loneliness”, “Anxiousness”, “Disappointment”, “Anger”, “Encouragement”, “Insecurity”, and “Depression” are discovered to be the most common emotions conveyed by the participants of online Koi Culture. In other words, the contemporary Koi Culture, to a great extent, is one of the embodiments of Sang Culture. Thus, one could argue that these two youth cultures are interrelated and contain mutually inclusive elements.
Chapter 2. Getting to Know the Chinese Millennials

2.1. The Characteristics and Unique Problems of Chinese Millennials

The principal participants of the contemporary Koi Culture and Sang Culture are Chinese Millennials, more specifically the post-90’s generation. While Chinese Millennials share numerous commonalities with its counterparts in Western countries, young adults in China face unique challenges brought about by the distinct characteristics of Chinese society. This section will identify the commonly seen stereotypes of the post-90s generation in China as given by parents, the mass media, and society at large. Meanwhile, challenges faced by the millennial generation with regards to social pressure, employment, and identity will also be discussed.

The “Great Leap Forward” and the “Cultural Revolution” in China had severely stunted both the economic and social growth in China. The economic reform policy enacted by Deng Xiao Ping, however, had ushered in a new era of prosperity and socioeconomic development. The Chinese Millennials born after 1980s had in turn grown up in an environment of relative stability. That said, in comparison with their parent’s generation, Chinese Millennials in general could be argued as the generation of the better educated and technology literate, giving rise to rapid technological development, urbanization globalization. However, certain social phenomena and historical developments have made Chinese Millennials unique in their own way. To illustrate, both Montgomery, Schwarz and Mitchell's article “Examining the Cross-Cultural Dimensionality of Prestige Sensitivity” (2016) and Sun and Cheng’s book China’s Generation Gap (2018) highlight the influence brought about by the One-Child policy, which was strictly enforced from 1979 to 2016. China’s One-Child policy, as suggested by its name, had imposed the law that allows only one child in every family. This has caused the “little emperors and empresses” phenomenon as the sole child typically commands the love and attention of the entire family, including that of parents and grandparents (Montgomery et, al., 2016, p127).

While some argue that the one-child policy had produced little emperors and little empresses that have been spoiled by the entire family, it has also created tremendous pressure for Chinese Millennials that other generations did not experience. As the centre
of attention, the sole child usually experiences great pressure from the parents, who have high expectations for the child to be both academically and socially successful, who wish the child to achieve what they could not achieve, and who spend most of their time and energy imposing their ideals on the child and disciplining the child.

In addition, sole children are expected to become the lone caretaker of their parents and all four of the grandparents. As argued by Montgomery et, al. (2016, p127), the concentration of attention and stress as well as the “unhealthy perfectionism” have caused many individuals of the post-90s generation to become increasingly sensitive to external criticism and opinion. Meanwhile, Chinese Millennials also experience immense pressure from school. The academic workload of a post-90s child tends to be extremely heavy as they have to spend their down time not only finishing a large amount of assignments but also attending one or more types of extracurricular tutelages.

In addition to the academic pressure during the teenage years, Chinese Millennials also encounter different kinds of stress as adults. For example, most Chinese parents forbid their children from having any romantic relationships while in school because they worry that the relationship will become a distraction. Moore (2005, p.363) also mentions this specific rule in most Chinese households and argues that this rule is influenced by traditional Confucian thinking. For the post-80s generation, this rule could not be challenged as teachers in high schools and even professors in universities helped reinforce such prohibitions, making romantic relationships seem like a moral crime (Moore, 2005, p.363). However, many of the post-80s millennials will encounter the immediate shift of relationship expectations from their parents after they graduate from school. It is rather contradictory to see that even though parents strictly forbid dating while their children are in school, they expect their children to marry soon after they graduate, leaving minimal time for the new graduates to find a partner.

As a result of such intense pressure coming from families, schools, and the Chinese society, Chinese Millennials tends to hold a different understanding of success compared to their parents’ generation. To explain, while the majority of the 50-year-olds are complacent in the middle ground at the workplace and tends to find fulfillment rather easily, the post-80s and post-90s are more likely to view success as material abundance, individual freedom, and achievement of internal and external desires (Sun & Cheng, 2018, p.122). Moreover, unlike the previous generation who were deeply
influenced by collectivistic thoughts promoted by Mao’s government and the Cultural Revolution, Chinese Millennials are more likely to embrace individualism, independence, and freedom (Moore, 2005, p375). In fact, the common occurrence of school romance amongst the post-90s, according to Moore (2005, p.363), is a clear embodiment of individualistic undertaking.

Moore (2005, p.363) also points out that parents and professors have become more flexible with the post-90s in terms of in-school romance. As a result, more opportunities for making romantic connections have been granted to university students in recent years. However, more dating opportunities in universities does not necessarily mean easier access to marriage. As quoted by Montgomery et, al. (2016, p127), Powell points out that the average age for Chinese female Millennials to be married exceeded 30 years old, which is far greater an age than what their parents would expect.

One of the reasons that has caused the delayed marrying age for both genders is the gender imbalance brought about by the One-Child Policy. Many Chinese families, especially those in rural areas, prefer boys over girls (Li, Yi, & Zhang, 2011. p1535). Thus, the survival rate of boys exceeds that of girls. Powell (2015) states that the male to female ratio in China peaked in 2008 at 1.22 to 1 and he further illustrates that the number of males of marrying age will exceed the number of females of marrying age by 30 million by 2020. While there are more men than women, it will become far more competitive for men to form romantic relationships (Montgomery et, al. 2016, p128).

Another reason for the delay of marriage is relatively superficial. Chinese Millennials are arguably the generation that sees luxurious brands and extravagant purchases as the de facto demonstration of social status and fortune (Sun & Cheng 2018, p.140-141). Such an intense obsession with material possessions amongst Chinese Millennials is also brought up by Montgomery et, al. (2016, p.127), who consider the Millennials as “the most materialistic generation”. Their argument demonstrates that the public display of extravagant material goods is a way for Millennials to herald their financial achievements and self-identity as well-off consumers, although many of them are considered “Yue Guang Zu” — spending all your pay-check every month in Chinese.
With such high expenses every month, not many males can afford to keep up with their own expenditures, the costs in a relationship, as well as rent or mortgage. It should be mentioned here that being able to afford a place, or at least the down payment, is one of the most important and unnegotiable requirements in order for a man to get married. As such, the concept of marriage serves not only as a familial but also an economic pressure for Chinese Millennials.

2.2. Stereotypes towards Chinese Millennials

Commonly viewed traits of Chinese Millennials are that of the overly spoiled, self-centred, and vulnerable. Stereotypes regarding the generation, also known as the post-80’s (80 后) and the post-90’s (90 后), can be found not only in the daily life in China but also in the mainstream media. Such an example can be seen in Han, Zhou, and Zhao’s article “Examining the Psychological Characteristics and Mental Health Education of Post-90s University Students” (2011), which has been published by Science & Technology Information Journal. In this short article, the authors summarized four characteristics of the post-90’s university students which included, “pursuing abnormal yet unique fashions”, “being impulsive, extreme, simple, and vulnerable”, “pretending to be mature despite their immature thoughts”, and “the sense of responsibility only appears when necessary”. Without providing empirical data or research results, the article appeared convinced in validating the existence of such traits and in turn generalizing these traits to all post-90s university students. This is despite the fact that the tone and narrative in this article appears particularly biased and discriminative. This article is not the only example of the externalization of stereotypes against the post-90’s.

While Chinese Millennials tends to be a target of frequent criticisms and controversies, many have argued instead that the majority of stereotypes towards this younger generation lack credibility because they are based upon the outdated values of the previous generations. For instance, to Chinese young adults, purchasing a pair of ripped jeans is a commonly seen fashion choice. On the contrary, the same behaviour could be seen from their parents’ or grandparents’ perspective as a pursuit of abnormal trends. The older generation may argue that abnormal fashion styles are used by the Millennials in an attempt to strive for uniqueness and character, a way to prove that they
are different from the norm. However, the older generation may not be aware that this particular style is the norm amongst young people. Instead of attempting to challenge the norm, young people are just in fact conforming to a norm.

Sun and Cheng (2018) also point out a generation gap in consumption values, which explains why the Millennials are faulted as being extravagant in their spending by the previous generations in China. According to Sun and Cheng (2018, p.89), young people in China are developing more fashion awareness, and this fashion awareness in turn formulates significant portion of their expenditure. On the contrary, the older generations in China cared much less about appearances. Some even think that expenditure on clothing, shoes, and haircuts is a waste of money and denotes a lack of responsibility (p.90). Due to distinct values of consumption, misunderstandings often occur between different generations, and the Millennials are often seen as materialistic and irresponsible.

In fact, Sun and Cheng (2018, p.89) argue that the changed form of social interaction is the main catalyst which fostered the young people’s desire for fashion. It has become a modern trend, in China, to judge or evaluate somebody based on their outward appearance — judgements which are based upon extrinsic qualities such as hairstyle, hygiene, and clothing. This trend is especially prominent in an urban setting, where a dense population, a fast pace, and high-pressure lifestyles have made close interpersonal relationships difficult and rare.

As a result, the younger generation tends to use fashion not only an armour to perfect their public image but also as a tool to engage with their peers. In other words, fashion expenses are not merely an embodiment of extravagance, but rather a fundamental need when it comes to social interactions. While the older generations in China have invested most their savings and efforts on meeting the basic needs of survival such as food and shelter, Chinese Millennials are moving towards higher needs that contribute to esteem, such as fashion.

If the generational gap is one reason that has attributed to the emergence of stereotypes towards Chinese Millennials, then the media not only attributes but reinforces these stereotypes at a higher level. As Liu (2019) has pointed out in his study, in all of the researched news articles reporting the post-90s, the amount of negative
information exceeds those of both positive and neutral information combined. Meanwhile, Liu (2019, p31)’s report also points out that many news reports featuring the post-90’s tends to be driven by commercial profitability purposes and thus have lost their authenticity and reliability while some others have focused too much on entertainment purposes in order to draw public attention and thus in turn acts as a method to intentionally disparage the generation by the use of discriminative language and false information.
Chapter 3. Sentiment Analysis of Koi Posts on Sina Weibo

3.1. Methodology

The previous chapters have introduced the backgrounds of Koi Culture and Sang Culture, as well as the Chinese Millennials, who are the main participants of these two subcultures. In order to understand the different emotions conveyed by Chinese Millennials through Koi on social media platforms, a sentimental analysis is conducted, targeting Sina Weibo posts featuring Koi.

All Sina Weibo posts from Monday (June 24, 2019), Thursday (June 27, 2019), and Friday (June 29, 2019) from 10:00PM to 11:30PM (Beijing Time) that make the mention of “Koi” are selected into the pool of samples. Drawing data from three different days in a week allows for a greater variety of posts from different demographics of users, such as University Students and individuals who work during weekdays. Thus, this allows for the enhancement of the reliability and diversity of the data. That said, 10:00PM to 11:30PM is a period when most young people have finished other activities, but it is not expected to be too late of a time for them to be asleep already. As such, a significantly number of posts are likely to be collected since it is expected that most young individuals tend to be on their phones during this period of freedom. There are approximately 450 posts in this pool. In order to narrow down the number of samples, an indicator of significance, which is a minimum of 5 “likes,” is applied to decrease the sample size to 115 posts. Within the 115 posts, 35 are from Monday, 37 are from Thursday, and 43 are from Saturday.

Next, in order to understand the sentiments conveyed by the sample posts, different categories, each representing an emotion, is developed to ascertain if posts follow a particular sentimental pattern. Specifically, while manually examining the contents of each post, a central emotion is identified. After the same process is applied to all 115 posts, nine different core sentiments have been discovered. The posts that convey the same sentiment are grouped together for analyzation purposes.
3.2. Data

One of the limitations of the data is that young individuals who are from a lower-class background may be excluded, as many of them may not have access to the Internet or digital technologies to express their thoughts on Sina Weibo. Also, there is a small group of Chinese Millennials who prefer social media platforms other than Sina Weibo. Thus, their posts are not represented in this analysis. Moreover, due to the limited period of the study, the total number of samples being examined is relatively small. If more time was permitted, the sample size should be more substantial and, perhaps, more consistent. Lastly, although the majority of Sina Weibo users are Chinese Millennials, it is difficult to determine if they are actually the ones publishing all of the sample posts. Although the user profiles were examined during the data-collection process, many of the users either provided a fake age or did not provide one at all.

Table 3.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentiments Found in Sina Weibo Posts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Posts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope for Luck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire for Fortune</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouragement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Adapted from Sina Weibo, 2019.
Table 4.1 shows the nine sentiments found in the sample posts and the number of posts expressing each sentiment. To further illustrate, the blue bar represents Monday, the yellow bar represents Thursday, and the grey bar represents Saturday. The horizontal axis shows the nine sentiments, including hope for luck, loneliness, anxiousness, desire for fortune, disappointment, anger, encouragement, insecurity, and depression. It should be noted that while all of the sample posts wished for better luck, some of the users do elaborate on their emotional or life struggles that have made them turn to Koi to achieve their wishes. Such posts will be grouped based on the emotions expressed in the explanatory part of the post. On the other hand, some other posts only express the hope for good luck without providing any supplementary information; these posts are grouped in the “Hope for Luck” category.

Table 3.2

Note: Adapted from Sina Weibo, 2019.
Table 4.2 shows the percentage of personal accounts versus commercial accounts conveying each sentiment. For example, a “100%” in Table 4.2 indicates that all of the posts in the corresponding category were posted by personal accounts, whereas a “0%” means none of the posts in the corresponding category were posted by personal accounts. Compared to Table 4.1, in which the total number of posts that expressed “Hope for Luck” appears to be the highest among all categories, the percentage of posts published by actual personal accounts was only 24% on Monday, 16% on Tuesday, and 9% on Saturday. Similarly, lower percentages of personal posts can also be found in the category of “Desire for Fortune.”

In other words, the majority of posts conveying these two sentiments were created by commercial accounts, which could be a media organization, a business institution, or other groups where there is an absence of individualized aspirations. Table 4.2 also shows that “Loneliness,” “Anxiousness,” “Disappointment,” “Anger,” “Encouragement,” “Insecurity,” and “Depression” had a very high percentage of personal posts. Among these sentiments, “Encouragement” was the only positive emotion. However, the positive emotion occurred in light of a negative emotional context. This is because that users were trying to encourage themselves while facing negative situational pressures in life.

As indicated by Table 4.1, an extraordinary amount of Koi posts demonstrated “Hope for Luck,” whereas all the other emotions appeared to encompass a much smaller amount of posts. However, this does not necessarily mean that hoping for better luck is the most significant sentiment amongst Chinese Millennials on Sina Weibo. In fact, the number of posts of each sentimental category in Table 4.1 cannot reveal the user’s sentiments on its own. As mentioned earlier, posts from the categories of “Hope for Luck” and “Desire for Fortune” were more likely to be published by commercial accounts, which is not indicative of individualized emotions of online participants. As such, Table 4.2 has provided the percentages of personal posts as a means to remedy that limitation.

3.3. Findings

The data demonstrates the Chinese Millennial’s purpose of using Koi and reveals their emotional status in real life while using the Koi symbology. Although the meaning of
Koi, as a symbol of luck and flourishing, has not been changed, the way different generations in China are using it has transformed. Specifically, older generations in China use Koi in a slightly positive manner. As illustrated before, they use the paper-cut wall art of the fish during the Chinese Spring Festival in hope of a happy new year. In this case, the emotional state of these Chinese individuals tends to be joyful, positive, and optimistic.

As revealed by the analysis, Chinese Millennials on the contrary tends to turn to Koi for possible luck when they are feeling slightly negative emotions. Koi symbology today has been argued to be linked to Sang. The apparent contrast of the different generation’s emotional status while using Koi implies a change, not only in the ways of how Koi is used but also in terms of people’s living conditions and emotional wellbeing. To gain a better understanding of what has caused such a transformation and why the transformation is happening now, it is important that Chinese Millennials are examined from cultural, political, and economic perspectives.
Chapter 4. The Current Conditions and Struggles of Chinese Millennials

4.1. Introduction

From the analysis above, it can be argued that the online contemporary Koi Culture, as well as the Sang Culture, reveals certain psychological patterns of Chinese Millennials. According to Chen (2019), the popularity and development of Koi Culture is a way for Chinese Millennials to provide themselves with mental comfort while dealing with the anxieties from life. Psychologically speaking, Koi represents luck, which is an “external controlling variable” (Chen, 2019, p.131). For individuals who tend to be more “externally controlled” (Chen, 2019, p.131), it is more likely for them to believe that they cannot merely manage their lives with their physical abilities. In other words, they tend to rely on external influences to guide their destiny, which increases their anxiety. The action of posting the Koi, to some extent, enables them a kind of self-management, which can decrease their fear of the unknown and uncertainty. Thus, even though the reposting of the Koi may not necessarily satisfy people’s physical needs in reality, it could reduce their helplessness and grant them a sense of control (Chen, 2019).

Furthermore, Li (2018) has made the connection between the Koi Culture and the Sang Culture. He argues that the younger generation in China has labeled themselves as losers and garbage. Such self-denial indicates dissatisfaction towards not only the society but also self-development, which, according to Li (2018), is a struggle between the ideal and the reality. Li (2018) thinks that the Koi Culture is a product of the Sang Culture, and reposting Koi on the Internet is a “performative social act” (p.46) used by young people to gain a sense of social belonging. However, the essential things to be figured out are the social factors that have caused such emotional patterns within Chinese Millennials. That said, it is argued that the causes for the popularity of Koi Culture and Sang Culture amongst Chinese Millennials are due to cultural, economic, and political factors embedded in Chinese society.
4.2. Cultural Conflicts and Identity Struggles

By discussing the pressures put upon Chinese Millennials by their families and the unwarranted assumptions being made about them, Chapter 2 has demonstrated some of the cultural struggles that may have caused the emergence of Koi and Sang cultures. In addition, Chinese Millennials have arguably been accused of being overly individualistic, often exhibiting selfish behaviours and narcissistic intentions (Moore, 2005, p372). Another common trait associated to Chinese Millennials — frequently referenced by the older generations — is the unwillingness to make personal sacrifices for the benefit of the collective, such as on behalf of the family or company (Sun & Cheng, 2018, p130). In fact, selfishness is a characteristic often associated with the concept of individualism in China.

According to Xu and Zhang (2017, p.109), the change in Chinese culture involves “a trend of seemingly rising individualism but continuing collectivism.” The authors further explain that the conflict between generations in China is a clear embodiment of such a trend. Chinese social values and shared beliefs have always been dominated by a deeply-rooted orientation towards a collectivistic culture. Even though globalization and modernization have introduced individualism, which is a Western cultural orientation, not all of the Chinese populace have adopted this foreign concept. Chinese Millennials are more likely to be exposed to Western ideologies because of the Internet and digital technologies, while the previous generations remain less exposed and thus not as readily influenced.

The interspersed concepts of individualism and collectivism in China have resulted not only in tensions between generations but also identity-related issues amongst young adults. While Chinese Millennials are raised and educated in households and institutions that follow collectivistic ideologies, it is not until teenage years or early adulthood are they exposed to individualistic values. That being said, many of their core beliefs had still been fundamentally shaped by the collectivistic education they have received from families and schools.

For instance, many Chinese Millennials still value Mianzi (面子, literally means face; indicates the social status of an individual) and Guanxi (关系, literally means
relationships; indicates the social connections that an individual has with other individuals with power). These two concepts are deeply rooted in collectivistic thinking, as they represent how one sees oneself as a part of a broader social network and how one identifies oneself based on one’s social relations with others (Xu & Zhang, 2017, p.99). Online participation in the Koi and Sang cultures also signifies intent on the part of Chinese Millennials with regards to the seeking of recognition and a sense of belonging. At the same time however, young individuals in China also value freedom and personal space, which are individualistic concepts. Therefore, due to the antinomic nature of the relationship between individualism and collectivism, Chinese Millennials face an everyday challenge of balancing the two belief systems.

4.3. Political Powerlessness

Amongst Chinese Millennials, the current political environment in China has also contributed to the emergence of a series of negative emotions, such as helplessness, anxiousness, disappointment, anger, insecurity, and depression. Politics and social policies have shaped and influenced the daily lives of every citizen; they are important matters when it comes to the life quality and well-being of a country’s residents. That said, young adults in China are not given many opportunities to participate in politics, nor are they granted much freedom to participate in official or unofficial political conversations.

In China, in order to become a political official, one must go through a series of training, tests, and evaluations to prove that one’s political standpoint is considered appropriate by and favourable to the Communist Party of China. Those who do not go through such a process are not likely to wield any power, while those who do complete the process tend to be even more heavily controlled in terms of political standpoints and opinions. Therefore, for Chinese individuals, especially young adults, it is rather challenging to harbour both political authority and critical opinions towards the existing political power at the same time. In other words, the dominant power within China’s political environment is unshaken, untouchable, and unquestionable. In addition, while the development of social media has brought about a relatively more free and open space for the public to discuss political matters, such freedom and openness are only permitted when there is an absence of violations “directly [challenging] the right of the country’s leaders to rule” (Wei & Zhao, 2017, p.58).
As the primary space where Koi and Sang Cultures takes form, Sina Weibo is a unique platform which grants its users certain powers of political influence but it in fact also controls, monitors, and conveys political engagement on behalf the state. Since it was launched in 2009, Sina Weibo has always been the forefront in online discussions and the website where users are given the opportunities to speak, view, create, and connect. Due to Sina Weibo’s popularity amongst Chinese Internet users and the strong interest from the Chinese state towards it, it should be considered an effective platform for users to not only publicize and discuss social issues and political events but also for the government to ascertain public opinion more effectively and to foster an environment of accountability. Thus, by closely examining the platform, one can gain a better understanding of not only governmental policies and existing social events but also the relationship between Chinese Millennials and the government.

On one hand, Chinese Millennials have obtained a certain amount of power as they can participate, criticize, and communicate with each other about current political events and social affairs on Sina Weibo. According to Gu (2014), “Sina Weibo is significantly changing the rapport between [the Chinese government and its people]. …Sina Weibo promotes the bilateral supervision and co-governance between the Chinese government and its people in various aspects of social and political affairs, forging a more efficient and vibrant China” (p.72).

Gu (2014) also argues that Sina Weibo plays a role of the mutual communication apparatus between the people and the government as it not only provides the government with modes to receive and distribute information but also affords the user a sense of autonomy through its ability to foster active, collective online participation. In many cases, the power of young Internet users has induced improvements in social policies, civil rights, and liberties as Sina Weibo provides a platform for its users to request aid from both the public and the state. This usually happens when their own social networks are too small to provide any adequate forms of support and when minorities need to reach out to political authorities and leaders who are not readily accessible in real life (Zhang, 2013).

As an example, Sina Weibo has helped to expose the unscrupulous situations in Chinese hospitals caused by ticket scalpers, who resell high price tickets to patients. According to Chinese medical policies, patients who want to see a doctor must first
obtain a ticket and wait in line. Each doctor has their daily quota for the number of patients that they could treat; hence, the tickets themselves are limited every day to a predetermined number. The ticket scalpers would in turn purchase all the tickets and force patients to buy the tickets from them. In order to see the doctor, patients have no other choice but to buy drastically marked-up tickets. After a Sina Weibo user posted a video of the unsavory situations that ticket scalpers have created, the post went viral and was retweeted by many users including celebrities. In the end, this Sina Weibo post has made a significant social change because a new regulatory policy of ticket-selling was created in response by the appropriate departments to guarantee patients with a much fairer medical environment and process. Since the hospital involved in this case is operated and managed by the government, by exposing certain unjust policies that have been the subjects of abuse, the users of Sina Weibo have successfully fought for and deservedly obtained civil redress.

On the flipside, the government can also use Sina Weibo to set its own political agendas (Nip & Fu, 2016). As argued by Nip and Fu (2016), even though Chinese Millennials are the major group that actively initiates the information flow on Sina Weibo, their capability is still limited by the platform because Sina still plays the role of the dominant distributor of information. The supply of information is thus controlled and limited by the distributor of the information. Media producers and social media platforms, by the same token, should be considered the major opinion leaders in that supply of information, which could be disproportionately influenced by official announcements made by the government.

Even though there are entertaining bloggers such as actors and actresses with a large number of followers that can be seen as opinion leaders, according to Nip and Fu (2016), this category only falls in the third place of the ranking list of the most influential accounts. Gillian Bolsover, as quoted by Nip and Fu (2016), points out that the top opinion leader is, in fact, the Weibo service provider itself, followed by news organizations. Even though Chinese Millennials are the most active players on Sina Weibo, most of them tend to repost popular posts rather than publish original content. Ultimately, the breadth and depth of the most influential information on Sina Weibo still originates from and is controlled by, the state.
Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that Chinese Millennials are not willing to participate in politics. According to Xu and Zhang (2017, p.113), findings have suggested that Internet users tend to be more politically engaged than others. As argued previously, Sina Weibo has been adopted by many Millennials as a communication channel with the state. This should be seen as evidence that Chinese Millennials are willing to and also aspire to defend civil rights and pursue social justice through participation in political discussions on Sina Weibo. However, aside from the selective exposure of stated-governed, politically appropriate information, another barrier that prevents Chinese Millennials from obtaining political power is Internet censorship.

The Chinese government is known for having strong regulations towards online and offline media content. As discussed by Ng (2013), a weekly-updated blacklist containing the most recent sensitive topics and terms is sent to all media producers and online platforms by government regulators aiming to cleanse all forbidden discussions online. Therefore, the actual practice of censorship is imparted to, perpetuated, and implemented by the lower level—media producers and online platforms, who are responsible for interpreting and determining what is prohibited based on the blacklist. In addition, the state also provides an official written policy on censorship over media content. As discussed in Vuori and Paltmaa’s (2015) essay, the Chinese Information Office declared its goal of achieving a “healthy and harmonious Internet environment” (p.406) by launching The White Paper on Internet control, which is the definitive guide from the government on the regulation of media content. The Chinese government also claims that the purpose of Internet censorship and online surveillance is dedicated towards eliminating illegal information, which, as explained by the Information Office quoted by Vuori and Paltmaa (2015), includes the following:

[information] being against the cardinal principles set forth in the Constitution, endangering state security, divulging state secrets, subverting state power and jeopardizing national unification, damaging state honour and interests, instigating ethnic hatred or discrimination, and jeopardizing ethnic unity; jeopardizing state religious policy, propagating heretical or superstitious ideas; spreading rumours, disrupting social order and stability; disseminating obscenity, pornography, gambling, violence, brutality and terror or abetting crime; humiliating or slandering others, trespassing on lawful rights and interests of others (Vuori and Paltmaa, 2015, p.406-407).
Moreover, according to Ng (2013), an even stricter version of *The White Paper*, known as the *Public Pledge on Self-Discipline for China Internet Industry*, is required to be signed by all Chinese media producers and Internet companies. As mentioned earlier, censoring and filtering all online information every day is a massive burden, so the task is delegated to media producers as well as the users themselves by the government. Therefore, overtly proclaiming that online content and activities are being monitored is a way of achieving such a task.

To explain, Ng (2013) has pointed out that the candid nature of government censorship policies can potentially intimidate producers as well as users into compliance and therefore achieve a disciplinary purpose. As illustrated by Liang and Lu (2012), China’s campaign-style policing is widely adopted to act against online pornography. In most cases, the campaign is initiated by a central governmental agency and is enthusiastically supported by all of the subordinate players through absolute cooperation, which can entail the local departments or media producers. Wu (2017) believes that such unconditional support for governmental action from the media producers is a trend resulting from the deterrent properties of intimidating governmental control and the fear of potential state prosecution or penalty.

As argued by Chen, Zhang, and Wilson (2013), rather than discouraging and decreasing online discussion and participation over forbidden issues, Chinese Internet censorship has provoked even more responses from online users. Despite heavy censorship from the state, media producers, as well as other users, certain users still manage to invent ways to fiddle with the policies. Ng (2013) has mentioned that Chinese Internet users have successfully developed a vast number of visual or homophonous morphs such as memes, acronyms, abbreviations, anglicization of Chinese characters, and neologisms to bypass and circumvent censorship controls. By using such euphemisms, users are still able to discuss and share ‘inappropriate’ content online.

That being said, most users tend to adopt the morphs almost immediately through mutual sharing and learning. As explained by Chen et al. (2013), on Chinese social media platforms such as Sina Weibo, users tend to utilize a considerable number of morphs while commenting on the original posts, which uses the authentic terms. Thus, it becomes more comfortable for other users to draw connections between the original terms and their morphs quickly. However, the fact that users have to use
different techniques in order to participate in political discussions is problematic enough. That said, the fact that Chinese Millennials have to adopt these types of techniques to participate in online political discussions ironically demonstrates the dichotomous situation of political participation and political powerlessness.

4.4. Economic Pressures

While many have spent time and effort discussing the extravagant lifestyles, the material possessions, and the individualistic orientations of Chinese Millennials, few have taken a look at the social and economic conditions that may have shaped these traits and its resulting phenomena. In fact, rather than saying that the Millennials have adopted a culture of consumerism and extravagance, it should be argued that they have been forced to live in such a consumerist and materialistic environment, and all they have been doing is adapting. It is debatable if Millennials have voluntarily chosen this lifestyle because it makes them genuinely happy. Rather, the tendency or the need to follow such a consumeristic market could be argued to be a result of social pressure. It is the mass media, the economic elite and the upper-class with power who have been fostering a one-size-fit-all upper-middle class lifestyle to the public, with insidious effects. The Millennials have been exploited in many different ways as products and as labour, and yet they have also ironically become the target of blame.

One of the characteristics of the Millennial generation is that they have grown up with the rapid and vast development of digital technologies. Technological advancements and the Internet have enabled the creation of inventions that make one’s life easier and richer, and there are certainly many advantages brought about as a result. However, one can also argue that technology and the Internet are also used to take advantage of the end user and has a sinister way of escalating certain social issues. In other words, despite the service they provide to the users, they are still “primarily [playgrounds] for entertainment and consumerism under the state control” (Wei & Zhao, 2017, p.58).

Information technology and the supposed ease of access to information that have resulted from advancements in the field is not immune to the power imbalance as one may like to believe. Jodi Dean, as quoted by González (2009), has drawn attention to Communicative Capitalism, which is the “condition by which technoculture works in
the interest of capital growth while appearing to enhance public access to information and communication” (p57-58). From this statement, one can capture the unequal relationships between the economic elites and the public.

During the economic reform era, the media’s significant role in promoting economic development and engendering citizenship in a “socialist market economy” was specifically emphasized (Zhao, 2008). Hence, the middle class and the bourgeoisies had gradually gained power since the consumer market had become the dominant and deciding factor when it comes to social and economic development. Instead of being criticized, the image of the middle class and its values were promoted by the mass media. Moreover, financial gains and private businesses were highly encouraged in a commercialized society. The commercialized mass media system has been promoting the ideology and values of the middle class for self-serving purposes. According to Zhao (2008), the media abandoned and avoided the discourse of the class struggle; instead, it focused on the formation of the middle class and the upper-middle class, which became a force for social stability and even the agent of democratization due to commercial propaganda and advertising.

As Xu and Zhang (2017, p.108) have pointed out in their study of the online behaviours of Chinese Millennials, young individuals in China have demonstrated high scores in the category of “competence,” which means the emphasis of one’s strengths and abilities. Xu and Zhang (2017) further explain that this is because Chinese Millennials tend to present a more favourable image of themselves, as social capitals, while trying to build relationships with strangers. However, it is not entirely up to Chinese Millennials when it comes to determining what images are favourable. Their idea of what is to be admired is heavily influenced by the images promoted on social media platforms like Sina Weibo.

To further illustrate, many influencers on Sina Weibo, such as @ohh_emma, are paid by businesses to advertise their products. As a result, the materials these influencers promote towards their followers tend to be heavily commercialized and bourgeois, whether directly in the form of advertising or indirectly in the subliminal form of daily implanting. Take @ohh_emma as an example. On one hand, she cooperates with cosmetics brands such as M·A·C and promotes their products on her Sina Weibo posts, which are explicitly disclosed by @ohh_emma herself as sponsored content. On
the other hand, she also publishes contents such as “monthly favourites” or “empty bottles,” in which she recommends skincare or cosmetic products based on her own experiences. Even though some content might not necessarily be sponsored, they still convey a clear upper-middle-class image in terms of lifestyle and consumption level.

Bloggers like @ohh_emma are considered influencers for a reason. First, they are usually followed by a vast number of followers; @ohh_emma as an example, has almost a million followers on Sina Weibo. Second, their content is exceptionally influential to the extent that they generate a sizeable amount of profit for their sponsors, as many of their followers tend to purchase the products they have been promoting. On one hand, there is an uneven distribution of power between these influencers and their followers, both of which are primarily Chinese young adults. On the other hand, a power imbalance also exists between these influencers and the sponsoring brands and capitals. The influencers are essentially being used as labour to promote the product but also serve as a product themselves, catering to the consumers that are their followers. The influencer then becomes the ‘perfect product’, the product that every consumer aspires to be like. In general, one could argue that Chinese millennials have been manipulated by economic elites at all levels of the consumer market. In other words, even though the Internet appears to bring a greater sense of power and freedom to its users, it nonetheless exploits the Millennials as both labour and products to further the consumeristic agenda. It creates, promotes, and implants consumerism and a one-size-fits-all upper-middle-class lifestyle to the public, with deep, insidious effects that may further contribute to the development of Sang Culture.

While being exploited by the economic elites is one of the struggles faced by Chinese Millennials, the difficulty to succeed financially is another factor that frustrates young adults in China. While the cost of living and housing prices in China have been drastically increasing, the increase in income comes at a slower pace. Thus, it is difficult for Chinese individuals, especially Chinese Millennials that lack capital, to thrive in such an economic environment as they cannot comfortably support themselves or their families. Similarly, even though the fees for medical care and public education have not increased, the need for medical care and extra-curricular education are increasing. Therefore, the expenses regarding these two matters are also inevitably adding up. Beijing and Shanghai, the two major cities that attract a massive number of young migrant workers from all over the country, can serve as an example. According to Wen
(2018), although the average income in Beijing and Shanghai has increased, its gross rate is still lower than that of the cost of living. In other words, higher income does not necessarily indicate a higher standard of living in these two cities. Instead, the purchasing power of a Chinese Yuan is much less in Beijing and Shanghai in comparison to less prosperous provinces. As a result, the stern reality is that it is much more challenging to achieve the ideal upper-middle-class living circumstances and to become successful.
Chapter 5. Conclusion

Owing to the modern re-emergence of Koi as an online phenomenon, this project has observed that Koi works as a coping mechanism for Chinese Millennials who experience “Sang” because of real-life struggles. The project has provided introductions to Koi Culture and its historical development, which demonstrated that Koi had been seen as a symbol for luck and flourishment throughout Chinese history. It was also explained that the meaning of Sang culture and its contemporary embodiment was itself intricately connected with the online Koi Culture. The unique characteristics of the Millennial generation was introduced, followed by a sentiment analysis of Koi posts on Sina Weibo. As indicated in the analysis, the contemporary online Koi Culture reveals seven universal emotions of Chinese Millennials, including “Loneliness,” “Anxiousness,” “Disappointment,” “Anger,” “Encouragement,” “Insecurity,” and “Depression,” all of which are key emotions that corresponds to the development of Sang Culture. Although “Encouragement” appears as positive sentiment, it emerges based upon the context of negative situational factors. As such, one can see that although the meaning of Koi remains more-or-less the same in both traditional culture and contemporary online culture, the generational differences upon the circumstances in which it is used are quite distinct.

In order to gain a better understanding of the underlying reasons that have spurred the transition in the divergent usage of Koi, real-life struggles faced by Chinese Millennials were discussed. These struggles come from the dichotomous but coexisting cultures of the old and the young, the level of access to the political landscape, and the current economic environment of China.

First, because of Westernization and Globalization, most Chinese Millennials encounter Western cultural products on a daily basis and since have become susceptible to its influence. While Western Culture embraces individualistic thoughts and ideas, Chinese culture and society are deeply influenced by collectivism. The interspersed concepts of individualism and collectivism in China have resulted not only in tensions between generations but also identity-related issues amongst young adults. Second, while many Chinese Millennials strive to play an active role in the political landscape and public affairs, they are not given much freedom nor power to participate
in such activities and conversations. The political system and online censorship act as a partial barrier to young adults from obtaining civil redress. Last, the current economic environment in China fosters a culture of blind materialism. On one hand, the media and the economic elites have perpetuated an unrealistic upper-middle-class life standard to young consumers as a norm. On the other hand, because the gross rate of monthly incomes is incompatible with the dramatic increase in living expense, most Chinese Millennials are not able to achieve this upper-middle-class lifestyle. Thus, their frustration arises from the fact that the economic environment has created an unobtainable goal yet still forces them to march forward despite their limited capabilities.

All things considered, the contemporary Koi Culture and Sang Culture are not simply subcultures adopted by young people who are attempting to rebel against societal standards. Instead, they are an embodiment of the problems brought about by the transition period of a rapidly developing and drastically changing Chinese society plagued by identity-struggles, political powerlessness, and an over-idealistic standard of living. Chinese Millennials just happen to be unfortunate enough to be the recipient of these novel challenges. As such, instead of amounting blame to their participation in Koi Culture and Sang Culture, one should first take a long, hard look at the existing social, political, and economic structures that have spawned the creation of such cultures.
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