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## 'Face' and psychological processes of laid-off workers in transitional China

Bingxin Wang<sup>1</sup>, Kenneth Mark Greenwood<sup>2,3</sup>

### Abstract

**Objective:** The objective was to explore the psychological experiences of laid-off workers in contemporary transitional China and to formulate a theoretical model of these.

**Methods:** In-depth interviews of 26 laid-off workers were conducted and analysed using grounded theory techniques.

**Results:** Four themes underline the psychological processes of these laid-off workers – feeling of loss, feeling of physical pain, feeling of fatalism, and final acceptance. These are characterized by Chinese culture and its philosophy – feeling of loss is dominated by their loss of face (*diu mianzi*), physical pain is a somatization of their mental painfulness, their fatalism is traced back to the Chinese ancient theocratic concept of *Tian Ming*, and their acceptance of reality to their final making face (*zheng mianzi*) is sourced from both Confucianism and Daoism.

**Conclusion:** The psychological experience of laid-off workers (or unemployed workers) is likely to have varied manifestations in different cultural contexts. The psychological processes of Chinese laid-off workers (or unemployed workers) might be different from those of laid-off workers in Western countries. A therapeutic intervention to cater for the needs of laid-off workers derived from the four themes might be effective.

**Keywords:** laid-off workers; unemployed workers; state-owned enterprises; psychological process; China

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### Introduction

China's economy has achieved remarkable progress in the more than 30 years since economic reform started in 1978. However, the economic reform process, particularly the restructuring of state-owned enterprises (SOEs), inevitably marginalized state workers once the leading class known as the 'masters of socialist China' were laid off and dropped from the top class to the bottom of China's new social class [1]. As a consequence of *xiagang* ('layoff') and breaking their 'iron rice-bowl,' they became

the lowest social class, the 10th class in China, according to Lu's new categorization of social class into 10 groups [2]. 'Laid-off workers' are unemployed workers with a distinct Chinese characteristic; they lost their jobs, but kept a legal link with their enterprises [1]. According to the Chinese Ministry of Labor and Social Security [3], the term 'laid-off workers' refers to those permanent workers (not including those temporary contract workers recruited from rural areas) who have been laid off from their working posts



because of the production and managerial imperatives of the SOEs but whose labor contracts with the enterprises have not been terminated and who have not found another job yet. 'Laid off,' in this context, does not, technically, mean 'sacked' [4]. In China the *xiagang* problem became a national crisis. Lei [5] pointed out that 25.5 million workers were laid off from SOEs between 1997 and 2003 [6, 7]. The *xiagang* issue brought not only financial problems but also psychological problems for laid-off workers.

An understanding of the psychological impact of layoff and unemployment on individuals is critical not only for understanding laid-off workers' mentality and their needs, but more importantly it has significant implications for understanding the psychological experience of the current unemployed population in China and in the construction of fruitful, support programs. Chinese researchers did look, in the 1990s, at the problem of unemployed workers and their psychological experiences [8–11]. However, only a few researchers have explored the psychological processes the laid-off workers experienced.

This article explores the psychological processes Chinese laid-off workers experienced during China's contemporary, transitional, economic reform through a close and thorough study of their psychological transitional cycle. Using grounded theory, we formulated one primary question: What were the psychological processes experienced by the laid-off workers?

## Literature review

### *Psychological impact of unemployment in the Western world*

In the Western world, there is a wealth of literature revealing the psychological impact of unemployment. The literature indicates that the unemployed are likely to suffer from anxiety, depression, somatization, hostility, paranoia, loss of confidence, reduction in self-esteem, poor cognitive performance, loss of motivation, learned helplessness, low happiness, suicidal ideation, low levels of coping, and behavioral problems [12–15]. For instance, Seligman and Maier [12] believe that unemployment leaves an individual with a feeling of helplessness. This feeling of helplessness reduces the individual's motivation to initiate voluntary responses likely to control or reverse the undesirable outcome.

A number of models [16–20] of the psychological transition cycle of people who have become unemployed have been developed to explain the negative consequences of unemployment. The most influential description of the stages people go through following unemployment is usually attributed to Eisenberg and Lazarsfeld [16]. Their model has been described as the 'three-stages model.' The first stage is shock, the second is distress, and the third is fatalism. In the first stage, the unemployed person is shocked by his or her unemployment. This is generally followed by an active hunt for a job, during which the individual is still optimistic, rather than resigned; the person still maintains an unbroken attitude. When all efforts have failed, the second stage arrives. During this stage, the individual becomes pessimistic and anxious, and suffers active distress. This is the most crucial stage of the three, the transition or intermediate stage. It is commonly followed by the third stage, in which the individual becomes fatalistic and adapts himself or herself to his or her new state. The person now has what Eisenberg and Lazarsfeld [16] described in the 1930s as "a broken attitude."

In the 1940s, Selye [17] included three phases in his model of human stress, which he called the "general adaptation syndrome." The three phases were alarm, resistance, and exhaustion. He also specified each phase physiologically. The alarm phase involved adrenal enlargement, the resistance phase involved thymicolymphatic shrinkage, and the exhaustion phase involved gastrointestinal disease.

In the 1960s, Fink [18] presented his sequential theoretical model. He divided the experience of the unemployed into four sequential phases: (1) shock, the period of initial psychological impact; (2) defensive retreat, the period during which the individual defends himself or herself against the implications of the crisis; (3) acknowledgment, the period when the individual faces the realities of the crisis; and (4) adaptation, the period during which the individual actively copes with the situation in a constructive manner.

In the 1970s, Jahoda [19] elaborated the psychological experience of the unemployed as involving an immediate shock effect in the initial phase, followed by a period of constructive adaptation in which the unemployed person would actively look for job opportunities (some people even enjoyed their free time), ending in despair and apathy attributed to the failure of all his or her efforts.



In the 1980s, Hayes and Nutman [20] described the psychological transition of the unemployed as consisting of three stages, which included four phases. The first stage contains the initial phase of shock and immobilization, and the phase of renewed hope, optimism, and minimization. The second stage involves a mixture of long-term optimism, identity crisis accompanied by depression, and withdrawal. The third stage is described as ‘readjustment.’

The most recent research to test the states of mind of laid-off workers was done by Benton [21]. He studied 139 laid-off workers and found that the laid-off workers provided “‘shock and anger’ as the leading emotional descriptors, adding ‘a sense of betrayal’ as the third leading descriptor of their thoughts” [21].

Even though the models described above, which include stages, phases, and processes to describe the psychological consequences of the unemployed, have some similarities, they also differ to some extent. The staged nature of the models has been criticized by some Western researchers [22], whereas others argue that some form of a staged account best describes the impact of unemployment [23].

Given the lack of consistency, there is, therefore, a need for further exploration. Moreover, most of this work has been conducted in Western countries and may not be relevant in an Asian country, such as China.

### *Psychological impact of layoffs in China*

The psychological impacts of layoffs were first described in the 1990s in China by researchers such as Zhang [8], Chen et al. [9], Li and Zhang [10], Guo [24], Xu et al. [25], Mok et al. [26], Wu [11], and Wang and Greenwood [4].

Zhang [8] describes the mentality of laid-off workers as involving a lack of self-confidence, distress, and a tendency to despair. These characteristics have a lot in common with stages 2 and 3 of the Eisenberg–Lazarsfeld model. On the basis of a psychological survey in Beijing SOEs, he asserted that laid-off workers lack self-confidence in the initial period of their layoff, which gives way to a period of distress, before finally resulting in a state of despair. Li and Zhang [10] stated that “loss of identity, belonging and feeling lonely, helpless and insecure in their community are the symptoms of psychological problems of the laid-off workers in China.” They noted that

the feeling of helplessness is very detrimental as it undermines the motivation of laid-off workers to search for employment and reduces their motivation to acquire new skills for reemployment. Mok et al. [26] added that older laid-off workers feel a very strong sense of betrayal by the Chinese Communist Party.

Xu et al. [25] studied suicidal ideation and its related risk factors in laid-off workers in Changsha, China. Using cluster sampling, they surveyed 675 laid-off workers from six factories. They found that 23.4% of laid-off workers reported having had thoughts of suicide, 4.6% had actually planned to commit suicide or thought of an exact method for doing so, and 2.8% had actively attempted suicide after being laid off. As to the factors related to laid-off workers’ attitudes to suicide, the researchers stated that psychological deterioration, traumatic loss of income, little social support, and low educational attainment were the main factors correlated with tendencies to consider or actually attempt suicide.

Guo [24] divided laid-off workers into three types on the basis of his research: the lost type, the complaining type, and the positive type. Here the ‘lost type’ refers to those laid-off workers with dramatically decreased income after being laid off, who felt ‘lost’ because they had lost their self-confidence with the loss of their job and income and were scared of being looked down on by others. The ‘complaining type’ refers to those with the mindset that they had been treated unfairly by their work unit, who complained about their work unit leaders, blaming those leaders as being responsible for the destruction of their company and their good life. The ‘positive type’ refers to those with a positive attitude toward being laid off, who were actively looking for job opportunities. Guo failed to go further to explore the relationship and transition among the three types. Such stereotyping of people may be misleading, as it seems possible that individuals may move between the three types over time.

Wu [11] articulated the psychological experience of laid-off Chinese workers as involving three stages: the initial stage, an acceptance stage, and a looking for job stage. The initial stage was characterized by the laid-off workers’ feeling of losing face (*diu lian*), low self-esteem, self-pity, and loss of security. He failed to describe the characteristics of the acceptance stage, mentioning only that the workers realized that they had to accept the cruel reality of survival that faced them. Nor did



he provide the characteristics of the third stage. He assumed that laid-off workers would look for jobs after they have accepted reality. Therefore, he did not provide any evidence for his articulation of his three-stage model. Even though he described losing face (*diu lian*) as one of the feelings the workers initially experienced after being laid off, he did not elaborate on the reasons underlying their experience.

The China Labor Consulting Network [27] also stated that losing face (*diu lian*) was one of the psychological experiences of Chinese laid-off workers. The authors of this article have concluded that losing face (*diu lian*) might be a unique psychological experience of Chinese laid-off workers, because no literature in the West has documented losing face as one of the psychological experiences of the unemployed. The research of Wang and Greenwood [4] also indicated that economic poverty of laid-off workers would cause them psychological stress. The research also proved that losing face (*diu lian*) might be a unique psychological experience of Chinese laid-off workers, through their exploration of psychological response, which contained positive and negative sides, to layoff in contemporary China. However, they did not elaborate the point in detail. This will be one of the major questions the current research will investigate.

### Theoretical perspective on 'face'

The concept of face is fundamentally important for understanding social interaction in Chinese society [28, 29]. For the Chinese, the influence of face is so salient that it is an integral part of their social network and social milieu at large. Wilhelm [30] was the first author to trace the cultural origin of the Chinese concept of face in the Western world. He found that Confucianism taught Chinese people to strive for two types of character – namely, working to maintain face or face loving (*ai mianzi*) and striving to accept one's fate or having no way (*mei fazhi*). 'Face' is an individual's public image obtained through self-evaluation in a given social situation [31]. As it is an individual's self-identification in the given social situation, it also refers to a person's self-identity, as well as social identity [32]. From the social psychology perspective, 'face' is defined as an individual's situated identity, or identity in a particular social situation. However, Earley [32] defined 'face' as the evaluation of self based on internal and external (to the individual) judgments concerning a person's adherence to morals of conduct

and position within a given social structure. Thus, face is not simply a product of self-perceptions, or a result of external evaluators' perceptions alone [33]. It is a combination of both.

In Chinese culture, 'face' can refer to two related concepts: *lian* and *mianzi*. According to Hu [34], the internalized standards of society concerning moral conduct are referred to as *lian*, and the status and prestige a person holds is *mianzi*. 'Face' can also be defined as an individual's contingent self-esteem [35]. It can be lost, maintained, or increased. 'Face' can be divided into moral face and social face. 'Moral face' refers to the social evaluation of an individual's moral character; it is the fundamental integrity of an individual's personality. 'Social face' refers to an individual's status in the eyes of themselves and others, achieved by one's talent, ability, hard work, and family relationships [36]. It is a reflection of an individual's struggle for self-definition and positioning relative to others in society. It is an integral part of the daily activity and official functions of the Chinese people [37].

Although Chinese concepts of 'face' have been explored by both Western and Chinese researchers from the perspective of Chinese culture, and loss of face has been mentioned by a few Chinese researchers while elaborating Chinese laid-off workers' psychological experience, little research has been done to explore how the psychological transition cycle of Chinese laid-off workers is influenced by their concept of face. In this article we endeavor to achieve this goal.

### Methods

To explore the psychological processes of laid-off workers in contemporary China, a grounded-theory-based method was used. This qualitative research approach is characterized by its explorative nature. It is used to understand lived experiences and search for answers to questions rather than to test a hypothesis against a particular sample [38]. The procedure of grounded-theory-based analysis includes the construction of analytic codes, the construction of categories from data, and the development of theory [39–41]. The constant comparison method was used during the analysis, involving memo writing to elaborate categories and define the relationships between these categories [39].

This inductive approach provides the researcher with an appropriate tool to explore participants' experiences of the



phenomenon and the meanings attributed to these experiences, helping the researcher to construct a conceptual framework [40]. The conceptual framework, or theory, is closely connected to the reality of the individual being studied [41]. Therefore, we used this method to achieve the desired outcome of understanding the lived psychological experiences of laid-off workers in China.

### *City and participants*

To focus this research on a manageable case study, a mid-sized city close to Beijing in northern China was chosen. It is a military and heavy industrial city and, therefore, was markedly influenced by China's reform of SOEs. According to the City Bureau of Labor and Social Security [42], in 2002 the total number of workers in the labor force (including those employed by SOEs and collectively owned enterprises) in the metropolitan city was 370,000. The total number of laid-off workers was 77,103, among which the registered number of workers laid off by SOEs was 54,960, whereas those laid off from collectively owned enterprises numbered 22,143. Thus, according to the official statistics [42], 20.83% of the total number of workers had been laid off. The actual percentage could be much higher. Because of the collapse of collectively owned enterprises and the layoff of a large numbers of workers, the average income of the urban citizens was lower, and the economy of the city was relatively worse.

Twenty-six (13 female and 13 male) laid-off workers were recruited and interviewed. These interviewees were carefully selected to ensure a reasonable cross section of laid-off workers. For example, their ages ranged from 25 to 55 years, and the ratio between men and women was 1:1. Another inclusion criterion was to find people who were capable of providing rich information. For the purpose of getting information-rich people to be interviewees, we adopted the methods of purposeful, snowball, or chain sampling. By using these methods, we gradually built up our social connections with the information-rich laid-off workers.

### *Procedure*

Participants were briefed on their rights in the study in detail. Their participation in the study was voluntary. They had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. To obtain the true psychological experience of laid-off workers, an open-ended

question was developed: What were the psychological processes experienced by the laid-off workers? Each interview began with the open question: "Could you tell me the psychological processes experienced by you after you were laid off? In other words, how would you describe your own experience of your psychological journey after layoff?" Then the laid-off workers were invited to "describe their own experience of the psychological processes." We always remained flexible and receptive to participants' emergent responses [43].

The interviews were undertaken either at the home of one of the authors (Bingxin Wang; at the time of data collection, she was a PhD candidate) of this article or at the workplace of the interviewees. Every time, before we met our interviewees, we telephoned them first to discuss with them the interview venue and the time which was suitable for them. If they were willing to come to the home of first author of this article, we prepared tea, soft drinks, and small snacks for them to make the interview environment more comfortable for them. If they invited us to their homes, we were always willing to go.

The duration of the interviews ranged from 2 to 4 hours depending on the availability of the interviewees and their interest in providing relevant information, and the frequency and duration of the interruptions that occurred during the interviews.

With the consent of the interviewees, we recorded the interviews for later transcription. One of the authors also took notes during the interview to record things that could not be recorded – for example, the facial expressions of the interviewees. To encourage the interviewees to speak their minds, we translated the interview questions into the local dialect. The interviewees realized that we were not strangers, but were people who could speak their language.

Not all of the interviewees agreed to have their interview recorded. They were anxious about the possibility that their recorded remarks might be heard by someone else. To respect the rights of the interviewees and make them feel comfortable, in these circumstances one of the authors took notes. We use pseudonyms in this article to protect the privacy of the interviewees. The transcripts were translated by a qualified translator. All the transcripts, including quotations, were checked by an independent auditor using the method of back-translation.





### Data coding and analysis

During the thematic analysis, the two researchers independently coded transcripts translated into English (or notes taken during the interview) independently. We formed categories using the constant-comparative technique and expanded and revised them accordingly [39–41]. The two sets of results were compared to increase reliability, and a final set of themes that both researchers agreed on was used in the analysis.

## Results

### Thematic analysis

The interview data were processed by means of the construction of themes to help gain insight into the interview data. The following four main themes, summarized in Table 1, emerged after the 26 laid-off workers had been interviewed.

Nearly all of the interviewees said that their first response to being laid off involved losing face (*diu mainzi*). Accompanying loss of face, a series of psychological feelings of loss were experienced by them. The interviewees said that being laid off made them lose face and they felt shameful and unable even to confront their families, friends, and neighbors. Their prestigious position as ‘the masters of the country’ was lost in their own eyes, and, they believed, in the eyes of their friends and neighbors and family members. The strong feeling of losing face extended from themselves to their children. They enclosed themselves in their own world of distress, without much communication with the outside world. For example:

*I felt I had no face to meet my families, friends, neighbors after being laid off. As our Chinese often said “people live for their faces, and trees live for their bark.” I was a face loving person. After being laid off, I felt I have lost my face. I felt I was shameful and inferior to my friends. Therefore, I tried to avoid seeing them. I did not want to meet people and talk with them as I lost my face with losing my job. I trapped myself at home and the only thing that I did was smoking ... smoking ... smoking, and I tried to smoke all my anger and distress out of my heart .... What made me very shameful was that my daughter felt she lost face in front of her classmates due to my layoff. (Li Ming, 48 years old, male, married; p. 1, para. 1)*

Another interviewee expressed:

*As you know I worked in the SOE for 25 years, like all the workers in China, I enjoyed the high social position of ‘master of socialist society.’ I took the SOE as my home and I worked very hard, so all these years I held the award of ‘Excellent Worker,’ which means that my performance was very good. However, I was laid off like so many other SOE workers. All my past glory became as nothing. I felt that I had been destroyed by the layoff. My face has been totally taken away. (Zhang Hui, 50 years old, female, widow; p. 3, para. 1)*

A second theme related to feelings of physical pain. Most interviewees said that they could not sleep at night after being laid off, they felt pain in the heart, *xin fan*, or pain in the head, *tou tong*, or stomach ache, *wei tong*, or back pain, *bei tong*. For example:

*I could not sleep at night after being laid off. At night I could not help thinking how I would feed my family without an income from my work unit. I have a daughter to support to go to school and an old mother to look after. I started to worry about the basic living conditions of the family. I said to myself “I could go hungry but I would not let my daughter and my mother go hungry.” My mind was trapped into the miserable thought the whole night. I felt my heart was vexed and painful, my head was painful, my stomach as painful, my back was painful, and my whole body was painful. I had to get up from bed at night. I started to smoke. As you know, cigarettes are not medicine and have no power to cure the painfulness which I suffered. Too much smoke made my chest terribly painful. (Li Ming, 48 years old, male, married; p. 1, para. 1)*

The third theme to emerge was a sense of fatalism and losing hope for the future. Nearly half of the interviewees stated that they were very disappointed with their being laid off. They felt that their future was hopeless because they were born at the wrong time and bad luck had followed them since the time when they were born. Even though they put a lot of effort into job hunting, they could not find a job. They started to feel helpless and pessimistic. Some of them even had thoughts of committing suicide. For example:



Table 1. Summary of the main themes

Category	Category
Feeling of loss (starting from losing face)	Loss of face, <i>diu lian</i> (or <i>mianzi</i> ) (feeling of being inferior to others, loss of social circle, friends, and even family members)
	Loss of self-esteem, self-confidence, and morale, <i>shiqu zixin, zizun, he douzhi</i> (feeling tired and having no energy to do any work)
	Loss of sense of identity, <i>shiqu guishu gan</i> (feeling of belonging nowhere in society);
	Loss of pleasure in activities, including hobbies, and interest in life ( <i>shiqu shenhua lequ</i> )
	Loss of health, including loss of energy, sleep at night, and appetite for food ( <i>shiqu jiankang, baokuo fali, shimian, he shiyu</i> )
	Loss of patience, calmness, and good temperament ( <i>shiqu pinghe, naixin, haopiqi</i> ) (feeling worried, angry, and resentful, but having no appropriate person and place to direct anger toward. Destruction of family relationships, effects on the next generation)
	Loss of trust, <i>shiqu xinren</i> (feelings of betrayal, no one can be trusted)
	Loss of sense of security ( <i>shiqu anquan gan</i> ) (feeling scared of the future)
	Loss of common sense of value ( <i>shiqu jiben jiazhi gan</i> ) (feeling the social value built in Mao's era has been destroyed)
Feeling of physical pain (Chinese laid-off workers use somatic symptoms to express their depressed and distressful feelings)	Pain in the heart ( <i>xin fan</i> )
	Pain in the head ( <i>tou tong</i> )
	Pain in the chest ( <i>xiong men</i> )
	Stomach ache ( <i>wei tong</i> )
	Back pain ( <i>bei tong</i> )
Fatalistic feelings	Hopelessness ( <i>mei xiwang</i> ) (feeling pessimistic)
	Bad luck ( <i>dao mei</i> ) (feeling there is no fairness in the world)
	Helplessness ( <i>wu zhu</i> ) (feeling no one is able to or willing to help)
Feeling of acceptance (ending by making face)	Suicidal ideation ( <i>zisha yinian</i> ) (feeling death might be able to end the adversity)
	Acceptance of the harsh reality brought about by layoff, such as financial difficulties, health problems, psychological problems
	Acceptance of the responsibility to the family, such as responsibility to parents, responsibility to children
	Making face, <i>zheng lian</i> (or <i>mianzi</i> )
	Restoration of self-esteem, self-confidence, and morale
	Restoration of sense of identity
	Restoration of happiness and restoration of interest in life
	Restoration of health
	Restoration of common sense of value
Restoration of trust	
Restoration of sense of security	

*I tried various ways to look for jobs without any success. I feel that nobody wants me. I guess other people might think I am lazy. However, the reality was that at*

*my age, over forty, it's very hard to get a job. Now I've lost interest in looking for jobs. The longer I am off work, the worse it gets, it eats into me. I become helpless in*





*the situation. I feel my life hopeless (mei xiwang). To be honest, once I had the idea to commit suicide. (Zhang Hui, 50 years old, female, widow; p. 3, para. 1)*

A theme to emerge for some, but not all, interviewees was acceptance and adaptation. After experiencing the harsh reality of financial difficulty and health problems caused by lay-off, nearly all of the interviewees expressed their bitterness. However, facing the responsibility for their families, in particular the responsibility for their children and parents, some of the interviewees stated that they had to accept the harsh reality. For example:

*Facing the harsh reality of no income and having a family to support, I needed to calm down to face this. Finally I found that the only way that I could make myself calm down was to persuade myself to accept my being laid off as my own fate. Indeed, my fate is not good. I was born in the time of China's famine and my parents had not got enough food to feed me, so you can see that I am not very healthy which is partly due to lacking of nutritious food when I was a baby. When I came to my school age, China's Cultural Revolution took place, I was sent to the countryside to learn from peasants instead of studying at school, so I had not received much education. When I came to my middle-age, China's economic reform started and I was laid off. Look, how miserable my life was! However, I had no other choice except finding my own way to make some money to support my family. I would like to make face for myself and my family among my friends and colleagues. (Li Ming, 48 years old, male, married; p. 1, para. 1)*

These themes were reported by the interviewees to occur in a staged fashion – that is, loss of face was their first psychological response, followed by feelings of physical pain, followed by a sense of hopelessness. Some of the interviewees reported these stages being followed by a stage of acceptance and adaptation. On the basis of the themes, a final theoretical model was developed showing the cycle of psychological responses after workers have been laid off.

The theoretical model is used to better conceptualize the psychological processes experienced by Chinese laid-off

workers (Fig. 1). As illustrated in Fig. 1, we discovered and defined four psychological processes experienced by Chinese laid-off workers. Firstly, the laid-off workers experienced the psychological process of feeling of loss dominated by the psychological feeling of loss of face, which was accompanied by a series of feelings of loss, including loss of self-esteem, loss of identity, loss of pleasure, loss of health, loss of patience, loss of trust, loss of security, and loss of value. The second psychological process they underwent was feeling of physical pain, which has been somatized by the laid-off workers as pain in the heart, pain in the head, stomach ache, and back pain. The third process they endured was fatalism, which was specified by them as hopelessness, suicidal ideation, bad luck, and helplessness. Finally, they (or some at least of them) went through the process of acceptance and adaptation, dominated by the psychological feeling of making face, which includes restoration of self-esteem, restoration of identity, restoration of pleasure, restoration of health, restoration of trust, and restoration of value.

## Discussion

The aim of this work was to explore the psychological processes Chinese laid-off workers experienced during China's contemporary economic reform. Twenty-six laid-off workers provided data, from which four underlying themes were extracted, describing the psychological experiences of laid-off workers: loss of face (feeling of loss); physical pain; hopelessness; and acceptance and adaptation (making face). These themes were reported by the interviewees to occur in a staged fashion – that is, loss of face was their first psychological response, followed by feelings of physical pain, followed by a sense of hopelessness and fatalism. Some of the interviewees reported that these stages were followed by a stage of acceptance and adaptation, which is the stage in which they made face that they had lost before. Analysis of the qualitative data suggests that most of the interviewees experienced the psychological process from their initial stage of loss of face to the final stage of making face. This finding is strikingly different from the process or stage theories developed by Western researchers.

The most distinctive theme that emerged was interviewees' strong feelings of loss of face, which were accompanied by a series of feelings of loss, including loss of self-esteem, loss of identity, loss of pleasure, loss of health, loss of patience, loss of

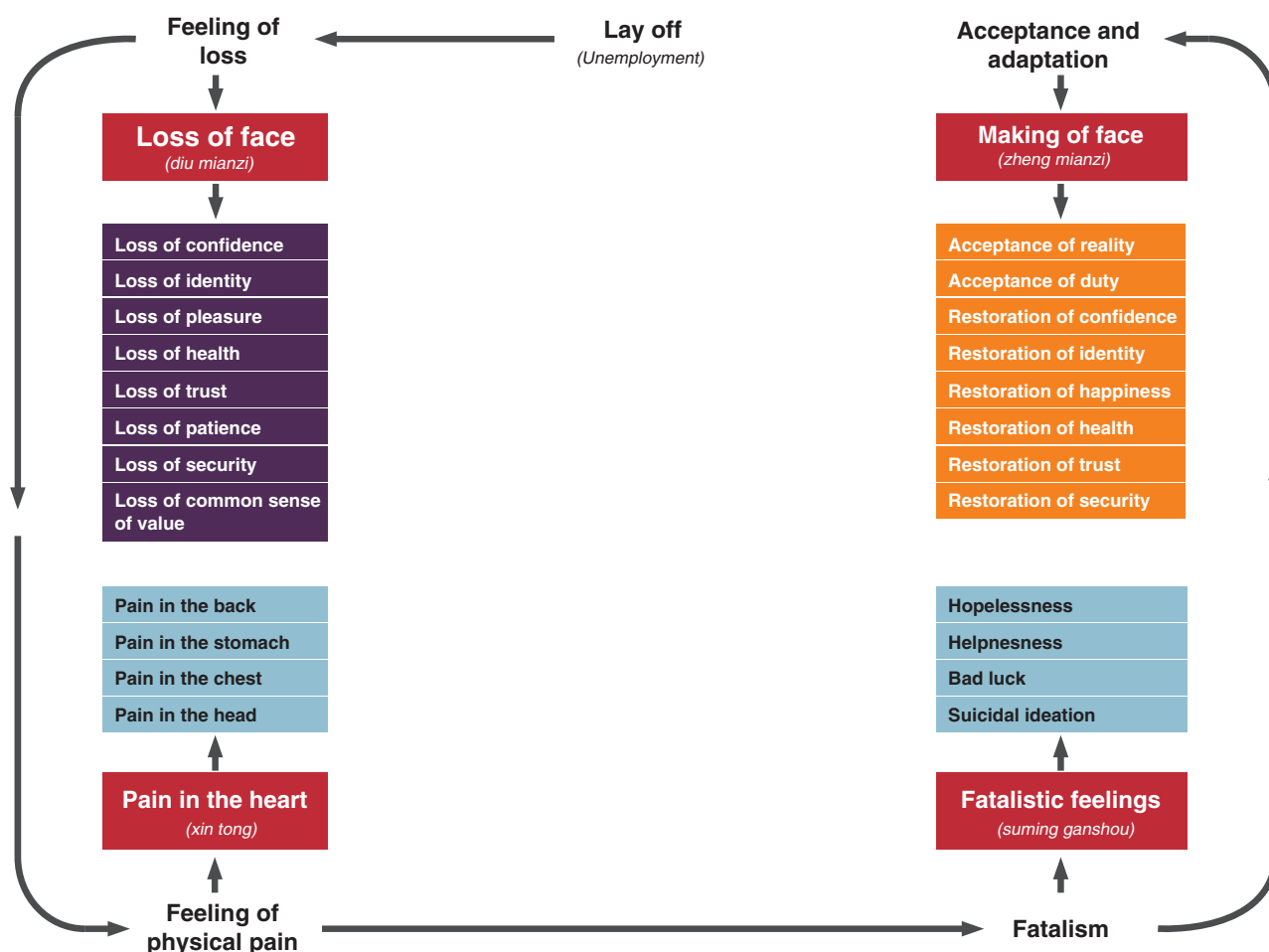


Fig. 1. The psychological processes of Chinese laid-off workers.

trust, loss of security, and loss of value. Until now no literature in the West has identified loss of face as one of the dominant psychological experiences of unemployed workers. Even though a few Chinese researchers [11] mentioned that loss of face was one of the feelings Chinese laid-off workers initially experienced after being laid off, none of them elaborated the reasons underlying this experience. We believe that the main reason for Chinese laid-off workers experiencing loss of face is due to the social and culture context in which they are embedded. In the Chinese social and culture context, 'face' is an individual's public image obtained through self-evaluation in a given social situation [31]. It is a reflection of an individual's struggle for self-definition and positioning relative to others in society. It is

an integral part of the daily activity and official functions of the Chinese people [37]. Chinese workers were regarded as the 'masters of socialist China,' the leading class of China in Mao's era, and they enjoyed a very high social status. However, being laid off during China's contemporary economic reform, they dropped from the top class to the bottom of China's new social class [1]. They have a very strong feeling of loss which is dominated by the feeling of loss of face, their public image.

A poignant theme that emerged was interviewees' feelings of physical pain, which was somatized by the laid-off workers as pain in the heart, pain in the head, stomach ache, and back pain. None of them claimed that they experienced psychological disorders due to their being laid off. This is because people



who have a mental disorder and mental illness are stigmatized in China. Chong et al. [44] noted that among Chinese, 38% of respondents believed that people with mental problems were dangerous and 50% of respondents felt that the public should be protected from them. Lee et al. [45] cautioned that stigma associated with the mentally ill comes not only from society, but also from their family members, partners, and friends. In China, a clear reason for stigma to be more strongly attached to the mentally ill relates to the obvious breakdown in the patients' ability to live up to society's standards and imposed responsibilities. Thus, nearly all the interviewees reported somatic symptoms instead of psychological symptoms, as these are seen as more acceptable within this culture.

The third theme that emerged was interviewees' fatalism about their layoff and future, which was characterized by feelings of hopeless, bad luck, helplessness, and even occasionally suicidal ideas. This theme was closely connected with the Chinese concept of *Tian Ming* ('The Mandate of Heaven'). The Chinese are the greatest fatalists in the world. Their fatalism is a direct development from the ancient theocratic concept of *Tian Ming*, which was applied to almost any political and social situation [46]. Heaven was regarded as the power to enlighten and rule the lower world, it was responsible for the rise and fall of the rulers and the contentment and discontentment of the people. Thus, fatalism is one of the characteristic traits of Chinese people [46]. In such a time of difficulty as layoff, the workers themselves could not control their own destiny, and it was very easy for them to be trapped in their own world of fatalism.

The fourth theme was (some) interviewees' acceptance of the harsh reality and their own efforts to make face to restore their own attributes and public social image lost before. This theme was rooted in Eastern philosophical teaching and cultural beliefs emphasizing the importance of managing stress and emotional distress by changing one's inner thoughts and desires instead of making overt changes in the environment. Confucianism and Taoism doctrines similarly advocate coping with adversity through changing one's mental or goal structure [47]. A sense of control does not come from mastering the environment, but should derive from insights gained through pondering about why and how environmental changes emerge. These philosophical teachings do not simply instruct individuals to ignore or avoid their problems, but also strongly

emphasize they should face and reduce their psychological stress by means of attitudinal change and personal transformation [47]. They lead individuals to appreciate the meaningful aspects and consequences brought about by negative encounters, believing negative occurrences can foster personal growth and hardiness, and strengthen their will, resilience, and inadequacies. Hence, both acceptance and endurance of suffering are deemed appropriate responses for the Chinese. As the loss of face can be regarded as inappropriate behavior and against the Confucian doctrine of propriety in social relations, it is fundamentally important for laid-off workers to function in their family and society. Losing face not only results in a loss of one's social standing but also brings embarrassment to one's family, and thus losing face is a highly undesirable interpersonal event for the Chinese. This indicates that Chinese laid-off workers tend to have an overwhelming concern about their 'face' and would make a great effort to make face for themselves and their families to meet others' expectations in order to obtain social acceptance, maintain relational harmony, and avoid social sanctions. The implication of this study lies in that it recognizes the significance of 'face' to Chinese laid-off workers, which is also a barrier for them to seek psychological help. Such an understanding would allow mental health professionals to design intervention and educational programs to reduce this barrier and encourage greater access to psychological assistance.

### Limitations

Although we believe that the findings of this research are of great significance in regard to the relatively less developed and older industrial cities of China, it may be that they will not be generalizable to all regions of China. Whether they can be applied to other countries is yet another question. Even with regard to the older industrial cities of China, the findings warrant further and wider empirical research. The present study drew on only a small sample (26) among the vast population of Chinese laid-off workers (25.4 million). It could be that the sample, although carefully selected to be representative in the research, is not representative of large parts of that wider population. However, there is no reason to assume that this is so, and the findings are so remarkable that they should be systematically tested.



## Conclusion

This study is one of the first exploring the psychological processes of laid-off workers in contemporary transitional China from a social and cultural context. Four themes that emerged from the grounded theory investigations are the psychological processes experienced by Chinese laid-off workers after their being laid off. These themes can be seen to be a psychological cycle within a wider theoretical framework with a loss of face as laid-off workers' initial psychological experience and making face as their final experience while going through the intermediate experiences of feeling pain and being fatalistic. On the basis of these findings, a series of hypotheses were derived that may form the basis of subsequent research: (1) the psychological experience of laid-off workers (or unemployed workers) is likely to have varied manifestations in different cultural contexts; (2) the psychological processes of Chinese laid-off workers (or unemployed workers) might be different from those of laid-off workers in Western countries; and (3) a therapeutic intervention to cater for the needs of laid-off workers derived from the four themes might be effective. Consequently, the present study suggests that researchers may further examine the psychological experience of laid-off workers within the theoretical model developed in this article, and that empirical research is required to systematically test the applicability of the theoretical model in different settings.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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### Related Information

This article provides suggestions for researchers examining the psychological experience of laid-off workers. As societies rapidly develop, there is increasing pressure on people of different ages playing different roles, and psychological problems are appearing in all corners of society. Given this situation, more effective measures for preventing and treating psychological issues should be studied and developed.

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