



Research Article

“I’m One of the Lame Ducks”-A Narrative Inquiry of the Sang Mentality of Elite Chinese University Students in the Crisis of COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has imposed various restrictions and challenges to college students in China, significantly impacting their academic pursuits and daily lives. Particularly, it has had a profound impact on the employment prospects of Chinese college students. This qualitative study employs narrative inquiry to investigate the experiences of 15 college students from reputable universities who exhibit characteristics associated with the *sang* mentality. These participants share stories of academic failures and challenges in their family lives. They refer to themselves as *lame ducks* and identify as predominantly coming from small towns and having an exclusive focus on exam-oriented performance. The study reveals that the *sang* mentality primarily arises from the diminishing status of educational elitism, the increasing tendency towards class stratification in higher education, and the emergence of the Internet-based *sang* youth subculture.

Keywords: *sang* mentality, educational elitism, class anxiety, upward social mobility

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 has had a significant impact on the general public in China, including college students, making it a public health emergency. It has presented numerous challenges and limitations for university students, particularly in terms of graduation, employment, and further education. A survey conducted by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in late March 2020, which included 3,030 Chinese college graduates from 19 universities, revealed that approximately three quarters of graduating seniors had not given serious consideration to job hunting and employment applications. This is in stark contrast to the statistics from late November 2019, where more than three quarters of graduating seniors had received employment notices by the end of March 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a detrimental effect on the employment prospects of college graduates, resulting in hindered recruitment interviews, decreased employment rates, increased employment pressure, and a bleak outlook on economic development (Li, 2020). Furthermore, apart from the practical difficulties, the outbreak of the pandemic has also led to psychological frustrations among college students.

All the participants in this study are students or graduates of prestigious universities in China. Despite being part

of the privileged group of elite universities, they humorously refer to themselves as ‘five’ (a homophonic transliteration of ‘lame ducks’) with self-deprecating humor. They have faced setbacks, frustrations, confusion, and hardships in their academic studies, intimate relationships, further education, and job hunting. The participants have come to realize that elite universities are not invincible. In a satirical manner, the elite universities are depicted as various types of vocational-technical schools. For instance, Tsinghua University is mockingly called Wudaokou Technical School, Nanjing University is referred to as Jiuxianghe Technical School, and Zhejiang University is known as Laoheshan Vocational School. The question arises as to why elite college students engage in self-demeaning behavior. One participant’s comment offers valuable insight: the majority of elite college students facing difficulties come from small towns in China. They experience a significant gap in terms of family background, knowledge resources, academic performance, internship opportunities, intimate relationships, interpersonal communication, and job applications when compared to their peers from metropolitan areas. The challenges faced by elite college students are not sudden or unexpected. An online essay titled *A Brief Autobiography of an Atypical Elite College Graduate* sheds light on the life situations of elite college students struggling with various issues and attracted over 100,000 readers nationwide. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 further exacerbated the collective hardships faced by college students, particularly those from elite universities.

This study attempts to explore the *sang* mentality among elite Chinese college students. *Sang* refers to a negative, suppressed, and despondent state of mind commonly observed among a portion of the young population in modern society (Wang, 2017). This psychological condition is closely related to factors such as stress, setbacks, and social anxiety, and is also influenced by the excessive emphasis of social media on the standards of success and happiness (Liu & Liu, 2020; Zhang & Yang, 2019). This study aims to address the following specific research questions:

- (1) What are the manifestations of the *sang* mentality among elite Chinese college students?
- (2) What are the potential strategies for addressing the *sang* mentality at different levels?

1.2 Literature review

1.2.1 Spiritual values and quality of life

Quality of life has been defined as people’s ‘perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns’ (Robert et al., 2009). It is a function of the persons’ physical health, psychological state, social relationships, and their relationship to their environment. It is also associated with socioeconomic status (Schuessler & Fisher, 1985). The many facets include activities of daily living, dependence on medical aids, mobility, work capacity, physical appearance, self-esteem, personal relationships, financial resources, access to social care, opportunities for acquiring new skills, physical environment, and so forth. The quality of life is closely related to spiritual values (Sawatzky et al., 2005).

1.2.2 College students’ spiritual values and meaning of life

Since the mid-20th century, the issue of the meaning of life has garnered considerable attention in Western academic philosophy. This issue has also made its way into the field of psychology with the publication of Viktor Frankl’s renowned work, “Man’s Search for Meaning” (Frankl, 2006). The college period is a crucial phase in which young individuals search for meaning and establish their values, which will significantly influence their lives both during and after college. In a study investigating the impact of college experiences, Astin (1993) discovered that students often undergo changes in their self-perception, beliefs, and life philosophies throughout their time at college. The period between adolescence and young adulthood is particularly significant in shaping beliefs and values (Parks, 2000). When young adults possess personal values and goals that are meaningful and supported by others, they experience a higher quality of life and encounter fewer depressive symptoms (Salmela-Aro & Nurmi, 1997).

College students’ mental health is often associated with spiritual issues (Hsiao et al., 2010; Johnson & Hayes, 2003; Song & Ye, 2006). These researchers argue that in order to help students manage stress, reduce depressive symptoms, and promote health-enhancing behaviors, educators should develop strategies to address the spiritual well-being of college students (Astin, 2010; Deresiewicz, 2015; Kronman, 2008; Xu, 2017; 2020). Specifically, higher education institutions should acknowledge the importance of the spiritual dimension in students’ lives and take a more active role in shaping values that promote ‘healthy’ behaviors (e.g., Astin, 1993; 2010; Johnson & Hayes, 2003; Parks, 2000;

Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). For instance, Qin Xiuhua from Peking University once observed that some exceptional Chinese college students share a common issue—the lack of clarity and purpose in their otherwise impressive resumes. Interestingly, elite students at top Western universities exhibit similar characteristics to the ‘chosen ones’ at research-oriented universities in China. Despite their high intelligence and academic success, they often experience symptoms of depression such as anxiety, fear, emptiness, and loneliness. They navigate through life like a herd of ‘excellent sheep,’ lacking understanding of life’s purpose and the pursuit of meaning (Deresiewicz, 2015).

The meaning of life is commonly understood as providing individuals with a sense of purpose and value, as well as the significance of their existence (Frankl, 2006; Lin, 2001). More specifically, it refers to an individual’s perception of themselves, the world, and the reciprocal adaptation between them (Steger, 2006). Research on the meaning of life dates back to the 1980s, and it often employs qualitative and quantitative methods to explore the sources of meaning in different groups of individuals (Lin, 2001; Schnell, 2009; Steger, 2006). This study suggests that the *sang* mentality represents a state of mental health wherein individuals lack goals and a clear understanding of life, eventually leading them to abandon the exploration and pursuit of life’s meaning in a state of confusion.

I sought to expand the existing literature to address two significant concerns. Firstly, the majority of studies exploring the meaning of life and spiritual values in China have relied heavily on questionnaires and surveys developed by Western scholars, resulting in a lack of in-depth empirical studies utilizing qualitative methods (Cheng, 2011; Lin, 2001; Zhang, 2015). Secondly, although there has been extensive research on the relationship between personal values and subjective well-being, the Chinese population, especially college students, remain underrepresented in the existing body of academic knowledge. Consequently, in this study, I aimed to test the hypothesis that spiritual values and the meaning of life play a role in shaping the subjective quality of life among Chinese college students.

1.2.3 Mental health and spiritual values of college students in China

Numerous studies have investigated the mental health status of Chinese college students and explored the influence of spiritual values on their well-being. The literature consistently highlights the high prevalence of mental health issues among this population, including stress, anxiety, and depression. It suggests that the academic pressure, competitive environment, and societal expectations contribute to these mental health challenges (Li et al., 2019; Li, 2020).

Research examining the relationship between spiritual values and mental health among college students has gained prominence globally. Studies have shown that individuals with higher levels of spiritual values tend to exhibit better mental health outcomes, including decreased levels of stress, anxiety, and depression (Kim et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2016). However, limited literature specifically focuses on the spiritual values of Chinese college students, necessitating further investigation.

The intersection of mental health and spiritual values among Chinese college students is a relatively unexplored area. Few studies have examined the impact of spirituality on the mental well-being of this population. One study by Yang et al. (2015) explored the relationship between religiosity and mental health, highlighting the potential positive effects of religious practices on mental health outcomes. Chinese culture plays a crucial role in shaping the mental health and spiritual values of college students. Cultural factors, such as collectivism, familial expectations, and academic pressures, influence both mental health issues and spiritual beliefs (Xu et al., 2017). A culturally sensitive approach is necessary to understand the unique experiences and challenges faced by Chinese college students in relation to mental health and spiritual values.

However, the majority of research focuses on specific regions or universities, limiting the generalizability of findings. Moreover, there is a lack of longitudinal studies that could provide a better understanding of the dynamic relationship between mental health and spiritual values over time. To address these gaps, it is crucial to expand the scope of research to include a broader range of Chinese college students from different regions and cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, investigating the role of social support networks, cultural values, and coping strategies in the context of mental health and spiritual values could provide a more comprehensive understanding.

2. Methodology

Narrative inquiry is a research method that involves the exploration and analysis of individual and collective stories

or narratives to understand the lived experiences of individuals or groups. It is commonly used in qualitative studies to provide a deeper understanding of complex social phenomena (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The process of narrative inquiry typically involves collecting and analyzing narratives through interviews, observations, or written documents. Researchers aim to uncover the unique perspectives, meanings, and interpretations that individuals or groups attribute to their experiences. By examining the structure, content, and context of narratives, researchers can identify patterns, themes, and insights that contribute to a richer understanding of the research topic (Riessman, 2008).

Identities are shaped and formed through the narratives individuals create and share about their lives (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). Narrative inquiry serves as a valuable research tool to explore the diverse identities that arise from individuals' sociocultural practices (Barkhuizen et al., 2013). This study aims to investigate the narrative construction of the *sang* mentality among Chinese college students in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, utilizing the three dimensions of the narrative inquiry framework (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). By examining the students' past experiences, present circumstances, and future aspirations, the dimension of 'time' is incorporated to align with the temporal and dynamic nature of identity. The dimension of 'personal and social' is explored to understand how the students' *sang* identities emerged and evolved in relation to their internal perceptions, values, dispositions, and emotions, as well as their external sociocultural interactions within the school and family. Furthermore, the institutional and sociocultural environment of mainland China is taken into consideration to illuminate the dimension of 'context' in shaping their *sang* identity as elite college students in higher education.

2.1 Research context and participants

This study is a part of a larger research project examining the subculture of Chinese college students belonging to the 'z-generation' in mainland China. At the initiation of the project, research invitations were dispatched to outstanding college students in thirty universities across the nation. Considering the extensive duration of the project, involving in-depth interviews and regular documentation of reflections or autobiographies for six months, fifteen students consented to participate in the study. Notably, it is important to highlight that this study does not seek to generalize its findings. As a narrative inquiry, its value lies in the abundance of research data and the comprehensive analysis of the participants' lived experiences (Liu & Xu, 2011). By collecting data from multiple interviews, reflection journals, and autobiographies, the study aims to develop a 'substantive theory' (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) regarding the embodiment of *sang* mentality by elite college students within their institutional and sociocultural contexts. Consequently, this will contribute to our limited understanding of the identity of elite Chinese college students in higher education settings.

In this study, the method of purposive sampling is utilized to ensure a comprehensive representation of participants. Factors such as geographical regions (Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Guangdong, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Chongqing), academic grades (sophomores, juniors, and seniors), and majors (natural/human sciences, engineering, and humanities) are taken into consideration. This approach allows for the collection of a substantial amount of information until reaching a point of saturation, ensuring valid answers to the research questions.

In order to capture a wide range of experiences, it is important to include participants from diverse regions so that researchers can identify patterns, similarities, and differences in narratives, which enriches the analysis. Covering different grades of students is also crucial as it allows researchers to capture the perspectives and experiences of individuals at various educational levels. Besides, including participants of different genders is important as it helps researchers understand how gender influences individuals' narratives and experiences. Lastly, covering different majors is necessary to capture a variety of perspectives and experiences within a specific academic context. Different majors often have distinct characteristics, requirements, and expectations, which can significantly influence individuals' narratives. Overall, the use of purposive sampling in this study ensures the inclusion of diverse participants from various regions, grades, genders, and majors. This comprehensive approach enhances the validity and reliability of the study, enabling researchers to gain a deeper understanding of individuals' experiences and perspectives. Prior to commencing the study, ethical approval was obtained from the university and all participants.

2.2 Data collection

Informed by the three dimensions of the narrative inquiry space, I conducted a comprehensive examination of the narrative experiences of students over a period of six months. This exploration was achieved through a series of

interviews conducted in multiple rounds, reflection journals, autobiographies, and occasional informal interactions.

In order to gather participants' stories at home and school, three rounds of semi-structured hour-long interviews were conducted. The initial interview, which took place at the beginning of the research, aimed to explore participants' educational background and previous schooling experiences. The second interview occurred in the third month of the study, focusing on students' lived experiences and their institutional context, as informed by reflection journals and autobiographies. Specifically, I examined how students adopted a *sang* mentality and the potential conflicts they encountered in universities. The final interview, scheduled at the end of the project, invited all participants to reflect on their ten-year journey of schooling and discuss the changes in their identities, as well as the personal and institutional factors underlying these changes. Throughout all interviews, I actively engaged with students by posing questions, providing responses, and demonstrating my understanding, following the approach outlined by Barkhuizen et al. (2013). When critical events were mentioned, I probed for more details to gain insights into the story's characters, plots, contexts, and the participants' personal feelings and reflections, as recommended by Clandinin and Connelly (2000). I also explicitly requested stories when necessary to explore participants' thoughts, actions, and reactions regarding specific issues related to their *sang* mentality. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for further analysis.

In addition to conducting interviews, I actively engaged in personal communication with the participants by regularly visiting some of them. Through these interactions, they shared significant events, analyzed the factors contributing to their occurrence, and reflected on how to effectively navigate challenges in their academic pursuits. While I made some notes during our conversations, I promptly summarized and expanded upon these observations with more detailed information upon leaving the field. These field notes, comprising the students' narratives and personal reflections, served to corroborate and enhance the interview data, thereby providing deeper insights into their educational experiences.

In narrative research, it is crucial for the researcher to demonstrate self-reflection and transparency regarding their own perspective and positionality throughout the research process (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In the course of this narrative inquiry, I assumed the role of a qualitative researcher engaging in continuous negotiation and construction of meaning with participants. This was achieved by attentively listening to their stories and sharing my own observations and reflections during interviews and field visits. Consequently, not only did I establish a strong rapport with the participants, but I also attained profound insights into their mental framework. Furthermore, the participants acknowledged that my research could assist them in gaining a better understanding of themselves and their academic endeavors. This critical awareness would aid them in navigating the challenges faced as high-achieving college students in higher education. This exemplifies the principle of 'reciprocity' between researchers and participants in qualitative studies (Creswell, 2007).

2.3 Data analysis

All of the collected data underwent narrative analysis to uncover the various forms of representation of students' *sang* mentality. Initially, I meticulously coded the interview transcripts and field notes, paying particular attention to the diverse manifestations of *sang* mentality exhibited by students in their specific school contexts. Consequently, a range of categories were identified. Subsequently, I conducted a thorough re-examination of these mentality categories by reviewing the original data and creating different mini-stories guided by the three dimensions of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), focusing on 'time' (i.e., their past experiences, current situation, and future projections), 'personal and social' (i.e., their values, emotions, and interpersonal relationships), and 'context' (i.e., the institutional and sociocultural settings). Through the continuous process of constructing and reconstructing the mini-stories to align with participants' various forms of *sang* mentality, the narrative's storyline gradually emerged, connecting them into 'story constellations' (Craig, 2007). These story constellations effectively captured the (trans)formation of students' mentality through their involvement in school work and family life. Furthermore, the constructed narratives were shared with the students to encourage their additional comments, thereby validating and enriching the data analysis results of the narrative inquiry.

3. Findings

3.1 *Sang as a negative, suppressed, and despondent state of mind*

The participants exhibited a strong identification with *sang* culture, which can be characterized as a culture of mourning or demotivation. *Sang* essentially refers to a decline in work ethic, a lack of self-motivation, and an apathetic demeanor, reflecting the mindset of individuals who have become indifferent due to relentless competition. In essence, it is a term used to depict the negative aspects of a highly competitive society. Some individuals lower their expectations in order to alleviate stress. By setting unambitious goals, they avoid experiencing feelings of failure. In this regard, the *sang* mentality serves as a means of self-preservation.

The participants expressed a sense of despair and disillusionment. As high-achieving college students, the national college entrance exam was considered a defining moment in their lives. However, once they entered university, their lives seemed to drift aimlessly, and they found themselves lost in the sea of fellow students. The intense competition in universities gradually eroded their once privileged position. Despite having opportunities to make a difference and take charge, they repeatedly chose to disregard these chances, leading them to be trapped in a cycle of self-doubt, internal conflicts, and negative emotions.

Emotionally, individuals struggle to achieve inner peace, experiencing intermittent drops in morale and confidence. They often adopt a pessimistic and suspicious outlook towards themselves, frequently engaging in self-reproach. Consequently, they frequently become entangled in negative emotions such as depression and anxiety. Moments of happiness are fleeting, while feelings of anxiety and anguish can persist for extended periods.

I often find myself feeling out of place among my classmates, like a round peg in a square hole. They engage in conversations about films, TV series, and music that I have never heard of. Our ways of entertainment and concepts of life differ greatly, and as a result, I often feel inferior. The lead teacher, a 40-year-old single woman who has held various jobs, plans to resign in two years and embark on a journey around the world. This environment is a complete departure from the education I received during my first 18 years of life. The emphasis there was on prioritizing happiness, taking bold risks, making independent choices, and remaining loyal to those choices. (003)

The potential danger of books lies in their inherent tendency to adhere to a fixed and linear narrative structure, which deprives readers of the ability to exert any control over the unfolding plot. This passive consumption of information has left me with a sense of powerlessness, as I am unable to influence or alter the circumstances depicted within the literary realm. (008)

In terms of cognition, adolescents possess a limited sense of self-awareness. Unlike in middle school, where high academic achievements could serve as a clear indicator of one's self-worth, this is not the case in university. Within a short period of time, they struggle to develop a diverse and stable self-image, leaving them uncertain about how to embrace their true selves, maintain self-control, and navigate their surroundings. Consequently, they often fall into a pattern of self-defeating thinking, contemplating giving up or surrendering. Under the weight of immense peer pressure, they perceive peer competition as excessively intricate, resulting in physical and mental exhaustion. They find themselves caught between the extremes of 'admiring the winners' and 'admitting defeat.' Nevertheless, when left alone, they find themselves helplessly oscillating between self-expectation and self-exile, unable to uncover the true purpose of life.

I experience a sense of confusion and disorientation, accompanied by worries and doubts. At times, I find myself on the verge of plunging into an abyss of inner turmoil, constantly questioning myself. Prior to entering college, I never had the opportunity to contemplate my own identity and desires. Why do I aspire to attend the most prestigious university? It is because I desire the admiration and high regard of those around me. I long for others to perceive me as an exceptional individual. The sole means of proving myself and establishing a benchmark for my worth is through achieving good grades. (010)

My family perceives me as idle and abnormal, while my friends accuse me of lying and secretly exerting great effort. The external pressures, misunderstandings, and the disparity between my ideals and reality have transformed my sobriety into agony. I believe that individuals can pursue different paths, but whenever I discuss my true desires with others, I feel a sense of inferiority. It seems that no one else shares my aspirations, and what I am striving for is deemed vulgar. (013)

When it comes to behavior, they tend to exhibit introverted and unsociable tendencies. They have a strong inclination towards engaging in irregular daily routines, staying up late into the night, and becoming excessively engrossed in mobile phones and online games. A majority of them experience varying degrees of procrastination. They seek escapism through idolization, indulging in soap operas, and consuming online pulp novels. These activities paralyze them with fleeting and illusory pleasures, ultimately leading to regret for squandering valuable time.

I have recently come to the realization that nothing is truly 'mandatory.' Prior to this, I firmly believed that in order to achieve excellence, one must sacrifice their freedom. The original driving force behind my pursuit of excellence has diminished, yet I find myself lacking the innate inclination towards freedom. Consequently, I am neither exceptional nor content. I can only describe myself as a melancholic individual, akin to a preserved fish. (007)

I have always felt a lack of control in my life. For over 20 years, I have been driven forward by numerous deadlines and unseen pressures. I am constantly propelled forward, unable to stop or even know how to stop. The idea of stopping is terrifying, but continuing on the path I am currently on is equally frightening. (012).

More seriously, some participants have reported experiencing symptoms associated with mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression, bipolar mood disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. In extreme cases, some individuals even contemplated suicide. A majority of the participants acknowledged that their psychological well-being has veered off course to some extent, and they made attempts to rectify it. However, they faced significant challenges in implementing the desired changes. They had to come to terms with their inherent limitations, as they realized that their aspirations were akin to sparrows in the grass while the vast sky was reserved for the flight of eagles.

In difficult times, I often experience overwhelming thoughts of suicide. It feels as if I am a neglected clock hanging on a wall, devoid of purpose. I question my identity and feel like a solitary island adrift in an endless sea, unable to find meaning or motivation in staying alive. (003)

3.2 Sang as manifested in school work

Almost all of the participants in this study are winners of the national college entrance exam, with a significant number of them being champions from local towns and regions. These individuals have excelled in academic pursuits since childhood, growing up amidst constant praise and admiration. Their enrollment in prestigious universities has garnered them immense social approval, as well as envy from their peers. However, their transition to university life has not been as seamless as their high school experience. In fact, elite universities impose higher demands for individual autonomy, which often leads to challenges for these exam winners. Having been closely supervised by parents and teachers throughout their high school years, with a sole focus on achieving excellent grades, they find it difficult to adapt to the more independent and self-driven nature of university education. Qualitative analysis conducted on typical winners of the national entrance exam at Peking University reveals that the cultivation of a test-oriented mindset is largely constrained by the time-limited and somewhat compulsory nature of the goal of passing the college entrance exam. This approach lacks the active anticipation and vision for the post-exam stage and long-term personal development (Ding, 2020).

College brings about a significant shift in one's academic experience. In high school, a structured curriculum with assigned tasks and a focus on grades serves as the sole driving force. Teachers provide pre-packaged assignments and strategies, and success can be achieved by giving it your all. However, the university

environment introduces a new set of rules. Here, students have the autonomy to choose their own courses, and professors do not closely monitor individual progress. Additionally, grades no longer serve as the sole means of evaluation. Consequently, I find myself gradually losing both my ability to engage in meaningful discussions and the recognition of my peers. My father firmly believes that good grades equate to influence, while those with poor academic performance are looked down upon. Over the course of more than two decades, I have internalized the concept of exams and the pursuit of high grades as habitual practices. (014)

The participants' *sang* of school work is evident in three specific aspects.

3.2.1 Misconception of the major

In response to the pressure of the national college entrance exam, parents and teachers often promote the idea that once students are admitted to universities, they can indulge in leisure activities whenever they want. Prior to entering college, many participants only had a vague goal of achieving high scores and gaining admission to prestigious institutions, without a solid understanding of the various college majors. Consequently, they were uncertain when it came to choosing their majors. After a period of studying in college, they discover that not only do they dislike their chosen majors, but they also lack proficiency in them. Consequently, they lose motivation for further learning. Participants have classified certain majors such as biology, chemistry, environmental sciences, and materials, as 'trap/snare majors,' while some less popular majors are referred to as 'flunk majors.' The common characteristic of these majors is their limited employment prospects after graduation, with increased employment opportunities only achievable through continuous educational advancement.

I am dissatisfied with my current major and I feel excluded from the academic community. Furthermore, I recently experienced a heartbreak as my girlfriend decided to end our relationship, leaving me feeling disheartened in matters of love. It seems as though the entire world has turned its back on me. (001)

3.2.2 Poor academic performance and learning outcomes

The former top-performing students now find themselves in a situation where academic rankings are being reshuffled in prestigious universities known for attracting high-achieving individuals. Many of these participants no longer maintain their previous brilliance in academic records and often feel overwhelmed by the accomplishments of their classmates. Some struggle to pass exams, and a few are even contemplating dropping out of school. These poor learning outcomes are closely associated with their underwhelming academic performance. Their approach to learning follows a pattern of procrastination during regular periods and harboring high aspirations only at the end of each semester. Even if their Grade Point Average (GPA) appears satisfactory, their focus on studying is primarily driven by a desire to maintain a good GPA, resulting in a lack of retention of the course material once the semester concludes. Despite their decent grades, their intellectual capacity remains unfulfilled.

I strongly identify with the label of 'small town test-takers.' The term 'small town' refers to the limited economic development and narrow-mindedness, while 'test-taker' highlights the exceptional ability to excel in exams but limited overall skills. This label succinctly summarizes the first 20 years of my life. I began my education at a township primary school at the age of 4, then attended junior high school in the county. Later, I gained admission to a prestigious provincial high school and eventually enrolled in Guanghua Business Management School at Peking University. Through my test-taking abilities, I managed to escape the confines of small-town life. However, I found myself increasingly confused and lost in a larger environment. During my three years at Beida, I completely missed out on the carefree college experience and ultimately made the decision to drop out. (004)

3.2.3 Difficulties in further studies

Upon completing their college education, graduating seniors are often confronted with three options: immediate employment, pursuing postgraduate studies, or studying abroad. In prestigious universities, the prevailing trend is to

continue one's education, while the percentage of graduates opting for direct employment has declined in recent years. Nevertheless, the nationwide rate of guaranteed postgraduate recommendations varies from 5% to 30%. Only students with exceptional academic performance, as reflected by their high GPA, have the opportunity to secure admission to postgraduate programs without taking the entrance exams. Conversely, those who do not meet the criteria face a strong sense of disappointment commonly referred to as *sang*. Consequently, they have no choice but to join the ranks of the postgraduate entrance exam takers during their junior year. For some individuals, this may entail attempting the exam multiple times. Additionally, prospective students applying to study abroad have also encountered significant challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Those who are unsuccessful in both the postgraduate entrance exams and their applications for studying abroad are collectively labeled as 'out of school.' This label is often attributed to their choice of unpopular majors, unsociable personalities, and inadequate qualifications.

When I was selecting my major after the entrance exam, I missed the opportunity to pursue my preferred field of economics by a mere one point. Consequently, admission into the School of Economics for graduate studies became my primary goal throughout the initial three years of college. In order to compensate for this setback, I opted to minor in economics. During the most demanding semester, I was faced with the challenge of completing courses worth 59 credits within a span of three weeks. In the most extreme circumstances, I found myself taking exams continuously for eight hours a day, consuming three boxes of energy drinks, and staying awake all night. However, towards the end of the first semester of my junior year, I suddenly began to question my life plan. I realized that I had no genuine passion for economics and had no desire to pursue a career in this field in the future. It dawned upon me that the goal of becoming a graduate student in economics had merely been an obsession over the past three years. I felt like an overloaded machine, experiencing episodes of nausea, dizziness, and breathlessness during class. My appetite was often nonexistent, and even a small meal would trigger prolonged bouts of retching. Within a single semester, I lost over ten pounds in weight. (005)

Once, I found myself in a situation where I had to submit a perfunctory assignment due to being overwhelmed with an excessive workload. As a result, my teacher severely reprimanded me. From that point on, I started experiencing symptoms of depression, such as involuntary trembling of my hands, restlessness, and sudden bouts of crying. I worry about failing, whether it be flunking a course, failing an exam, or not successfully completing my graduation. These fears even extend to concerns about my own survival. To summarize, I am constantly anxious about everything. My plan is to return home immediately after graduating, before the winter vacation in junior year. After contemplating this plan for a month, I have made the decision to take the graduate entrance exam. I refuse to fall behind and accept defeat. The root cause of my suffering lies in my desire to outperform others and constantly compare myself to them. (015)

3.3 *Sang as manifested in family life*

It is a matter of great pride for parents and families when their children are able to gain admission to a prestigious university. However, as university life unfolds, the true nature of the participants becomes apparent to their parents during critical moments such as further studies, studying abroad, and entering the job market. The contradiction between the participants' true nature and their parents' high expectations becomes a source of pain and suffering. It is difficult for both the participants and their parents to cope with criticism and judgment from relatives and friends, especially when people around them comment, 'What's the point of studying so hard? You still haven't achieved anything ...' or 'You used to be the top scorer, but now ...' The public's criteria for success and excellence differ from those of academic achievements. If high academic performance does not lead to prestigious positions, high salaries, and promising careers, it is considered a societal failure. Such a reality is hard for the participants to accept. They perceive their diploma as a status symbol that their parents can boast about among friends and relatives in their twenties, but it becomes a subject of ridicule if they are still deemed unsuccessful in their thirties.

My parents have a strong desire for their children to succeed due to feeling inferior in their own career development when compared to their peers. They believe that only by surpassing others in raising successful

children can they gain recognition. My father often compares me to other students, pointing out my shortcomings in various aspects. In response, I retort by reminding him of his own classmates who have become company Chief Executive officers (CEOs), general directors, and distinguished scholars, asking him if he feels ashamed for still finding faults with me. Although my father often remains silent, I am aware that I have touched a sensitive nerve. He pushed me towards studying finance as my major, understanding that it offers greater financial prospects and potential social mobility. However, I can never forgive the harm that my family's expectations have caused me. (011)

During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, college students in China were required to undergo home quarantine and consequently had to attend online courses from their homes. This situation forced them to spend several months with their parents, constantly together from morning till night. As a result, their future prospects in terms of further studies, employment, and even studying abroad became uncertain, leaving them feeling like they were in a state of limbo. Unfortunately, this prolonged cohabitation also led to intergenerational conflicts stemming from differences in lifestyle and thinking patterns within the family. The participants perceived a lack of effective communication across generations, which resulted in feelings of suffocation. Their parents were unable to comprehend or empathize with their academic and personal concerns, and instead, the more parents attempted to communicate, the more frustrated the participants became. The incessant nagging and criticism from their parents left the participants feeling desperate to escape from their family environment. While they were hesitant to openly criticize their parents in real life, they resorted to vilifying them online, even going as far as considering their parents as the source of misery in their lives. For instance, they expressed sentiments such as 'My mom is always finding faults with me,' 'My dad is consumed by delusions and constantly gives arbitrary orders,' 'My parents bluntly claim that I am worthless,' 'My parents cannot accept me for who I am,' 'I am merely a tool born to fulfill my parents' expectations,' and 'My parents believe my life is doomed.' These expressions of frustration were a way for them to rebuke their parents and assert their desire to distance themselves, with the ultimate goal of establishing clear boundaries and moving out in the future.

Most of the parents of the participants are average individuals with limited knowledge about the life and employment prospects in major cities, prestigious universities, and the challenges faced by their children. The participants have come to realize that in order to establish themselves in the urban centers in the future, they will heavily rely on their families for support in various aspects such as job hunting, purchasing a house, getting married, or raising children. This reality starkly contrasts with the expectations that both the participants and their parents had when they initially enrolled in esteemed universities. Parental guidance often consists of empty rhetoric and vague encouragement, or even excessive criticism and derogatory comments. The participants have developed a strong dislike towards their parents, while also experiencing a sense of guilt. Despite their parents being traditionally good caretakers, the participants no longer conform to the traditional notion of being good children. To summarize their current life situation:

When I was a child, adults praised me for being quiet and intelligent, as I did not bother them. However, as I grew up, the same adults began to dislike me for being unsociable and unsophisticated. The troubles I had saved during my childhood came back to haunt me in adulthood. (010)

The love from my parents is conditional. I am expected to have ambitions and achieve good grades as a way to repay them. Moreover, my parents desire for me to change the fate of our entire family and demonstrate it to others. I feel overwhelmed by these expectations. (006)

4. Discussion

It is important to acknowledge that narrative inquiry, like any other research methodology, has its own set of limitations that may impact the generalizability and validity of the study's findings. One limitation of this study is the potential for bias and subjectivity. As narrative inquiry involves analyzing and interpreting individual stories and personal experiences, there is a risk of researchers imposing their own interpretations and biases onto the data. Another limitation of this study is the potential for limited generalizability. The uniqueness and specificity of each narrative may make it difficult to draw general conclusions or apply the findings to other settings or individuals. Therefore, it is crucial

to consider the specific context and population under study when interpreting and applying the findings. Additionally, the sample size of this study is relatively small. While this allows for rich and detailed exploration, it may limit the statistical power and generalizability of the findings. Therefore, caution should be exercised when drawing broad conclusions or making generalizations based on a small sample size. This study acknowledges these limitations and addresses them in the research design and analysis, thus enhancing the academic rigor and validity of research. .

The findings of this qualitative study shed light on the *sang* mentality among Chinese elite college students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants in this study, who exhibit characteristics associated with the *sang* mentality, shared stories of academic failures, challenges in their family lives, and a sense of being 'lame ducks.' These experiences have significantly impacted their academic pursuits, daily lives, and employment prospects.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on college students in China has been widely recognized (Li, 2020; Li & Zhang, 2020). The restrictions and challenges imposed by the pandemic have disrupted the usual routines and support systems that college students rely on. This disruption has had a profound effect on their mental health and well-being, as well as their academic performance and future prospects (Li et al., 2019). The participants in this study exemplify the struggles faced by many Chinese college students during this time.

The *sang* mentality observed among the participants primarily arises from a combination of factors. Firstly, the diminishing status of educational elitism plays a significant role. In the past, prestigious universities and top academic performance were seen as the key to a successful future. However, the changing landscape of higher education in China has led to a devaluation of this traditional belief system. With the increasing number of college graduates and the saturation of the job market, the once guaranteed path to success has become increasingly uncertain (Yang et al., 2015).

Secondly, the increasing tendency towards class stratification in higher education contributes to the *sang* mentality among the participants. As students from small towns, they face additional challenges and obstacles in accessing resources and opportunities compared to their urban counterparts. This unequal distribution of educational resources reinforces a sense of marginalization and hopelessness, further exacerbating their despondency (Xue et al., 2017).

Lastly, the emergence of the Internet-based *sang* youth subculture has also played a role in shaping the despondent mentality among the participants. The *sang* culture, characterized by a sense of resignation, cynicism, and disengagement, has gained popularity among Chinese youth in recent years. This subculture provides an outlet for expressing frustration and disillusionment with societal norms and expectations, further reinforcing the participants' despondent mindset (Huang, 2019; Zhou, 2018).

The despondent mentality observed among the participants reflects a broader issue of the challenges faced by Chinese college students in navigating their academic and personal lives (Li et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2018). The implications of these findings for college students' spiritual values, meaning of life, and mental health in China emphasize the importance of prioritizing mental health support and creating an inclusive and supportive environment for college students (Liu et al., 2019). Further research and interventions should focus on addressing these challenges and promoting positive psychological well-being among college students in China.

5. Recommendations

Elite college students play a crucial role in the construction and development of a nation. The *Chinese Dream* offers a practical path for young individuals to achieve the integration and reshaping of their value systems (Zhou, 2018). In the midst of unprecedented global changes, China has emerged as the world's second largest economic power. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has posed significant challenges, highlighting the vital social responsibility of young people and the development of human resources among college students in effectively navigating the complexities of China's present and future social development situation. President Xi Jinping emphasized, during the 100th anniversary convention of the May 4th Movement, the importance of instilling confidence in young individuals when they encounter career-related difficulties. To facilitate the contribution of college students to national construction and promote their personal growth, it becomes imperative to implement multi-level measures aimed at eradicating the elitist mentality prevalent among these individuals.

Effectively addressing the current predicament of college students' despondent mentality is imperative. The underlying cause of this mindset can be attributed to the soaring rates of unemployment amidst the ongoing pandemic. It is crucial for the government to prioritize both epidemic control and economic stimulation through policy interventions.

Consequently, the state has implemented several measures since 2020 to enhance the employment prospects of college students. These measures include the expansion of postgraduate student enrollment, increased allocation of national key projects, proactive exploration of employment opportunities within central and provincial state-owned enterprises, augmentation of vacancies in public institutions, amplification of employment demands in grassroots public services, and the creation of specialized positions to address the needs of heavily affected areas by the epidemic (Liu & Liu, 2020).

In addition, colleges and universities should support students in overcoming challenges from various angles. This can be achieved by enhancing college students' professional skills and employability through the integration of discipline development, student training, and market demands. Moreover, it is essential to guide students in cultivating correct values and fostering a positive social mindset by promoting socialist core values. There should be an increased focus on publicizing mental health knowledge and expanding online mental health services to better cater to the needs of college students. Lastly, institutions should assist students in enhancing their learning abilities, communication skills, self-management capabilities, and career planning skills by promoting humanistic concern, emotional support, and information accessibility (Li & Zhang, 2020).

6. Conclusion

The mindset of elite college students not only reflects the concerns of young individuals regarding their own future amidst the pandemic, but also signifies the increasing pressure of societal restructuring in recent years. In reality, the determined spirit of refusing to accept failure and mediocrity, as well as the inherent drive to strive for excellence, are ingrained within the seemingly pessimistic attitudes of these participants. It is important to acknowledge that young individuals cannot achieve maturity on their own, and success cannot be attained overnight. Being ordinary does not oppose elitism, as even ordinary individuals may possess extraordinary capabilities. During the pandemic crisis, it is crucial for the country, society, educational institutions, and families to exert their utmost efforts in helping college students develop into valuable talents. Simultaneously, college students themselves need to strike a moderate balance between expressing their individuality and adhering to social restrictions with a positive outlook, while recognizing their own self-worth through the pursuit of societal values.

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Conflict of interest

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