

The Chinese Online Youth Subculture of the “Electronic Wooden Fish”

— A “Lying Flat” or A “Self-salvation ?”

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Abstract: With the rapid development of the Internet, many products have undergone digitalization. The electronic wooden fish, for example, represents a virtual rendition of a religious instrument. In contemporary times, many Chinese youths encounter difficulties in coping with the intense competition prevalent in school entrance examinations and job markets. Also, their limited social recognition inhibits them from fully expressing their opinions in reality. Consequently, resorting to the electronic wooden fish serves as an outlet for these individuals. The youth tend to use the Internet as a means to alleviate stress, thereby giving rise to an online subculture among them. This article delves into the causes and effects of knocking on the virtual wooden fish. By collecting data from three social media platforms in China and conducting thorough analysis, it concludes by identifying three motivations behind knocking on the electronic wooden fish: seeking spiritual merits, relaxation purposes, and sharing experiences with others. These incentives can be explained through various aspects such as cultural symbolism within China’s context, serving as a tool for decompression, and contributing to self-identity formation among users. Ultimately, this article argues that embracing the subculture surrounding “Electronic wooden fish” signifies Chinese youths’ pursuit of “self-salvation,” rather than “lying flat.”

Keywords: Chinese youth, Youth subculture, Electronic wooden fish, “Lying flat” culture.

1. Introduction

In the digital age, where technology permeates every facet of life, the emergence of the “electronic wooden fish” has captivated the attention of Chinese youth, creating a new form of online subculture. The “electronic wooden fish” are the digitalized form of the traditional one. Under the high population of Buddhists and Taoists in China, it is a cultural artifact that reflects the anxieties, pressures, and aspirations of youth. After the release of the electronic wooden fish mobile apps, teenagers start to use the applications to release stress and make merits under peers’ recommendations because they believe it implies their “self-salvation”. However, some people are questioning the effectiveness brought by the virtual wooden fish, arguing that the addiction to the “electronic wooden fish” signifies a “lying flat” of youth instead of a “self-salvation.” “Electronic wooden fish” is not the only online youth subculture in China. These digital natives who have grown up during the age of digital

technology tend to use the Internet to express their opinions. Fortunately, society has recognized their efforts. Beijing Daily has shown sympathy towards youth, admitting that the online subculture is the actual reflection of their feelings [1]. Besides, they also wrote a review article commenting on youth burning incense more frequently. China Central Television and Beijing Daily argued that “instead of worrying about youth being superstitious, we should be focused on what they are praying for” [2-3]. Current studies already had various discussions on the electronic wooden fish, focusing on social, humanistic, and psychological aspects. Nevertheless, there is still room for further discussions about this new topic. Thus, this article seeks to uncover the underlying factors and incentives that drive the youth to engage with the electronic wooden fish apps and the psychological and social outcomes associated with their use. To achieve these objectives, the author collects data from Chinese social media and combines both quantitative and qualitative analysis.

2. Literature Review

Subculture is also a culture, but for a smaller group or community in a big organization [4]. Just as the name implies, youth subculture belongs to teenagers. Many teenagers are at the stage of “waithood,” a prolonged period of suspension between childhood and adulthood [5]. Youth transitions to adulthood are uncertain and difficult because they lack experience and wealth. Those marginalized youth who fail to catch up with society feel unsafe under traditional social norms. Thus, youth subcultures are formed to ease their worries [6].

The wooden fish is a traditional Chinese percussion instrument. It has a round and hollow body and is mainly made of wood. When knocked on it, the wooden fish will produce a ringing and ethereal voice. The wooden fish is widely used in Buddhism and Taoism. Having a similar shape as a fish, it symbolizes the fish’s characteristics of always staying awake. It reminds monks and nuns to be diligent and never forget their beliefs. When chanting sutras, the wooden fish is used for maintaining the rhythms and making them stay focused. The “electronic wooden fish” is a virtual and cyberpunk form of the wooden fish. For example, in the “Wooden Fish” mobile app (Figure 1), the wooden fish are designed for different functions, such as knocking for a preset time (Figure 2). The app creates a so-called “online chanting” environment so that people can ask for alms and accumulate merits by tapping on the digital wooden fish virtually. Every time the users tap it, the electronic wooden fish will emit a crisp sound and show the animation “Merit +1.” The “Wooden Fish” app soon gained people’s attention after release. It had surged to the second place on the Apple App Store’s free app download list in China [7].



Figure 1: The “Wooden Fish” app.

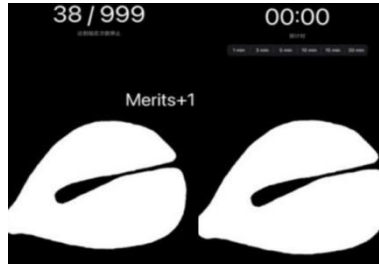


Figure 2: Different functions of the app.

Previous literature already has some discussions about the electronic wooden fish. For example, from the perspective of Semiotics, the virtual wooden fish is an easily accessible and relaxing social currency [8]. Also, Lin and Lu explained the digital wooden fish using disenchantment [9]. However, the current studies on electronic wooden fish are not comprehensive enough. The emotions after knocking are not being discussed. Thus, it is still hard to tell whether using the apps implies the users' hopelessness or endeavor. This article will further elaborate on the issue by analyzing the incentives of youth. The author tried to figure out whether using the electronic wooden fish apps symbolizes a "lying flat" or a "self-salvation."

3. Data Analysis

This article chose three popular Chinese social media platforms for analysis, namely Douyin (the version of TikTok accessible on the Chinese mainland), RED, and Bilibili. The author listed out the top 10 hottest posts on three platforms and conducted an analysis (Table 1). Here, the youth is defined as those teenagers who are studying or just starting to work. The table shows data about the themes, the incentives for using the virtual wooden fish, the emotions after knocking, and so on.

Table 1: Top 10 Trending Posts Under "Electronic Wooden Fish" Topic on Three Platforms.

Apps	User ID	Youth	Likes (K)	Theme	Incentive	Emotion after using the apps
Douyin	1296676090	No	349.1	Health	Make merits	Positive
Douyin	79897441012	Yes	196.9	Career	Relax	Positive
Douyin	xiongzaijuice	Yes	178.5	Health	Relax	Positive
Bilibili	107924873	Unknown	136	Study	Sharing	Positive
Douyin	79945289180	Yes	106.4	Health	Make merits	Positive
RED	943632940	Yes	98	Study	Relax	Positive
Douyin	30648203356	Unknown	69.1	Health	Relax	Positive
Douyin	JY9181	Yes	58.5	Study	Relax	Positive
Douyin	52732370648	Yes	57.9	/	Sharing	Positive
Bilibili	365934790	Yes	47	/	Make merits	Positive

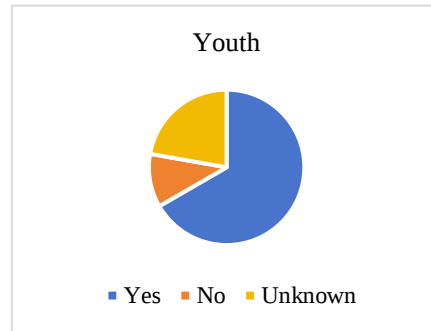


Figure 3: The proportion of youth using the electronic wooden fish apps.

As shown below, the topic “Electronic wooden fish” is mainly related to health, career, and study (Figure 4). As for emotions, all ten users show a positive attitude after knocking on the wooden fish. By summarizing the incentives and rationale behind the posts, there are mainly three kinds of reasons for using the apps: making merits, relaxing, and sharing with others. Moreover, Table 1 and Figure 3 show that youth are the leaders of the topic “Electronic wooden fish,” as they account for six out of ten trending posts on social media.

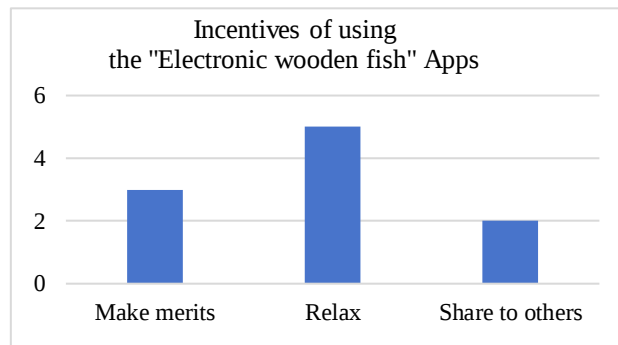


Figure 4: Incentives of using the electronic wooden fish apps.

4. Discussion

“Lying flat” means disheartened and weary of spirit, disengaging from the rat race and showing passive resistance against societal pressures. On the other hand, “self-salvation” in this article is defined as active and energetic, possessing ambition to claim for freedom and rights. The article tries to connect the three incentives listed in Table 1 to three points. It is believed that these three points are useful for arguing whether the “Electronic wooden fish” implies “self-salvation” or not.

4.1. Culture Symbol of China

“Making merits” is linked to the cultural symbol of China. Buddhism and Taoism are the main religions in China, and wooden fish is widely used as their instrument. In Buddhism, the principle of karmic retribution is “Good is rewarded and evil is punished.” Any benevolent and righteous actions by an individual will be rewarded with positive outcomes, and any unethical or malicious actions will end in permanent suffering. Achieving nirvana is the ultimate goal of Buddhists, and the harmful actions stop them from being liberated. To attain moksha, Buddhists should follow Buddhist rituals, as rituals are the instruments of power for coping with religious mechanisms [10]. Buddhism and Taoism share similar tenets. They all believe in karma, which means only accumulating merits can

lead them to a good end. Chanting while knocking on the wooden fish is their ritual for asking for alms and cultivating themselves.

In the case of “electronic wooden fish,” Table 1 shows that app users also have the intention to make merits. The increased workload has deprived the leisure time of many youth. They study and work from dawn till sundown, leaving little room for recess, not to mention chanting in temples all day long. As a result, these stressed Chinese youth thought of a more convenient way. Whenever they feel exhausted, they will provide themselves with a temporary break by using the apps. Many of them in the posts say, “They were recharged and ready for next work.” It shows that knocking on the electronic wooden fish does not mean disengaging from the competition, it is an oasis during their “desert safari,” where they can find “supplies” for the next exploration. Although they tap virtual wooden fish, their beliefs are the same as the prayers, that is, to accumulate merits and pray for a prosperous future. Therefore, we can conclude that youth are using the apps with positive attitudes, intending to achieve a “self-salvation.”

4.2. Decompression Tool

Table 1 shows that most people use the app to relax. The electronic wooden fish is an ego decompression tool, helping them to release stress and regain energy. In Spinoza’s Theological-Political Treatise, he presented the idea that “when men were always in possession of uncertain and stressed conditions and continually struggled with difficulties and evils, they were easily induced to believe anything in the hope of securing some assistance thereby” [11]. In other words, when people are frequently faced with difficulties and uncertainty to gain good fortune, most of them tend to religion and superstition, seeking divine and supernatural solutions. Under misattribution, there are simultaneous different pairings with one product, and each pairing has potential causal relationships with it [12]. Moreover, the Expectancy Theory by Victor Vroom suggests that an individual’s motivation to perform a behavior is determined by their expectations about the outcomes of that behavior and the perceived value of those outcomes [13].

In the case of “electronic wooden fish,” ultimate success can be described as the “product,” and there are many routes that can lead to success, like working harder, longer, and knocking on the wooden fish. Under app users’ expectancy theory, they believe that as long as they keep on knocking, Buddha will reward their “Good,” so that they will lead to the desired “product.” Thus, although their success may come from other routes, these users give themselves a self-talk and deliberately attribute success to electronic wooden fish. It may be the youthful misattribution, but it conforms to their expectancy theory. This kind of attribution can be interpreted as a “self-salvation.” When working harder and longer is no longer a panacea for success in the suffocating competition, youth are finding a way out, looking for ways to prove their self-efficacy. Obviously, knocking on the virtual wooden fish is successful because they feel more relaxed and comfortable, and such relief enables them to regain confidence.

4.3. Self-identity

App users love to share the electronic wooden fish with others, especially the youth. At the stage of self-discovery and self-exploration, these millennials are curious and easily affected by the Internet and their peers. App developers have perfectly responded to the demands of youth. Traditional wooden fish seems old-school for young people, but the electronic one is completely a product for the new age. Besides the simplest version of wooden fish, the apps also contain wooden fish with different shapes and sounds. The users can even DIY the instruments and animations. Hence, the apps are perfectly designed to pander to the teenagers’ tastes and curiosities.

The electronic wooden fish was first used as a tongue-in-cheek product to ease worries. However, youth gradually found that it indeed did a great service to them. To call a spade a spade, kids in China are born to be warriors. In the arena of “Gaokao” and later highly saturated job markets, they always encounter bewilderment, feeling demanding to stand out from others. Moreover, youth are headstrong, reckless, and complacent. They seldom bottle up grievances. On the other hand, society does not treat them as mature adults, from legal rights to voting to political participation. Combining all the factors, their presence in reality is diminished, so youth can only voice out virtually. They gather on the electronic wooden fish apps, competing for the numbers of tapping and releasing pressure.

Self-determination theory has mentioned the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness [14]. When these psychological needs are satisfied, they will increase people’s motivation and happiness. In the apps, youth find peers who are similar to them. Although they are absent from others’ tribulations, they have emotional resonance. Eventually, they mutually build up a cyberspace to resist stress and claim their existence. Therefore, it shows that youth are not submissive to the current situations.

5. Conclusion

The phenomenon of Chinese youth using the “electronic wooden fish” is a multifaceted reflection of their struggles and aspirations. Drawing upon data collected from Chinese social media, the conclusion synthesizes cultural symbolism, decompression tools, and self-identity to explain why Chinese youth choose the virtual wooden fish as their digital sanctuary. The analysis shows that the virtual wooden fish acts as a shot of confidence to youth, providing an avenue to release stress and gain public attention. The conclusion challenges the notion that the “electronic wooden fish” represents a form of “lying flat” culture, suggesting instead that it is a manifestation of “self-salvation.” It comes from the popularity of Buddhism and Taoism in China, showing personally through psychological decompressing and self-identity. The electronic wooden fish reflects the anxiety of youth. At the stage of waithood, their uncertainty about the future, disappointment about their social status, and their pressure all tangle up. As such, under the Chinese religious background, these tech-savvy youth choose the electronic wooden fish as their way out. Whenever they encounter difficulties, they will go to this cyber utopia for temporal relaxation.

However, this oasis of calm is not a panacea. The “electronic wooden fish” stands as a reminder of the need for a more inclusive approach to their mental and spiritual well-being. It is a call to action for all stakeholders to engage in the issues of youth. Instead of letting youth work on self-salvation, the government and citizens should work on “joint salvation” by implementing certain research and practical measures. It is only by having proactive thinking and setting suitable policies that society can salvage the next pillars.

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