

# Cultural Catchphrases, Buzzwords and Lingo That Defined China in 2023

By LIM Tai Wei

**C**ultural catchphrases, buzzwords and lingo encapsulate the spirit of the times. For some, it is a form of social censors that pick up sharp, significant or noticeable social changes in daily activities. They are snapshots of how ordinary Chinese people perceive the changes around them. Buzzwords also carry the effect of influencing behaviour and consumerism. Some of these catchphrases or buzzwords were given official recognition through a laundry list released by the National Language Resources Monitoring and Research Centre, or disseminated through social media video comments and online news reporting.

Therefore, digital technological platforms were highly visible in disseminating and proliferating those buzzwords to the masses in 2023. For example, “**Electric Fish (电子敲木鱼)**” soared in popularity in 2023, evolving from a Buddhist ritual to a digital wooden fish graphics meditative rhythm for stress relief and Zen serenity. Another example, “**electronic pickled vegetables (电子榨菜)**” refers to casual social media app tools like short vid, memes and social media posts whose contents are light-hearted and easily consumable mainly for an entertaining and relaxing experience.

Some of these words have their appeal. “**Xianyanbao (显眼包)**” connotes individuals who are mischievously goofing off to attract attention. Therefore, some consider this social trend as a movement to exert one’s individualism or uniqueness in the interest of social diversity and a celebration of individual opinions; this transforms the buzzword from one with a negative connotation to a positive one. The buzzword came from the popular culture genre of Chinese variety shows and originally referred to over-eager celebs who try to conspicuously differentiate themselves from the crowd to the extent of showing off in a charming, humourous, light-hearted and even clumsy way.

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The accent on individualism is also found in the Chinese fashion world with the buzzwords “**dopamine dressing (多巴安)**”, combining a word associated with a chemical compound needed for mental well-being and physical health, with outlandish dressing to leave an impression on others. Other than dopamine dressing, there are also hipster buzzwords like “**Thai pants are spicy (泰裤辣)**”, a homophone for “very cool (太酷了)” that was accidentally created by Chinese rapper Wang Linkai at a Shenzhen music festival when he mispronounced the latter phrase with a pronunciation that resembles the former phrase.

Sometimes, buzzwords are created for specific sports trends like the “**Village BA (村 BA)**” or “**Village Basketball Association**” which refers to a countryside suburban basketball competition from a Guizhou county in south-western China that turned into a national phenomenon in summer 2023. The basketball game helped to promote healthy lifestyle and exercising to members of the public. In the service economy, there are buzzwords related to the local economies as well. Domestic tourism rebound in China is due partly to university-age students engaging in “**commando-style tourism (特种兵式旅游)**” which involves touring many local attractions and partaking in the consumption of culinary cuisines while minimising costs and time by making shorter domestic trips rather than venturing overseas.

After the pandemic, an emerging form of tourism was “**special forces travel (also 特种兵式旅游)**” (a variant of “commando-style tourism”) which veers away from entertainment and leisurely pursuits and heads towards travel adventures that pushed the physical body and mental resilience to the limit, much like special operations in army training. These travel experiences are designed to be a test for survival, located in arduous natural terrains to steel one’s own character, and highly experiential in nature. The Chinese term “**daka (打卡)**” which means “punching the card” denigrates and makes fun of regular tourists who follow tour groups to touristy areas.

In the social context, the Chinese word “**zhen (振)**” or “self-inspire” was picked as the Character of the Year 2023 in China at an activity jointly organised by the National Language Resources Monitoring and Research Centre, Commercial Press and Xinhuanet. “Zhen” refers to an individual who is genuine to his/her ideals and perseveres when confronted with difficulties and feels the joy in doing so, especially when there are positive outcomes from the struggles. Therefore, some argue that buzzwords can also connote strongly held desires for a more fruitful life.

In the economic arena, like most of the post-pandemic world, China has to confront multiple geopolitical disruptions in a poly-crisis world while recovering from the pandemic. These uncertainties have created challenges particularly for young people in the job-seeking age who are already overworked or unemployed. The overworked group put in many hours of ‘**invisible overtime (隐形加班)**’ work in China as the work was done without compensation.

Those who were unemployed or were burnt out became “**full-time children (全职儿女)**”, basically performing household chores for their parents in return for fully paid daily expenses, enjoying the comfort of parental accommodations and/or monthly stipends. However, those who enjoy such lifestyles have been critiqued as becoming a “**parasite (寄生虫)**”, somewhat analogous to the term ‘parasitic singles’, a Japanese phrase to describe youngsters who stay single and live with their parents for an extended period of time. In China, they are part of what is known as the ‘**elderly gnawing tribe or adults reliant on parents (啃老族)**’.

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The unemployed includes the newly graduated and a demographic group under the age of 35. Before the cessation of official data publishing, more than 20% of youngsters (aged 16 to 24) were jobless, thus affecting youth employment rates which last stood at 21.3%. Those under the age of 35 who had difficulties locating jobs were nicknamed the “**curse of 35 (35岁的诅咒)**”, the age often regarded as a threshold for employment. Companies show a preference for employing those under the age of 35 as they are deemed more affordable human resources due to their lower starting pay.

Besides ageism, there were others who fell victim to pandemic-era economic challenges. These are graduates nicknamed as the “**blank paper** (“白纸”毕业生)” batch who could not accumulate work or internship experiences due to the few years of pandemic lockdown and/or isolation. Of these youths, some simply gave up working hard and became part of the “**tang ping (躺平)**” or “**lying flat**” movement. They were fresh graduates who took unconventional poses in graduation gowns with some shading their faces with mortarboards or discarding their graduation certs.

Some youngsters even felt a sense of ‘**involution (内卷)**’ where they feel that they are racing for the bottommost spot in the hyper-competitive environment. While the phrase first appeared a few years ago, it was derived from the field of anthropology and had only become more visible in 2023. It is also a critique of work pressures, a denigration of individuals who work too hard and suffering from exhaustion and tiredness from competition to the point of low marginal returns and inertia. In response, Chinese leader Xi Jinping had urged youngsters on *People's Daily* in May 2023 to “**eat bitterness (吃苦)**” and endure hardship to build character.

Based on youth demographics, Gen Z appears to embody the phenomenon of **Guangxiang qingnian (光想青年)**” which is sometimes translated as “dreamers’ generation” or “youths who are just thinking”. It is also used to connote Chinese Gen Zers who are full of dreams, creative ideas and aspirations but cannot translate them into actions. Contemporary challenges and demanding modern lifestyles make it difficult for them to actualise their dreams, especially in a hyper-competitive environment. This causes them to enter a stage of defeatist inertia.

Some online streamers and hipsters have turned defeatism into a more humorous term: “**Barbie Q (芭比 Q)**” which means “It’s over”. It is conceptualised as a playful and quirky term taken from an exclamation of frustration by a popular Chinese e-sports streamer’s defeat in a game: “It’s over, Barbie Q!” Many define it as a humorous slang for defeat, misery or despair, which has gained traction as a hipster term amongst TikTok gamers, netizens and bloggers that denigrated themselves in a playful manner.

Chinese state media outlets like *Economic Daily* and *China Youth Daily* used the terminology “**slow employment (慢就业)**” to classify individuals who proactively chose slow employment by taking a relaxed pace to find jobs, going on travels, continuing with further studies, enjoying a gap year, picking up new skills, embarking on a sabbatical or taking up teaching gigs.

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