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An E-ethnography of *Baifumei* on the *Baidu Tieba*: Investigating an emerging economy of identification online

by

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Introduction

On June 14th 2014, just about a week after Chinese *Gaokao* (College Entrance Examination), the official Sina Weibo¹ account of the Tsinghua University Admissions Office named Qingxiaohua (清小华)², retweeted a post of a female graduate-to-be. She just had published two contrastive pictures online. One was taken when she enrolled, the other seven years later when she was ready to leave her studies. In the first photo, the girl stood in a cornfield. She was dark-skinned and barely wearing any makeup. By contrast, in the second photo, the graduate-to-be had become whiter in her skin color and more fancily dressed. Qingxiaohua commented on the original post, stating that Tsinghua University is a place of nutrition where *baifumei* (白富美), a catchphrase literally meaning “white-skinned, wealthy and beautiful women”, are born and nourished. Through that, Qingxiaohua welcomed all potential students to apply to Tsinghua University. This ‘inspirational’ advertising stirred up a huge dispute on the Internet and hit the headlines of many news media. As one of the most influential universities in China, Tsinghua University was criticized for taking *baifumei*, which heavily stresses one’s physical appearance, as the aim of its education. In the midst of this heated debate, Qingxiaohua defended that the post was only intended to show a graduate-to-be’s personal gratitude for her Alma Mater. The public should not misunderstand and misinterpret it as “selling her charms” (出卖色相)³.

Baifumei, as an identification category, is not new. Lexically, it is a compound word consisting of three lexemes, namely *bai* (白, white-skinned), *fu* (富, wealthy) and *mei* (美, beautiful). *Baifumei* reportedly originated from an online chatting room named *Liyi Bar* (李毅吧)⁴ in *Baidu Tieba* (百度贴吧), an online community founded by the Chinese search giant *Baidu.com*. The first search record of *baifumei*, on *Baidu.com*, occurred around late November 2011. From there *baifumei* made its viral way to online media around May 2013. Within the same period of time, though, other identity

¹ Sina Weibo is Chinese most influential microblogging website akin to a hybrid of Twitter and Facebook.

² <http://weibo.com/tsingerhua>

³ http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_682f48930101e0ed.html

⁴ <http://baike.baidu.com/view/7694597.htm>

compound words started to proliferate on Chinese Internet. These category terms were created in a similar fashion to *Baifumei*, that is they combined three one-word attributional adjectives into a new word that was then elected as identity category. *Gaofushuai* (高富帅, referring to tall, wealthy and handsome men), *aicuoqiong* (矮矬穷, referring to short, ugly and poor people) and *tiansuchun* (甜素纯, referring to sweet, elegant and innocent women) are examples of this phenomenon.

Given China's population amounting to more than 1.3 billion people according to the latest Sixth Chinese Population Census⁵, becoming identifiable in China is a hot topic, that is to be seen by others as a person holding certain characteristics is key to someone's success. Sprung-up identity catchwords showcase an ever-growing need of creativity in the industry of identity representations. Moreover, the imbalanced ratio of 103.47 men for every 100 women gives rise to the challenges for Chinese males of a marriageable age to find their Ms. Right. The uneven gender supply-demand makes Chinese young females' identities even more salient. *Baifumei*, in this context, stands out as a privileged ideal identity representation for Chinese young females. More generally, it plays an important role both in masculine and female discourse. According to the *Baidu Index*⁶ from September 1st 2013 to June 17th 2014, males made 74% of *baifumei*-related searches with the other 26% carried out by females⁷. By contrast, on Sina Weibo, 53.6% of people who actively used the term "*baifumei*" were male and the other 46.4% were female⁸. The ratio of male to female searchers on *Baidu.com* is 2.85. These numbers show males' dominance in *baifumei* searches and the consumption of *baifumei* discourse, suggesting males are more interested in *baifumei*, either as a term in its own right or for the identities it stands for. By contrast, the male/female ratio of *baifumei* uses on Sina Weibo is 1.16, not a prominent contrast between two sexes. It generally shows a comparatively equal appeal of this term to both males and females.

Our case in point here is the *Baifumei Bar of Baidu Tieba*. In there, we explore the meaning attached to this identity category and the identity strategies of its users. We then move on to dealing with the drives and barriers behind this identity category usage and we focus more closely on what hinders the members' identification with *baifumei*? What pushes them to use this term for then distancing themselves from it? Should we understand from their semiotic doings that *baifumei* has become an undesirable term? If so, what societal factors are involved in this process? A study of these identification and self-distancing practices may not only uncover current identification patterns for Chinese youths, it may also shed light on the big social context in which processes of identity inhabitation, struggle and crisis are at play.

⁵ <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/pcsj/rkpc/6rp/indexch.htm>

⁶ <http://index.baidu.com>

⁷ <http://index.baidu.com/?tpl=crowd&type=0&area=&time=20130901%7C20140617&word=%B0%D7%B8%BB%C3%C0>, accessed 23:38 21 June, 2014.

⁸ <http://data.weibo.com/index>

Performed Identities and Stereotype Threats

Baifumei represents the ideal female identity in China, to which most females appear to strive toward. An investigation of such practices call for Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical analogy in his seminal work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, where Goffman likened the daily social encounters to theatrical performances, differentiating *back stage* behaviors from *front stage* ones. On the *front stage*, actors, perform to their audience according to certain rules and social conventions. Goffman drew a distinction between the impression *given* and *given off*, the intended and unintended impressions respectively as it were. These impressions infer a need for impression management, say what someone should express and what someone should not. With the advent of Internet, as a new means of interpersonal communication emerged and attracted scholarly interest. Against this background, Miller (1995) brought Goffman's theory of person-to-person encounters to the study of EC, although based on an impressionistic account within the Goffmanian frame. In his study, Miller made a typology of homepages and linked it to traditional person-to-person encounters, holding that "electronic self" was not essentially different from the 'traditional' offline self, which is indicative of the applicability of Goffman's theory to EC studies. Miller's study, however, dates back to Web 1.0, that is when the Internet was technologically confined to reading-oriented webpages connected by hyperlinks. Most of Miller's findings are no longer suitable for Web 2.0 interaction in that these are characterized by collaboration and synchronous interaction. Arundale (2010) and other researchers tried to challenge Goffman's theory by saying that his theories are outdated and ill fit the study of online phenomena. Against this view, Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) in their research of online blogging and users' behaviors in Second Life illustrated the applicability of Goffman's theory in the online context, finding that the online self is actually still "anchored" to the offline self with certain participants' character traits being suppressed and others emphasized. They advised to treat the offline world as the *back stage* and the online world as the *front stage*. They further argued that "Goffman's original framework is not only still applicable, but also of great value as an explanatory framework for understanding identity through interaction and presentation of self in the online world" (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013, p. 110).

However, Rushing hastily to the Goffmanian dramaturgy may hold some risks. Although groundbreaking, his dramaturgy overlooks the Internet users' dynamics of ingroup and outgroup identification, leaving out issues on inter- and intragroup mobility. Goffman (1963) did touch base with the issue of group membership in his book *Stigma*. But it is specifically focused on the othering process of stigmatization and its management. Considering that the advent of Web 2.0 does not only allow for interpersonal communication but also facilitates group formation and mobility, the social identity theory (as developed by Tajfel, 1974, 1975, 1978; Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Turner, 1975) is a

helpful hunch in terms of identification research online. In computer-mediated-groups that are characterized by physical isolation and visual anonymity, personal differences and individuality could be less salient than “[...] the shared stereotypes that define their social category membership” (Turner, 1991, p. 157). Compared with individuation in offline face-to-face communication, a process of depersonalization prevails in online communication. This process “renders individual differences among group members less salient, which in turn accentuates category-based differentiation in the presence of any available cues to social identity” (Lee, 2009, p. 36). The observation of de-individuation was further developed by Postmes et al. (1995) into the Self Identification Model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE), which posits that existing social boundaries, specifically these stereotyped and biased intergroup relations, are playing a big role in computer-mediated-communication (CMC) for interactants’ self-identification (Jetten et al., 2002). Interactants in CMC are susceptible to group membership and stereotyped perceptions of self and others, often putting the interactants’ identities at risk, resulting in a stereotype threat where interactants worry about the confirmation of a stereotyped group identity that may be socially negative. This stereotype threat will lessen interactants’ participation and weaken their motivation (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Steele, Spencer & Aronson, 2002). To avoid the risk of the stereotype threat, interactants may apply different strategic “identity practices” that help to distance them from such threat. As defined by Blommaert and Varis (2011, p. 144), identity practices are “discursive orientations towards sets of features that can be seen as emblematic of particular identities”. , In order to be considered as an authentic member of an identity category, one needs to configure their discursive orientations for “enoughness”. The “dose” of discursive orientations can be minimal as long as it’s enough. Consequently, to keep a balance between authenticity and possible stereotype threat, one needs to have a good control of the dose of “enoughness”, which should be perpetually adjusted, reinvented and amended.

An E-ethnographic Approach to Identification

According to Skågeby (2011), ethnography can be understood concisely as “a description of individuals, groups or cultures in their own environment over a long period of time”. Along with the advent of Internet, traditional ethnography has been adapted and reapplied into research that has online communities as its focus (Hine, 2000; Beaulieu, 2004; Sade-Neck, 2004; Androutsopoulos, 2008; boyd, 2008; Murthy 2008; Garcia et al., 2009; Kozinets, 2009; Robinson & Schulz, 2009). Online ethnography, although still thorn by ethical and epistemological issues, holds the advantage that it can bring to a better understanding of virtual communities and of their meaning making

processes and practices. By applying online ethnography as for this case study, the researcher can capture more significant details that may be otherwise less observable or relevant. This effort finally will uncover the connections and conflicts between individuals and groups, adding to the public knowledge about the specific community. This study strives to be an online ethnography of identification strategies on the web. The first author, a registered member of the Baifumei Bar, has carried out non-participatory observations from December 2013 to October 2014 and he has documented what happened in the field using the other two authors as *tertium comparationis* for his findings. *Baifumei* Bar members, as they were observed doing, scarcely extended their communications and online friendship to the offline world. Because of this, this study relies solely on online data collected in the *Baifumei* Bar. The choice of data was not pre-designed but developed in the process of field work. The data collected and analyzed are not restricted to textual discourses but also include those pictures, emoticons and animations that were posted in that these too helped uncover the semiotic complexity of identity practices within the group studied.

The Research Field: *Baidu Tieba* and *Baifumei* Bar

The *Baidu Tieba*, claiming to be the largest online Chinese community in the world, is officially referred by baidu.com as an interest-based communication platform, where Internet users can have topic discussions and make friends with each other. It covers a wide range of themes, including entertainment, games, novels, cities, life styles, etc. Up to now, 8,198,284 groups have been established. As simulacra to offline bars, each of these groups is called a *ba* (吧), or ‘bar’ in English. However, the prominent difference between *Baidu Tieba* and offline bars lies in that the former is free for registration and use, while the membership of the latter in most cases is exclusive and charged.



Fig. 1 The logo of *Baidu Tieba*

The *Baifumei* Bar is officially registered under the directory of “love and emotions” on *Baidu Tieba*. Its banner picture portrays a woman bathing in a bathtub as follows, which is suggestive of what a *baifumei* could be like:



Fig. 2 The banner picture of the *Baifumei* Bar

The sign of the *Baifumei* Bar is a black 8 ball in billiard games, while the previous sign was a photo of Audrey Hepburn, a famous Hollywood actress who is regarded by some as the most naturally beautiful woman of all time⁹. 156,153 people are following the *Baifumei* Bar, with 1,248,044 posts being published¹⁰. Apart from textual and picture content in traditional BBS, spontaneous voice messaging is also made handy. Each post must start from a textual headline but may end without any content under the headline.

Dynamics of Identity Positioning in *Baifumei* Bar

Borrowing Goffman's metaphorical analogy of dramaturgy, an image of *baifumei* can be projected only through a proper performance in front of the audience. In this sense, being a *baifumei* has to be performed to and judged by the members of the *Baifumei* Bar. My observations in the *Baifumei* Bar show that the post writers, more often than not, performatively distance themselves from the association with *baifumei*. Does this mean they really cut themselves off from the ideal *baifumei* identity? In fact, in many cases underneath the superficial distancing there usually goes a dynamic positioning, which involves both distancing from and nearing to *baifumei* from time to time. An investigation into this dynamics will not only yield an in-depth insight into the post writers' identity positioning pattern but may also uncover the pragmatics of *baifumei* on the Internet.

The following examples consist of some extracts from a girl's post with 6578 replies up to the time of this contribution¹¹. In the following examples, I will address her as Xiaofang and pixelate her photos to avoid any recognition of her.

Example 1¹²

Xiaofang: 不是白富美，只是喜欢爆照而已

I'm not a *baifumei* but one who loves posting selfies online.

⁹ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/3763887.stm

¹⁰ Accessed at 18:24 (UTC+1:00, Amsterdam) on October 15th, 2014.

¹¹ Accessed at 23:29 (UTC+1:00, Amsterdam) on September 28th, 2014.

¹² Unless otherwise specified, the examples shown in this paper are from the *Baifumei* Bar and the English translation from Chinese is made by my own. Further unless otherwise specified, the contents between brackets are my own explanations.

In the headline, after a straightforward denial of any *baifumei* identity affiliation, Xiaofang gave an additional explanation for her posting. In her words, she was “one who loves posting selfies online”. By using the sentence structure “not...but...” the post writer distanced herself assertively from any intention of drawing close to *baifumei* identity. Interestingly, in contradiction with what Xiaofang claimed above, after the headline there come three selfie photos as follow¹³:

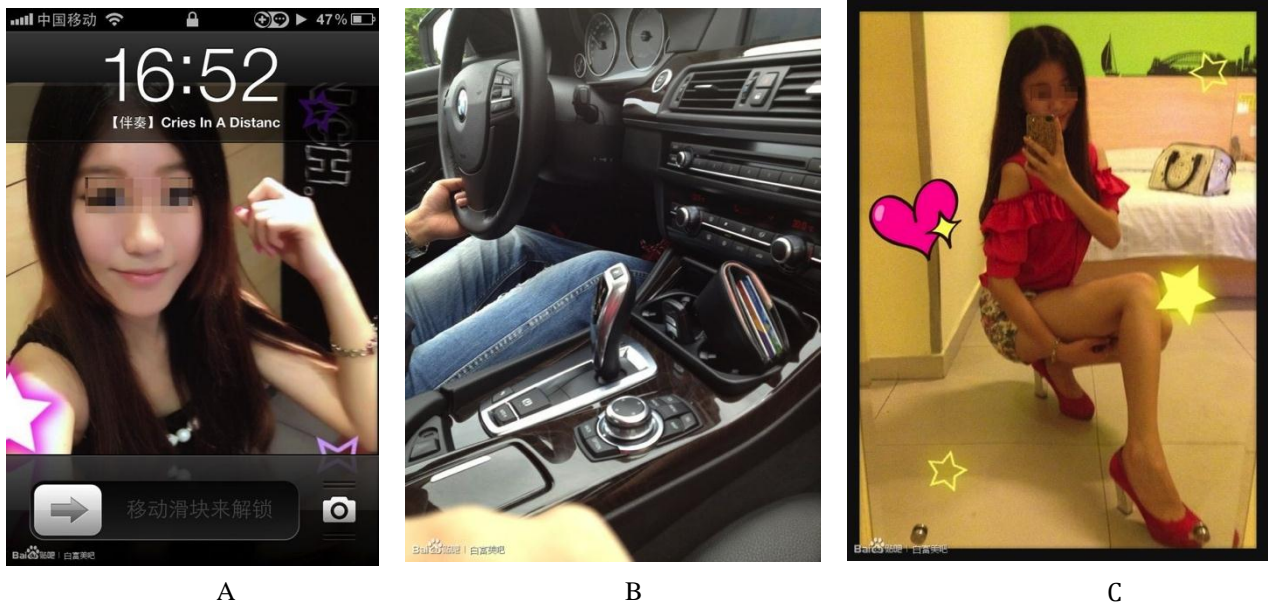


Fig.3 Three photos posted by Xiaofang. For the convenience of the reader, they will be referred in the following as A, B and C from left to right

Photo A is a screenshot of Xiaofang’s iPhone lock screen, backgrounded by a close-up photo of hers. Compared with the selfie in a lightful bedroom in photo C, Xiaofang’s skin tone in A is much paler. While different from the half-length portrait in A, C shows Xiaofang’s art of clothes matching, including a red blouse, patterned shorts, a bracelet and red high-heel shoes. B instead, is a photo taken in a BMW, a stereotypical emblem of wealth for most Chinese people. The seemingly randomly uploaded photos above are, in fact, in a sequence, and this sequence follows the same order of the compound words that make up for *baifumei*, that is being *bai* (fair-skinned), being *fu* (wealthy) and being *mei* (beautiful). With this cue in mind, it’s hard not to infer that the “backstage preparation” in Goffman’s words (1956) was not aimed at flagging up a *baifumei* identity. On the second floor¹⁴ of her post, Xiaofang wrote as follows:

¹³ Originally they’re in a vertical sequence. To save the space here I arrange them in a horizontal line-up.

¹⁴ “Floor” is often used in *Baidu Tieba* as a simulator to a construction in offline world. The first post of a thread is called the First Floor and the rest in the same way in a chronological order. A floor can be maintained by others’ replying to it. Changing a floor in *Baidu Tieba* usually means an ending of the previous conversation turn and the beginning of a new one.

Example 2

Xiaofang: 我发帖没说让别人评论，我说了我长期更贴，我的生活是怎样我就跟大家分享的是怎样，不存在什么其他的，所以要讨论或者说我坏话的人省省


You are not in any way obliged to comment on my post. As was said before, I will continuously update my life status in this post and show you what my life is really like without any other intentions. So, those who are ready to discuss on me or speak ill of me are kindly asked to leave for the sake of your time and energy.

Advancing from the graphical nearing act in Figure 1, Xiaofang repositions herself just as she did in the Example 1 claiming that all she posted or would post in the future was her real life status. Obviously, she was alert to potential conflicts that her posts could cause, alert to those “discussions” and people that may “speak ill of” her. She suggested that those potential debates about her post would neglect her post. To summarize, Xiaofang’s identity positioning regarding *baifumei* has undergone a development from the initial ‘discursive distancing’ to a more covert ‘graphical nearing’ for then going back to the ‘discursive distancing’ again. After posting the text that is used for Example 2, the post thread moved forward with both positive and negative comments. When Xiaofang was positively regarded by others as a *baifumei*, she often showed her modesty. On the 97th floor, a man who I address as Male (A) interacted with Xiaofang as follows:

Example 3

Male (A): 我要逆袭白富美。

(As a loser) I wanna counterattack you, the *baifumei*.

Xiaofang: 

(A sweating face)

Male (A): 嘿嘿，行不？

Lol, is that ok?

Xiaofang: 应该不行，哈哈

Honestly, it’s not ok. Lol

Male (A) shows his “counterattack” intention, which presupposed Xiaofang’s *baifumei* identity. Xiaofang responded with a sweating-face emoticon that helped her avoid making a direct positioning. With ‘a sweating face’, Xiaofang could either feel overstated or embarrassed by Male (A)’s words. Then Male (A)’s asks Xiaofang to become his girlfriend, which is refused by Xiaofang. Unlike her distancing in Example 2, under the guise of her refusal Xiaofang implicitly accepted her *baifumei* identity as she did not utter any opposition to the identity category ‘[...] you, the *baifumei*’. Then the 348th floor sees the following exchange between Xiaofang and another man addressed here

as Male (B) unfolds:

Example 4

Male (B): 就是白富美
You're a *baifumei*.

Xiaofang: ...

Male (B) @¹⁵Xiaofang: 难道不是
Aren't you?

Xiangfang @Male (B): 我不觉得
I don't think so.

Male (B) @Xiaofang: 我们就是穷屌丝
We are undoubtedly *diaosi*.

Xiaofang @Male (B): 我也是
Me, too.

Male (B): 哈哈~ 握爪
Lol...A hand shake with you

Xiaofang again repositions herself as a non-*baifumei*. Instead, she identified with Male (B) as a underprivileged loser, repositioning herself from the covert *baifumei* identity established on the 97th floor and resituating herself for a solidary communication with Male (B) who then asks to shake hands as they are both alike. Seen from the above examples, Xiaofang shifted her footing constantly to adapt to the concrete discourse context, from the initial distancing in the headline to nearing in her photos and then distancing again with another nearing followed. However, the positioning pattern is not necessarily all the way a distancing—nearing—distancing—nearing sequence. The sequence could be cut down with disruptions, repetitions, silences, etc. What emerges so far from the data is that Xiaofang has never made her nearing salient. Instead, Xiaofang showed her distancing often in a clear way. Even so, Xiaofang's real motives are perpetually questioned in the bar. Group members tend to take nonverbal clues as more solid evidence to justify Xiaofang's showing-off intention. These clues are the impression “given off” in Goffman's term contrasting with the impression directly “given” by Xiaofang. Furthermore, while the distancing act can “give off” an impression of being modest, one of the most valued virtues in China. The “virtue” in Chinese is called *mei de* (美德), with the same word ‘*mei*’ as in ‘*baifumei*’. Modesty, being a *mei de*, forms a social convention that indexes morality and the quality of being not only bai fu and mei but it adds a connotation of morally integer to her beauty. In line with much studied patterns in language usage amongst people in China, someone should not like and would not like to speak high of his/her own merits. Instead,

¹⁵ The symbol @ is similarly used as that in Twitter, after which follows the addressee to whom the speaker address.

someone should be more inclined to understate their personal accomplishments. In this tradition, if a woman presents herself as humble, this humbleness, if recognizable, will be related to the Chinese virtue and help her with the *baifumei* identity. While on the contrary, if she claims to be a *baifumei*, then she most probably would encounter challenges and severe disagreements. *Mei* (being beautiful), if considered as one of the required qualities of *baifumei* identity, not only refers to one's physical appearance. I, rather it also involves moral judgments. If a woman keeps a low profile, she may probably get upscaled as being 'beautiful'. Cai et al. (2011), in a comparative study on the relation between modesty and self-enhancement in China and United States, find that modesty is positively related to people's implicit self-esteem in China. Cai et al. (2011, p. 62) conclude that,

Chinese would partake in the cultural drama by deemphasizing the positivity of the self at an explicit level when high on modesty or when situationally induced to behave modestly; however, they would paradoxically benefit from their modest disposition or situationally induced behaviors by implicitly harvesting an enhanced self.

The *Baifumei Bar* has actually witnessed many examples of the above-mentioned "paradox": "harvesting an enhanced self" by "deemphasizing the positivity of the self". Just as Goffman (1959) stated, the actor should perform following certain rules and social conventions, violations of which will invite loads of challenges, while complying with it can help people with their self-enhancement. The enoughness of being a *baifumei*, i.e., of "the orientation toward certain resources that emblematically index" *baifumei*, should not be overfilled or highly presented, otherwise that over-enoughness yields to be a lack of authenticity of *baifumei* (Blommaert & Varis, 2011, p. 152). A step back from *baifumei* identity may become a step forward into it. In the same sense, one's distancing from *baifumei* identity is potentially an act of nearing to it, while nearing if not properly manipulated may instead yield to a distancing by the end.

Xiaofang's posts and her identity practices above presupposes that there exists a standardized semiotic form of *baifumei* identity, which, however, does not hold true for many. In fact, for different people and different online groups the standards for *baifumei* identity vary much. Other from drawing back on its fundamental constituents, the term *baifumei* in use undergoes a tendency of semantic blurring, or in other words a denotational diversification. This tendency invalidates the essentialist view of *baifumei* identity and deconstructs *baifumei* as a stable identity representation.

Semantic Features of *Baifumei* Being Blurred

In Xiaofang's case, *baifumei* was perceived by her as an identity consisting of three qualities, namely *bai* (white-skinned), *fu* (wealthy) and *mei* (beautiful). These three qualities are *distinguishers* that

differentiate females of this kind from the average crowd. Therefore, *baifumei* semantically has the [+white-skinned], [+wealthy] and [+beautiful] features. Besides, the term *baifumei* is often used to describe a female person. So being a human and female are another two semantic features of *baifumei*. Different from distinguishers, these two grammatically important features are called *semantic markers* and transcribed with <> as <+human> and <+female>. Consequently, the whole semantic features of *baifumei* are: <+human> <+female> [+white-skinned] [+wealthy] [+beautiful]. Any lack of five features may disqualify one's *baifumei* credit. Let us turn to the following example in *Baifumei* Bar from a student called Xiaoli majoring as a flight attendant:

Example 5

Xiaoli: 我还是个在读学生，发的照片是在学校拍的。说到白富美，我认为我够白。至于富，你们可以在网上查查我就读的四川西南航空职业学院。美的话，还不完全算吧。

I'm still a university student. The photo I posted was taken at the campus. Talking of *baifumei*, I think I'm kind of *bai*. As to *fu*, you can look up Sichuan Southwest College of Civil Aviation, the college I'm attending right now, on Internet. And for *mei*, I best think that I'm not fully qualified.

In Example 5, Xiaoli referenced mentioned three distinguishers. She had checked her “enoughness” on *bai*, *fu* and *mei* one by one. This reference underlined Xiaoli's perception that the copresence of *bai*, *fu* and *mei* was required for the authentication of *baifumei* identity. Taking the distancing—nearing perspective previously discussed, she was nearing to *bai* (white-skinned) and *fu* (wealthy) but distancing from *mei* (beautiful) in a negotiable way considering the use of the adverb fully around which she articulated her not ‘fully’ qualifying as *mei*. Two neared qualities, that is *bai* and *fu*, are the more solid qualities needed for *baifumei* identity inhabitation. *mei*, or being beautiful, is instead a more flexible and easier to be acquired given the prevalent phatic use of *meinv* (美女, literally meaning a fancy lady) (Shao Jingmin, 2009). However, to be a *baifumei* does not necessitate one's whole possession of *bai*, *fu* and *mei* traits. There are cases that *baifumei* is not used in its holistic sense as its lexical structure would presuppose. Evidence shows that *baifumei* identity is perceptually acquirable in the absence of either *bai*, *fu* or *mei*. The following are examples of this kind of perception from members of the *Baifumei* Bar:

Example 6

Lingling: 一直是穷屌。想要做白富美很多年。长得丑不是错啊。

I'm poor all of my days. However, I have been dreaming to become a *baifumei* for many years. (You know) Being ugly is not a fault.

Example 7

Shaohua: 毕竟我也想减肥变成白富美

After all, I want to lose my weight and become a *baifumei*.

In Example 6, *baifumei* identity was discoursed as Lingling's "becoming", not as something ascribed but as an acquirable property. In spite of Lingling's unbeautiful physical appearance ("being ugly"), that "becoming" *baifumei* can still be achieved through making good money. For Lingling, to become wealthy is most essential to acquire *baifumei* identity. *Fu* here outweighs *bai* and *mei*. The semantic features of *baifumei* in Lingling's sense are: <+human> <+female> [\pm white-skinned] [+wealthy] [\pm beautiful]. While in Example 7, simply "by losing weight" Shaohua can become a *baifumei*. "Losing weight" is closely linked to modern aesthetics that the slimmer one is more beautiful. To become slimmer gets her to *mei*. *Mei* here outweighs *bai* and *fu*, and becomes the most essential quality of *baifumei* identity. Shaohua's sense of semantic features of *baifumei* is: <+human> <+female> [\pm white-skinned] [\pm wealthy] [+beautiful]. Putting Examples 5, 6 and 7 together, we realize that the semantic features of *baifumei* turn from the initial <+human> <+female> [\pm white-skinned] [+wealthy] [+beautiful] to <+human> <+female> [\pm white-skinned] [\pm wealthy] [\pm beautiful]. The only must-have quality of *baifumei* is being female. However, at times being female is not required for *baifumei* identity.

Example 8

Qiqi: 吧里有人喝过白富美普洱茶吗?

Has anyone in the bar tried *baifumei* Pu'er tea¹⁶ patch?

In this case, *baifumei* as an identity category is depersonalized. The example evolves around a question inquiring about quality tea patch, abandoning its overarching feature of being human and female. In a comprehensive view, *baifumei*'s semantic features change accordingly to < \pm human> < \pm female> [\pm white-skinned] [\pm wealthy] [\pm beautiful]. The semantic arbitrariness of *baifumei* undermines its functionality as a privileged defining identity category. So, today if a female is called *baifumei*, she may probably regard it to be a phatic addressing rather than seriously as what it literally means. However, the degree of this arbitrariness should not be overestimated because the varied use patterns of *baifumei* illustrated above are not equally influential in terms of the corresponding population using them. Consequently, the semantic blurring of *baifumei* only partly accounts for the

¹⁶ Pu'er tea is a kind of dark tea produced from Pu'er City in Yunnan Province, China.

distancing practices. Observably, negative stereotyping of *baifumei* are emerging, which is another contributor to the distancing practices.

The Negative Stereotyping of *Baifumei*

As previously discussed, the qualification criteria for *baifumei* identity vary from person to person. The lack of semantic uniformity renders *baifumei* less of a stable reference frame for identity. In this semantic discrepancy, a pure focus on *fu* (being wealthy) leads to money worship and materialism, for which the negative stereotyping of *baifumei* starts. In the *Baifumei* Bar, a girl named Vienna has been challenged by calling upon stereotypes that can be reconducted to a *baifumei*.



Fig. 4 Vienna's profile photo

In one of her posts, she wrote in the headline, “”.

The following example is an extract of what follows thereafter in her post.

Example 9:

Vienna: 这都是我自己打拼来的 白富美我担得起

All of what I have now is earned by my own. I can confidently say I'm a *baifumei*

Vienna: (Vienna posted three of her photos and deleted them later. Unfortunately, I've only preserved one of them, in which she drove a car by herself as shown in the picture below. In one photo that was deleted she was using her mobile phone in her living room. In the other one she was lying in a sun chair on the attic of a house.)



Fig. 5 Vienna is driving a SUV

- Male (C): 依我看，她就是个黑木耳，跟男人睡觉上位的
According to what I see, she must be a *black fungus* (黑木耳, a popular derogative metaphor for the women who are sexually experienced) and struggle to such position by sleeping with men.
- Vienna: 我笑 凭什么只有男人才是奋斗的 女人就是靠脏的？ 我权当你们是羡慕嫉妒恨一笑而过。
Laugh my head off. Why a successful man is thought to have earned his life by their hard work while a woman by immoral trades (euphemism for sleeping with men)? I just see your words as a kind of envy.
- Female (A): 貌似长得漂亮就被鄙视了,,, 揍揍挺你~
It seems as long as you're beautiful you'll be defamed. I'm with you.
- Vienna: 男女注定不平等
It's destined that women are not equal with men.
- Female (A): 呵呵,,, 我也改变不了某些观念~努力做自己吧~
Lol...Neither can I change this kind of stereotypes~ Try to be yourself~
- Male (D): 你是鸡吗?
Are you a prostitute?
- Male (E): 我刚刚看了一些评论。有很多种辛勤工作。对懒人来说， 所有别人的钱都是不干净的。做自己。
I just read some of the comments. (I want to say) There are many kinds of jobs that need hard work. For those lazy people, all the money earned by others is unclean. Just be yourself.
- Male (F): 如果像你说的，你还干嘛来白富美吧？
If what you said is true, why do you still come to the *baifumei* bar?
- Male (G): 求包养
Please keep me your toy boy.
- Male (H): 那么 求包养
Then, keep me your toy boy.

Male (I): 有钱的女人无外乎两种情况:

1. 跟她睡的男人很成功!
2. 跟她妈睡的男人很成功。

你呢?

A wealthy woman cannot escape from the following two cases:

1. The man she sleeps with is very successful!
2. The man her mother sleeps with is very successful.

What's your case?

On a quite different tone from Xiaofang's case, Vienna explicitly claimed to be a qualified *baifumei* after a brief introduction of herself in the headline. Then, Vienna posted three pictures of herself, in which the gold (or gold-like) necklace and the shining watch she wore, the SUV she drove, the spacious living room she lived in and the sunbath she was enjoying on the attic are all telling clues to the good quality of her life. On 12th and 19th Floors, there is an insult on her being uttered, which defamed her by saying that she was a *black fungus*. On the 27th Floor, Vienna questioned the sexist interpretations of successful men and women and openly charged against the discriminational belief that women make their fortune by immoral trades (sleeping with men). Then Female (A) joined in the thread thereafter to ease Vienna up and comforted her. Later, both of them their hopelessness about gender discrimination. On the 42nd Floor, Male (B) directly doubted Vienna's claim by asking if she was a prostitute. Male (C) on the 94th Floor made sense of Vienna's tragic encounter, saying that lazy people always immoralize the way successful people make their fortune. On the 116th Floor another doubt on the authenticity of Vienna's *baifumei* identity surfaced, which reasoned that the real *baifumei* wouldn't visit *Baifumei Bar*. In fact, this reasoning was not only expressed by Male (F), but it was also held true by other community members. On the following 113rd and 147th Floors, Male (G) and Male (H) asked Vienna if she was willing to keep them as toy boys. In fact, this kind of requests is not incidental but commonly seen in *Baifumei Bar*. It underlines a negative stereotype of the immorality of *baifumei*. And this immorality stereotype is also seen on the 190th Floor, saying that all women made their wealth by serving and sleeping with men, either it's done by themselves or by their mothers.

Obviously, Vienna's subscription to *baifumei* identity has been fiercely challenged. She and other Chinese wealthy women are stigmatized as men's 'parasites', while their personal efforts are either being neglected or dismissed. King, one member of the *baifumei* bar, classified those claiming to be *baifumei* in the bar into four general category types:

1. 败家子, 有一个有钱的爹
A black sheep who has a wealthy father

2. 黑木耳，认了个有钱的干爹
A *black fungus* who has a wealthy adopted father
3. 一手拿 iPhone、一手拿相机的骗子
A *baifumei* wannabe who shows off with an iPhone on one hand and a camera on the other.

Baifumei, be it any of the above types, is not morally respectable and successful according to Chinese traditional virtues. In fact, scandals of “having a wealthy adopted father” can be easily found online in which all the “adopted fathers” have a disputably unclear relationship with those young *baifumei*. King’s interpretation embodies a prevalent negative public impression of *baifumei*, which results in a stereotype threat of *baifumei*, a threat of stigmatization that deindividuates different personal facets of *baifumei* identity and overwhelmingly renders *baifumei* a stigma. Recently lots of prostitutes and online sex performers flood in the *Baifumei Bar*, vending for any potential buyers. The infestation of erotic photos in *Baifumei Bar*, in another way strengthens the negative stigma of immorality of the *baifumei* identity.

***Diaosi*’s Social Upward Mobility**

Along with the distancing practices in the *Baifumei Bar*, many members call themselves ‘*diaosi*’ (屌丝) instead, a coarse word for ‘underprivileged losers’. ‘*Diao*’ (屌) in Chinese is a vulgar term for the male genitalia. And literally *diaosi* refers to male’s pubic hair. Despite this, *diaosi* goes viral in China, especially among male netizens. According to Dong Haijun and Shi Yufeng (2013), *diaosi* refers to the underprivileged males who comparatively lack social and economic resources. Within *Baifumei Bar*, there are 354,747 posts containing the word *diaosi*, hitting 29.5% of all 1,201,784 posts¹⁷. Due to the prevalence of *diaosi*, a *diaosi* discourse starts to emerge. Usually, people who label themselves with *diaosi* are willing to “kneel down to kiss *baifumei* (跪舔白富美)”. Their pet phrase is ‘counterattack’ (逆袭), a show of their ambition to climb up the social ladder. Dong Haijun and Shi Yufeng (2013) argued that *diaosi*’s “counterattack” is almost impossible in China due to the intergenerational and intragenerational social upward inequalities. The big gap between *diaosi* and *baifumei* is often performed with the aforementioned stylish discourse, most of which accuses the lack of social upward mobility in China. Example 10 as follows is a typical *diaosi* discourse.

¹⁷ Data accessed at 15:59 (UTC +1:00, Amsterdam), September 16, 2014.

Example 10:

Xiaohong: 嘎嘎嘎,,, 痘痘。。我要没事回白富美看看

Gagagaga (chuckles)... (I have) acne... I'd like come back and look around in *baifumei* bar in my leisure time.

Xiaohong: ㄋ (ㄨ ㄨ) ㄋ ,, 白富美越来越多了。穷屌丝只有跪舔的命。。哎

ㄋ (ㄨ ㄨ) ㄋ ... More and more *baifumei* are emerging. Poor *diaosi* are destined to kneel down and lick *baifumei* (like a dog) ...Alas!

The smiley “ㄋ (ㄨ ㄨ) ㄋ”, as is commonly used online, shows Xiaohong’s helplessness about the big gap between himself and *baifumei*. With the awareness of that big gap, he choicelessly kneeled down to lick *baifumei* without dignity. There is a Chinese phrase 专找粉木耳 in Xiaohong’s screen name. 粉木耳 literally means “*pink fungus*”, an opposite of the aforementioned “*black fungus*”. Metaphorically, it refers to either a female virgin or sexually inexperienced female. 专找粉木耳 means “only looking for *pink fungus*”. However, the post writer took an animation signature at the end of his post, which made a contrast with his screen name. The Figure 6 shows seven keyframes of the original gif-formatted animation:



Fig. 6 Keyframes of the animated signature

The story starts with a man meeting a woman. Happily, the man gets a bunch of flowers that he wants to give her. But just then, another woman appears. She is not much impressive at first sight. However, the man gets greatly fascinated when he sees her big breasts. The man turns away from the first woman. He intends to give his flowers to the woman with big breasts before he sees her rounded belly in pregnancy. He is scared and tries to flee but fails. The story ends with the pregnant woman taking a gun and forcing the man to stay with her and marry her.

The post writer himself did not make this animation. With TinEye, a reverse image search engine, I have found the oldest record of this animation on 29th May 2012 at www.taringa.net/cipoletto. The search result shows that lots of people use it as their signature in a

variety of forums, *Baidu Tieba* only being one of them. But here in the *Baifumei Bar*, the post foregrounds and recontextualizes the animation. The man in the picture is a representative of *diaosi*, who faces an awkward situation in a relationship and who is deprived of the choice by external pressors (the gun in the animation). The *diaosi* who initially hunts “pink fungus” finally ends with “black fungus”, a sexist term inferring a second-hand and less valuable female, the same as in the Vienna’s case. Evidence that underpins this understanding of the animation comes from a video on Chinese Internet named *Three-second love with a Black Fungus quickly makes a Diaosia become a father* (屌丝遇上黑木耳 无情3秒喜当爹). It is a story about how a *diaosi* is forced to take the responsibility for a *Black Fungus*’ pregnancy although the child is obviously not his. The video got viral on the Internet, harvesting 517,000 and 1150,000 views on www.youku.com¹⁸ and www.iqiyi.com¹⁹ respectively.

Because of the lack of social upward mobility in contemporary China, lots of non-*baifumei* females do not think they have a big chance to make their way up to the *baifumei* status. In the *Baifumei Bar*, there are 1,296,684 hits of “female *diaosi*” (女屌丝), which shows that the term *diaosi* has been freed from the previous male-only use and it been taken up in female discourses.

According to Tajfel and Turner (2001), people preferentially identify less with their in-group of a low status while identifying more with an out-group of a high status. To achieve favorable social identities, members of a low status group can use three strategies, i.e., social mobility strategies, social creativity strategies and social change strategies. Social mobility strategies refer to nearing to a more desirable out-group by leaving or dissociating with one’s negative in-group. Social creativity strategies refer to making collective efforts to change the element in the intergroup comparison situation to yield a more favorable in-group comparison; social change strategies refer to directly competing with out-groups to change the balance of power between groups. As has been discussed, social mobility in China is low. In other words, the social group boundary between *diaosi* and *baifumei* is impermeable, which cuts off most of the attempts for an upward flow. However, by definition the popular identification with *diaosi* is neither the social creativity nor a social change strategy, as this identification is not aimed to enhance the desirability of *diaosi*. Instead, for most of its users, the term *diaosi* and *diaosi* discourse exaggerate the disparity between them, the low-status in-group, and *baifumei*, an out-group of a higher status. This exaggerated disparity introduces a tension that calls up people’s notice of social class solidification. By performing their *diaosi*-ness and their distancing from *baifumei* identity, the *diaosi* group actually questions the legitimacy of *baifumei* and calls for a more fluid and vibrant social upward mobility in China.

¹⁸ http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XMzg3MDE4ODk2.html

¹⁹ http://www.iqiyi.com/v_19rriqvqsy.html

Conclusion and Discussion

This article reports an e-ethnographic study that has its focus on *Baifumei Bar* members' identity practices around *baifumei*. It is found that *baifumei*, as a desirable identity representation in general, is not readily approachable for many of the bar members. In fear of being challenged as a fake or wannabe, some members distance themselves from *baifumei* by aligning with the social convention of modesty. However, this distancing is perpetually negotiated and adjusted. Specifically, acts of nearing sneak under the surface of self-distancing identity practices, the patterns of which are susceptible to the negotiation between the post writer and the audience. Others who claim to be a *baifumei* may easily encounter severe critiques that tend to invalidate their authenticity and impose negative stereotypes or sex discrimination upon them. However, seen from a wide range of *baifumei* use patterns, *baifumei* paradoxically undergoes a process of semantic blurring, lowering down the threshold to *baifumei* identity. The semantic blurring and stereotyping process of *baifumei* seems to contradict but actually consistent with each other. Because of the nonuniform yardsticks for *baifumei* authentication as shown in the semantic blurring process, one can always use either the higher or lower standard to judge and stereotype others. The semantic blurring and the negative stereotypes of the term, combined with social upward immobility in China, undermine the desirability of *baifumei* and make its authenticity no longer a pursuit for many members online. Surprisingly, the coarse word *diaosi* emerges as a favorable identity representation for lots of people. The tension thus created between the 'losers' and '*baifumei*' accuses both inter- and intergenerational inequalities and calls for a change for social class solidification. Just as Szablewicz (2014, p. 260) argued, "The *diaosi* phenomenon, though amorphous and at times contradictory, may also be considered an emergent form of affective identification through which alternative desires and forms of mobility may be imagined and enacted."

Recently, *baifumei* has failed to make its entry into the 3rd Edition of Contemporary Chinese Standard Dictionary issued in May 2014 in the competition with other online catchwords. The dictionary editor Li Xingjian argued that the competence of being a dictionary word depends on two aspects: one is its popularity and the stability of its usage; the other is its influence upon the public opinions with a good taste. However, this decision is quite controversial²⁰. No matter how it's dismissed by Chinese mainstream culture, considering the imbalanced male/female ratio, *baifumei* as an idealized identity representation may continue to exist for a long time, especially in marital discourses. And it may regain its strength from hot social events and change semantically along with the socioeconomic development of China. Chinese youths' identities inhabitation is a widely

²⁰ http://www.baidu.com/link?url=gyY-Nf-W-evCxwjPtZSkepX6OZIMQA5Na1xDcFJfHUHGn2SCiLhTRy8BvjC5JPdxzHHkprShF0WkKtKHWHMRdGYBbAq22DMh9sgGmleyhF_7

contested and debate topic on the Internet in that it shows the values toward which population. Further studies can go into more of these identity inhabitation catchwords, in the hope of clarifying current Chinese youths' identification patterns. Besides, looking at different online groups and platforms where Chinese youths dwell and do their identity makings will enrich this study in terms of the relationship between online identification and group dynamics. All this together may provide us a more vivid picture about how Chinese youths are using Internet to voice their identity anxieties and struggles in modern China.

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