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**The Birth of Social Class Online:
The Chinese Precariat on the Internet**

The Birth of Social Class Online: The Chinese Precariat on the Internet

PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor
aan Tilburg University
op gezag van de rector magnificus,
prof. dr. E.H.L. Aarts,
in het openbaar te verdedigen ten overstaan van een
door het college voor promoties aangewezen commissie
in de aula van de Universiteit

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Caixia Du

Introduction

Let me open with a truism. The People's Republic of China (PRC) is going through a period of intense transformations. The past two decades have seen the country shift from a communist economy to a capitalist one. This shift has propelled the country to the center of economic globalization processes and to the status of a global capitalist superpower. This shift has caused massive economic and political changes, but also profoundly affected the social structure of the country, and this book will discuss one aspect of this: the emerging Chinese precariat. Guy Standing (2011a, 2014) described the precariat as 'the new dangerous class', a very large and growing mass of 'white collar' workers who experience grave socio-economic difficulties and who, in spite of advanced skills and competences, do not enjoy the fruits of economic growth and prosperity.

It is my purpose here to describe this emerging precariat in the PRC, and focus on their online behavior. The reason for this is clear: the dissatisfaction often voiced by the precariat has no place in the conventional public spheres controlled by the Chinese government; consequently, the Internet (in spite of harsh restrictions to be discussed later) becomes the only public arena where such complaints can be voiced, and where the precariat finds its footing as an emerging class in China.

Framed by an introduction and conclusion, the progression of the dissertation is quite straightforward. In the first chapter, I describe the emergence of the precariat in China and its sociohistorical context. I situate the birth of the Chinese precariat in post-socialist Chinese society as one of the consequences of China's fast developing market economy and accelerated globalization, outlining its defining features and life experiences, as well as its tensions with other social classes. In the second chapter, I give the theories and methods that this dissertation relies on. The theories I use include James Scott's theory of hidden transcripts (Scott 1990), and the theory of cultural studies from the Birmingham School (e.g. Hebdige 1979; Brake 1985). Both of these theories emphasize the significance of studying the soft side of society: its cultural aspects. Regarding methods, this dissertation revolves around online ethnography.

After these two introductory chapters, I turn to the materials with which I build my case. In Chapter 3, I review online memic communications that are used by the Chinese precariat as their new language. The use of memes is a strategic choice made by the precariat in their online communication to escape strict online policing conducted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and it is a typical 'disguised hidden transcript' in Scott's sense when it is used for resistance and community construction.

In Chapter 4, I present case studies of a unique Chinese online parodic practice conducted by the Chinese precariat, i.e. E'gao. By combining ethnographic interviews with the semiotic analysis of several E'gao videos, especially those made by Hu Ge, the best-known E'gao practitioner in China, I aim to capture the complexity and ambivalence of E'gao as a cultural expression of a shared precariat class experience and how it challenges the established order of meaning making and the legitimacy of mainstream culture. By participating in E'gao, the precariat constitutes a cultural consumption public or audience, which is small, circulating in the margins and operating on a no-budget basis, and which is different from the dominant cultural consumption public – the large mass audience of high-budget movies. In Chapter 5, I discuss Diaosi, another popular online subculture in China, which I interpret as a joint call for identity by the Chinese precariat. By identifying with Diaosi, they are trying to label themselves as a community of young helpless losers living a life opposite to the elite who are usually the second generation of the interest groups in China. Diaosi is the precariat's response to perceived social inequality, a helpless expression of their own disadvantages, an expression of self-doubt regarding their abilities, lack of confidence, and lack of self-acceptance, but also a way of producing themselves as an identifiable community. In Chapter 6, finally, I draw my conclusions and look ahead to further research.

CHAPTER 1

The Chinese precariat

1.1 A global precariat?

The recent global recession and a series of protests from Tunisia to Egypt, Greece, and Occupy Wall Street have led to attempts to conceptualize these movements and the larger implications they have for social transformation (see e.g. Castells 2012; Bailey and Brown 2012; Glasiu and Pleyers 2013; Standing 2011a, 2014; Gould-Wartofsky 2015). As reviewed by Bailey and Brown, most of these commentators tie their analysis to an argument that broader structural changes in capitalism have weakened the link between capital and labor, thereby displacing the revolutionary proletariat in the Marxian sense with a more atomized, fragmented, multitude whose relationship to work and production is much more tenuous. This new social force has been dubbed the 'precariat' (Bailey and Brown 2012: np).

Guy Standing, the writer most identified with popularizing the concept of the precariat, analyzes the impact of neo-liberalism on labor relations and the emergence of the precariat – what he sees as a new rising class (Standing 2011a, 2014). He (2011a: 7-8) first proposes a multi-tiered class system made up of an elite, a salariat, the proficiat (professionals and technicians), manual employees, “the essence of the old ‘working class,’” and the ‘precariat’ itself, “flanked by an army of unemployed and a detached group of socially ill misfits living off the dregs of society.” Standing goes on to identify the ‘class characteristics’ of the precariat:

It consists of people who have minimal trust relationships with capital or the state, making it quite unlike the salariat. And it has none of the social contract relationships of the proletariat, whereby labour securities were provided in exchange for subordination and contingent loyalty, the unwritten deal underpinning welfare states. (Standing 2011a: 8)

Standing regards the neo-liberal claim taking shape in the 1980s – ‘labor market flexibility’ – as the seed of the fast emergence of the precariat worldwide in the last two decades. He observes that as globalization proceeded, and as governments and corporations chased each other in making their labor relations more flexible, “they saw the world as an increasingly open place, where investment, employment and income would flow to where conditions were most welcoming” (Standing 2011a: 5).

As globalization made production become ‘de-territorialized’, Standing argues, so too did notions of stable, long-term employment. Stable jobs were replaced by offshoring, temporary contracts, casual labor, and peripheral and informal economies.

What remains is not the traditional standoff between capital and class-conscious industrial workers that Marx described, but a fluid, free-floating group whose relationship to production is tenuous at best and who lack a sense of clear class identification. “Millions of people, in affluent and emerging market economies, entered the precariat” (Standing 2011a: 6). Standing described this new phenomenon by means of the following distinctions between the precariat and other traditional social class categories:

The precariat was not part of the ‘working class’ or the ‘proletariat’. The latter terms suggest a society consisting mostly of workers in long-term, stable, fixed-hour jobs with established routes of advancement, subject to unionisation and collective agreements, with job titles their fathers and mothers would have understood, facing local employers whose names and features they were familiar with. (...) They were also not ‘middle-class’, as they did not have a stable or predictable salary or the status and benefits that middle-class people were supposed to possess. (Standing 2011a: 6)

It is not, Standing admits, a homogenous group. It cannot be defined by its particular relationship to work, by a particular political outlook or aims:

The teenager who flits in and out of the Internet café while surviving on fleeting jobs is not the same as the migrant who uses his wits to survive, networking feverishly while worrying about the police. Neither is similar to the single mother fretting where the money for next week’s food bill is coming from or the man in his 60s who takes casual jobs to help pay medical bills. (Standing 2011a: 13)

Standing’s definition of the precariat aroused debates. The focus of discussion is on whether the precariat is a class. Some commentators claim that precariousness is a social condition or a social category rather than a social class (see e.g. Bauman 2013; Seymour 2012). For instance, according to Bauman, the precariat is a social category. He insists that the mere similarity of the situation is not enough to transform an aggregate of individuals bearing similar characteristics into a ‘class’, and to call the precariat a class is “misleading” (Bauman 2013: np). Seymour argues that the ‘precariat’ is not a class, but a kind of popular-democratic ideology, which subjectifies one as a member of ‘the people’ in opposition to the power bloc. He writes:

It is all of us. Every one of us who is not a member of the CBI¹, not a financial capitalist, not a government minister or senior civil servant, not a top cop or guest at a Murdoch dinner party, not a judge or news broadcaster – not a member, in other words, of the ‘power bloc’, the capitalist class in its fractions, and the penumbra of bourgeois academics and

¹ Community Boating, Inc, is a non-profit community boating centre on the Charles River in Boston, Massachusetts.

professionals that surrounds it. We are all the precariat. And if we are dangerous, it is because we are about to shatter the illusory security of our rulers. (Seymour 2012: np)

While these debates sound more like a semantic issue, Bailey and Brown proposed that the increasing precariousness faced by working people under neo-liberalism is difficult to deny, so maybe it is not wise to focus on a defense of a definition of class (and of the working class) that was developed over 150 years ago under very different circumstances (Bailey and Brown 2012: np).

I agree with Standing's view of the precariat as a class rather than a social status or class condition, because as argued by Standing, "social condition does not act, it does not have human agency," which means that the precariat does have human agency; however, the precariat is "a class in the making," which can be defined with "increasing precision" (Standing 2014: 3). To elaborate this argument, Standing describes the precariat in relation with basic social variables, illustrating its connotations as a class-in-making (Standing 2014: 3-4):

- 1) the precariat has distinctive relations of production, with their labor being insecure and unstable;
- 2) the precariat also has distinctive relations of distribution, in that it relies almost entirely on money wages, usually experiencing fluctuations and never having income security;
- 3) the precariat has distinctive relations to the state, in having fewer rights than most others; fundamentally, it has rights insecurity;
- 4) the final distinctive feature is its class consciousness, which is a powerful sense of status frustration and relative deprivation shared by all of them.

While my agreement with Standing's core argument is evident, I also feel drawn to Seymour's (2012) suggestion to extend the description of the precariat to people not only of working class but also of other social layers. Thus, while I accept the existence of a precariat in China and will use this as my lead hypothesis, I intend to define it in terms of the wider scope suggested by Seymour. This way, the precariat "can be part of a system of articulations unifying those affected by it in a struggle against the power bloc" (Seymour 2012: np), and this is especially true in the case of the Chinese precariat, which displays a much higher social heterogeneity. I will discuss this point in detail in the following section.

1.2 A precariat in China?

1.2.1 China's contribution to a global precariat

Since changes to the global system of capitalist production brought about by neo-liberalism are regarded as the cause of the emergence of the precariat worldwide

(Standing 2011a), it is difficult to ignore China's contribution as an active participant in globalization in the last two decades. This is why China is an important case in Standing's discussion of a global precariat.

Standing discussed China's contribution to the global precariat at some length in his book. For example, the spread of sweatshops in the Western nations forced the local traditional proletariat to scramble for a precariat job or no job at all (Standing 2011a: 5). There is also systematic export of temporary workers.

China has taken advantage of its combination of large state corporations with access to financial capital and a huge supply of workers resigned to labour for a pittance. (...) Although some may gain skills, most are in the global precariat, a source of insecure labour that acts as a lever to lower standards for others. (Standing 2011a: 110)

Standing (2011a: 28) pointed out that China's "low wages have put downward pressure on wages in the rest of the world and widened wage differentials."

1.2.2 Migrant workers as a denizen labor force

Standing also discussed the domestic situation of the Chinese precariat. He reviewed the rapid emergence of the Chinese precariat since China enacted its 1994 Labor Law and its 2008 Labor Contract Law, which entrenched fixed-term and open-term contracts, boosting "outsourcing and triangulation as firms learn to minimize the costs that come with contracts" (Standing 2011a: 37). These developments mark a move to a multi-layered labor force in which salariat and proletariat in State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) will work alongside a growing precariat.

Along with these developments goes an increasingly flexible wage system. "In the twentieth century, the salariat and the proletariat [in China] came to rely largely on other forms of remuneration," e.g. enterprise and state benefits, "where the *danwei* ('iron rice bowl') system gave employees of state enterprises 'cradle-to-grave' benefits and services, provided they stayed compliant. [But now], the precariat relies largely on money wages" (Standing 2011a: 41).

According to Standing, the most representative of the newly emerged Chinese precariat is a large population of migrant workers in China, which has on the one hand greatly lowered the income level of the traditional working class in the city and on the other hand also greatly increased the size and scope of the precariat, as such forming a huge 'denizen' labor force. 'Denizens' is one way of depicting the precariat, as suggested by Standing. According to him,

a denizen is someone who, for one reason or another, has a more limited range of rights than citizens do: civil (...), cultural (...), social (...), economic (...) and political (...). A growing number of people around the world lack at least one of these rights, and as such

belong to the 'denizenry' rather than the citizenry, wherever they are living. (Standing 2011a: 14)

Standing pointed out that

the Chinese state has shaped a denizen labour force unlike anything else ever created. (...) Some 200 million rural migrants lured to the new industrial workshops where Chinese and foreign contractors act as intermediaries of household-name multinational corporations from all over the world. These migrants are the engine of the global precariat, [being] denizens in their own country. Because they are unable to obtain the *hukou*² residence permit, they are forced to live and work precariously, denied the rights of urban natives. (Standing 2011a: 106)

Standing also pointed out that

China's migrant labour conditions are not accidental. International brands adopted unethical purchasing practices, resulting in substandard conditions in their supply chains. (...) Local contractors have used abusive illegal methods to raise short-term efficiency, generating workplace grievances and resistance. Local Chinese officials, in collusion with enterprise management, have systematically neglected workers' rights, resulting in misery and deeper inequalities. (Standing 2011a: 107).

Since the 1980s, about 200 million Chinese peasants live outside their officially registered areas and under far less eligibility to education and government services (Luard 2005). They remain trapped at the margins of the urban society and often blamed for rising crime and unemployment; and under pressure from their citizens, the city governments have imposed discriminatory rules (Macleod and Macleod 2001).

"The tension of being a floating worker was epitomized by a survey by Renmin University in 2009, which showed that a third of young migrants aspired to build a house in their village rather than buy one in a city" (Standing 2011a: 108).

The migrants' denizen status is strengthened by the fact that they cannot sell their land or homes. Their rural anchor blocks them from acquiring roots in urban areas and prevents rural productivity and incomes from rising through land consolidation. The rural areas provide a subsidy for industrial labour, making it possible to keep money wages below subsistence level, so making those fancy commodities even cheaper for the world's consumers. (Standing 2011a: 108)

² The Hukou book, which records attributes of a household in what could best be seen as a regional entitlement status, has been dubbed 'China's No.1 Document,' for it has the omnipotent power to determine many important aspects of life, if not the fate of the majority of China's people (Tian Bingxin 2003). The Hukou system is often considered as unique to China (Goldstein and Goldstein 1991). It is a quite elaborate system of controlling and regulating internal movements of Chinese citizens (Chan 2009).

1.2.3 White-collar workers – an educated precariat?

While the term ‘denizen’ vividly describes the situation of Chinese migrant workers, migrant workers are not the only group of denizens in China. Denizen also applies well to another newly emerged precarious group – precarious white-collar workers. Standing noticed the existence of a cohort of unemployed college graduates in China and described it as follows:

Since 2006, more than a million graduates each year have become unemployed on leaving university. They have been called the Ant Tribe (Si 2009), or the Wandering Tribe, because they rush around in their networks or wander around their old campuses in a desperate effort to retain a network of support and encouragement. Groups of graduates live together on city outskirts in tiny dwellings. Three-quarters are from rural areas, lacking household registration papers. Nearly all are single, living off casual jobs paying low wages, which they share. On those wages, they would have to work for a year to buy a tiny part of their cramped dwellings. (Standing 2011a: 73)

This cohort also attracted Chinese researchers’ attention (e.g. Lian Si 2009; Chen Guozhan 2012; Liu Xiting 2012; Liu Yan 2012; Wang Hui 2013). Wang Hui (2013) terms this cohort as the ‘new poor’. Lian Si provided a vivid description of the life experiences of the ‘Ant Tribe’: “Most of them are university graduates, collectively living in some corner of the city. They have a job and a certain amount of income, while becoming increasingly frustrated encountering the grinding of a consumer society” (Lian Si 2009: 3).³ This observation is supported by an article in the *China Daily*: “They live in colonies in cramped areas. They’re intelligent and hardworking, yet anonymous and underpaid.”⁴

Chen Guozhan (2012) observed that most of the educated ‘new poor’ are not necessarily unemployed. Most of the time, they are just under-employed, having a job they do not really like. They may even work in Grade A offices with gleaming appearances, and have high expectations (and illusions) about their identity as a white-collar worker. However, there is barely a real difference with blue-collar workers when it comes to the repetitive and boring nature of work as well as to the low levels of salary obtained through such work.

In the West, this disaffected young social group is called the ‘educated precariat’ or ‘white-collar precariat’ (Estrada 2013). The crisis in Europe and elsewhere has accelerated the emergence of this new social group and making it much more visible in the media and in social and political terms according to Estrada (2013). But unions and the governments are failing to respond to their needs. Estrada observes that the ‘educated precariat’ is now center ground in the process of social change we are

³ This is my translation of Lian Si’s Chinese text. Unless otherwise specified, all translations from Chinese texts into English in this dissertation are my own.

⁴ China’s ‘ant tribe’ still struggling. *China Daily*, 14 December 2010.

experiencing today and, therefore, analyzing this educated precariat, is key to understanding such changes (Estrada 2013).

There are, however, some basic differences between the educated precariat in China and in the West. For example, while the latter emerged in a climate of economic recession and austerity affecting the entire industrialized West, the former emerged in a context of economic growth in the most populated developing country in the world.

Then what defines this new social group in the particular social context of China? Or what are its distinctive features as compared to other existing social groups? This question has to be investigated by examining the overall social class structure of China as a general context.

At present, Chinese mainstream scholars usually refer to demographics or 'jie ceng' (阶层, 'social layers' or 'strata')⁵ as the determinant of class. According to this Weberian approach to class formation through education, occupation, and social networks, Lu Xueyi divides Chinese society into ten social layers as follows (attached at the end of each item is the percentage of the social layer in question against the total Chinese population):

1. Senior government officials (2.1%)
2. Senior business executives (1.6%)
3. Private business owners (with eight or more employees) (1%)
4. Professionals (academic or technical, including teachers) (4.6%)
5. Clerical workers (including lower-level officials) (7.2%)
6. Private business owners (with seven or fewer employees) (7.1%)
7. Service industry workers (11.2%)
8. Industrial workers ('workers' in the traditional definition) (17.5%)
9. Farmers (42.7%)
10. Urban and rural unemployed or underemployed (4.8%)

Lu Xueyi (2004) explains that these ten classes have been arrived at by using a method that is not ideology-driven, but mainly driven by demographic data without revealing the influence of political power relations. This Weberian de-politicized classification method dominates as the guideline for mainstream social class research in China. Chinese mainstream sociologists might avoid words like 'class' and use terms like 'social layers' or 'social strata' instead, but Chinese people articulate a different opinion about the social class reality in China, thanks to the Internet.

As observed by Lu Rachel (2014), in 2014, on the Chinese web, a popular (anonymous) post titled *A Guide to Social Class in Modern China*⁶ went around, offering a revealing dissection of China's current class structure, dividing society into nine tiers, describing the first three tiers as the 'ruling class' and the bottom three as

⁵ 'Social layers' or 'strata' is my translation of the Chinese term 'jie ceng' (阶层).

⁶ This post is anonymous, and has been reposted in many other websites, e.g. at <https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/media/guide-social-class-modern-china>. Retrieved 7 May 2016.

the 'underclass'. In this post, the division was based on political power and connection as much as on wealth and prestige, reflecting the fact that the ruling Communist Party plays an extraordinarily large role in the distribution of social goods in China. The following is a summary of this post as cited in Lu Rachel (2014):

Tier 1: The Head Honchos. They include current members of the Communist Party Politburo, which oversees the ruling party and certain retired members of the Standing Committee, the highly selective sub-committee of the Politburo that essentially runs China. Tier 1 has the power to set the agenda and make decisions regarding national and international policy. There are probably about 30 people in China who can be considered a member of this elusive class.

Tier 2: The Bigwigs. They include ministers and provincial-level heads with substantive power, retired Politburo members, and certain politically connected business magnates, tycoons and bankers. There are probably about 200 people in China who can be considered tier 2. Members of tier 2 have direct influence on national policymaking.

Tier 3: The Powerbrokers. They include ministers and provincial-level heads with less power, owners of top companies like Tencent or Alibaba, regional magnates and very wealthy businesspeople and chancellors of elite universities. There are probably about 4,000 to 5,000 people who can be considered tier 3. Members of tier 3 exert some influence over the development of certain regions or industries.

Tier 4: The Privileged. They include municipal or county-level party heads, prominent university professors, owners of medium- to large-sized companies, top managers at large corporations, well-known doctors and lawyers and famous writers and celebrities. There are probably 5 million to 10 million people who can be considered tier 4. Those in tier 4 have ties to the ruling class, and due to these ties they have obtained sufficient political, economic and cultural resources to feel safe to remain as the core middle class.

Tier 5: The Comfortable. They include mid-level party cadres with power over certain pockets of local policy, successful small- to medium-sized business owners, university professors, mid-managers of large corporations, owners of sizeable real estate property in large cities and reputable doctors, lawyers, and engineers. There are probably 100 million people who can be considered tier 5. Members of tier 5 do not have direct ties with the ruling class, but indirectly rely on local institutional powers to acquire economic and cultural resources and as the result they have control over their careers.

Tier 6: The Squeezed. They include ordinary civil servants, white-collar workers, ordinary doctors, lawyers, and engineers and modestly successful small business owners. There are probably 200 million to 300 million people who can be considered tier 6. Those in tier 6 have social mobility to ascend to tier 5 or even to tier 4.

Tier 7: The Marginalized. They include ordinary factory workers, owners of mom and pop shops, urban residents with odd jobs and wealthy peasants. There are probably 500 million people who can be considered tier 7. Those in tier 7 have the means to subsist in medium to large Chinese cities. They are living in the city but are marginalized.

Tier 8: The Underclass. They include migrant workers in sweatshops and ordinary peasants. There are probably 400 million who can be considered tier 8. Those in tier 8 can eke out a living on their own. They are basically ordinary peasants either working on their farm or in a city as a migrant worker.

Tier 9: The Destitute. They include long-term unemployed urban residents and impoverished peasants in far-flung rural areas. There are probably 100 million people who can be considered members of tier 9. (Lu Rachel 2014: np)

This online post on Chinese social class structure shows that contemporary social stratification in China features a re-emerging class hierarchy based on education, income, and personal assets obtained through political resources and competition in China's revived markets.

First, it reflects the impact of political factors. According to this post, the top four tiers, including the ruling class and the upper level of the middle class, which are usually regarded as the elite class, all have political resources. Whether or not one has political resources determines if a person can become an elite member.

This post also reflects the effect of new production and distribution relations under the logic of a neo-liberal market economy. Tier 5, the comfortable, is basically composed of people who benefit from China's market economy, the winners in the market, who are basically the new middle class that emerged after China's introduction to the market economy. What is more relevant to this study, the class analysis in this post touches on the emergence of the precariat. For example, tier 6, the lower middle class, is called "squeezed" in this post, and tier 7 is called "marginalized", reflecting the sense of marginalization, deprivation and insecurity felt by the group members. These feelings are exactly the defining features of the precariat as described by Standing (2011a). In this sense, this post, while delineating deep political factors for the status quo of China's social class structure, also coincides with Standing's multi-tiered class system in indicating the emergence of the precariat as the result of neo-liberal globalization.

According to this online version of stratification of Chinese society, the educated precariat find themselves basically in tier 6 and tier 7, wandering between the squeezed lower-level middle class and the marginalized city dwellers. Clearly, the author(s) of this post consider it as part of the middle class.

If categorized in a Marxian sense, the educated precariat community can be included into the middle class, but the term 'middle class' is really clumsy as a label to describe social formations, especially in today's China where the concept of 'middle class' is a foreign word, and where social structural transformations might display a much more complex and heterogeneous picture than in the West. This is why there are many debates about the legitimacy of 'middle class' as a term to describe social formation in China.

China watchers around the world are nearly unanimous in recognizing the country's rapid economic growth over the past three decades. Even more remarkable

is the fact that China has seen a significant portion of the population become affluent rapidly (see e.g. Zhou Xiaohong 2008; Cheng Li 2010). This trend has prompted foreign media to state that “China has stepped into a middle-class era” (Zhou Xiaohong 2008: 122).

Yet the use of the term Chinese ‘middle class’ remains controversial in academic circles. On the one hand, Lu Xueyi and like-minded sociologists⁷ believe that the concept of middle class is useful, and insist on the emergence of a middle class in China as a fact. They even claim that the 21st century will be the ‘golden age’ of the growth of China’s middle class (Yang Jing 2010: 451). On the other hand, some scholars are hesitant to acknowledge the existence of a Chinese middle class by claiming that “the so-called middle class in China is no more than a myth invented by media reporters and scholars” (Cai Zhenfeng 2004: np). Goodman (2008: 24) argues that the upper-level middle-class people in China are less the new middle class than a future central part of the ruling class.

One reason why people challenge the existence of a middle class in China can be attributed to the debates between ‘middle class’ and ‘middle-class society’. According to Niu Wenyan (as quoted in Zhong Xiaohong 2008: 113), a middle-class society is supposed to meet five standards: (1) a rate of urbanization of over 70%; (2) a white-collar work force of the same, if not larger, size than the blue-collar one; (3) an Engel coefficient⁸ lower than 0.3 on average; (4) maintenance of the Gini coefficient⁹ between 0.25 and 0.30; and (5) an average term of over 12 years of education for an individual.

However, as observed by Zhou Xiaohong (2008: 122), after three decades of reforms and opening-up, the former ‘pyramid’ styled social structure of China has only been replaced by an ‘onion’ structure, one with a slightly expanded middle part and an even bigger outer part. It is hard to say that China has entered a middle-class era as Chinese society is far from a middle-class society.

The second point that makes people skeptical about the existence of the middle class in China is people’s overemphasis on the amount of assets owned, at the cost of total ignorance of the occupational characteristics of the modern middle class (Zhou Xiaohong 2008). According to Zhou Xiaohong, the conventional Chinese translation for the term ‘middle class’ is 中产阶级, which means ‘the middle property class’. Obviously, this translation indicates an income-oriented criterion, overemphasizing the amount of assets owned, at the cost of ignorance of other characteristics of the modern middle class.

⁷ E.g. Lu Xueyi (2002, 2004, 2012), Li Chunling (2012), Li Peilin (2011), a group of researchers in The Institute of Sociology at CASS (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences), which assumed a leading role in research on China’s class structure.

⁸ Proportion of family income that is spent on food. It receives its name in honor to the German statistician Ernst Engel (1821-1896).

⁹ The Gini coefficient (also known as the Gini index or Gini ratio) is a measure of statistical dispersion intended to represent the income distribution of a nation’s residents, and is the most commonly used measure of inequality.

In an online article entitled *The concept of 'middle class' misinterpreted: High income does not mean high quality*, the author argues:

As far as an individual is concerned, the middle-class does not mean comfort and luxury, but responsibility and devotion (...) The very reason why the middle-class is a social group with extraordinary sense of social responsibility lies in the fact that the middle-class people have full supply of the necessities of life. (Wen Wen 2005 as quoted in Zhou Xiaohong 2008: 114)

The third question being debated is some researchers' insistence that the creation of a middle class is not only an objective process but also a subjective process – the term 'bourgeois' would emphasize this more subjective, sociocultural aspect. In defining the formation of a class, one has to consider the consciousness of the members of the group. In other words, it depends on "the extent to which members of the group are aware of the reality of the group and of their own membership in it" (Centers 1949 as quoted in Chen Jie 2013: 75).

The hype of the term 'middle class' in China encounters negative reactions in some interviews with people who are categorized as middle-class. According to an article commenting on China's middle class titled *'House slave', 'Car slave', and 'Kid's slave': The confusion of 'being made middle-class'*¹⁰ after the release of *The Report on Beijing's Social Construction* in 2010, a survey was conducted online by netizens themselves, and it turned out that 68.7% of the middle class defined by the report do not identify themselves as such. A person interviewed by the author of this article said, "We are middle-class? We are no more than a group of slaves for the bank!" The income criterion of 5,923.18 yuan monthly (about \$884) for middle-class is also questioned and criticized. Another interviewee quoted in this article, Liu Xing, said: "I think this income criterion is too low. In cities like Beijing, with this income you can only keep your family fed, it is impossible to buy a car or a house with it." With a salary exceeding 10,000 yuan (about \$1493), a car, a house, and a job in a bank, 29-years-old Liu Xing could surely be considered middle-class. However, as argued by himself, after deducting the loan for the house and car, his disposable income only remains 2000 yuan a month. "I can't even afford to buy a set of expensive clothes; how can I call myself middle-class?" Liu Xing complained. Thus we see that the desire for middle-class property and behavior (a 'bourgeois' desire, one could say) does not presuppose effective access to such levels of material property. Many people who do not objectively belong to the middle class, consequently, have (subjective) bourgeois dreams and aspirations.

Arguably, the most important debate regarding the Chinese middle class is about the potential implications its development will have for China's political system. There is a long-standing Western maxim postulating that there exists a dynamic correlation between the expansion of the middle class and political democratization (see e.g.

¹⁰ Source: <http://money.hexun.com/2010-07-28/124392840.html>, retrieved 23 July 2012.

Barrington 1966; Lipset 1959). It is believed that a professionally educated, politically moderate, and economically self-assured middle class is an important precondition for an eventual transition to democracy. However, empirical studies find that certain widely perceived correlations between the middle class and political democratization in Western countries are simply absent in China (Cheng Li 2010: 19).

Despite all these opposing voices, the middle class remains a hot topic in both media and academic circles. According to Cheng Li (2010), the first reason for this middle class hype is the Chinese business community's drive to promote the image of Chinese consumers as potentially the "world's largest middle-class market"; the second is the Chinese government's decision to "enlarge the size of the middle-income group" (Cheng Li 2010: 8).

Since we cannot deny the emergence of affluent middle-income groups in economically capitalist China, middle-class is still a useful touchstone concept for discussions of China's social class structure (Lu Xueyi 2012), and the identification of middle-class (or 'bourgeois') behavior does not necessarily entail an equation with earlier middle classes in other societies (Goodman 2008: 24)

However, there is a point that has to be taken into account: the middle class in China is a middle class with Chinese characteristics. The debates mentioned above reveal one distinctive characteristic of the Chinese middle class: complexity and heterogeneity. The middle class is made up of different elements and is itself often regarded as stratified (Goodman 2008: 23), but the middle class in China provides a more complicated case. As illustrated by the classification of the middle class in the online version of China's social class structure, political factors and neo-liberal market economy both play a role in the formation of a Chinese middle class.

In the same vein, Li Lulu, a professor of sociology at Renmin University in Beijing, found that there are three vastly different means or channels through which individuals can obtain middle-class status. Li Lulu and his associates created the terms "power-based executive-type access", "market-driven access", and "social network-linked access" to characterize these three channels. In other words, various groups – such as the Communist Party and government officials, entrepreneurs, professionals, and cultural elites – all have a share in China's emerging middle class (as quoted in Cheng Li 2010: 18).

Members of tier 4 as described above (Lu Rachel 2014), are the upper middle-class who basically obtained middle-class status through 'power-based executive-type access' and 'social network-linked access', while tier 5 and tier 6, the middle-level and lower-level middle class acquired their middle-class status mainly by 'market-driven access'. Thus, the three levels of middle-class in China, coming from different social backgrounds and possessing different types of social resources, obtain middle-class status through different channels. They consequently have developed different social networks, different cultural tastes and different feelings in terms of security.

The 'squeezed' in the lower-level middle class, where the educated precariat finds itself, are even more different from other levels of middle-class. They have distinctive

relations of production, i.e. instability of employment, distinctive relations of distribution, i.e. money wages without income security, distinctive relations to the state, i.e. fewer social rights than the upper classes, and a distinctive collective consciousness, i.e. a sense of insecurity, frustration and deprivation (Lu 2014). These distinctive social relations distinguish the educated white-collar precariat from other levels of middle-class, and constitute a part of the precariat class that is still in the making.

1.3 Defining features of the educated precariat

Liu Yan (2012) examined what I see as the educated precariat in the transformation of Chinese society from socialism to post-socialism. He found that the new poor are the product of capitalism's change from an industrial economy to a financial and knowledge economy, from a physical economy to a virtual economy. China is still in the transient stage, the knowledge economy has not been well established, and thus cannot provide enough satisfying positions for a large number of college graduates who emerged as a result of the commercialization of higher education since the 1990s. However, employment is not the only thing that worries them. Compared with their counterparts in the West and in other democratic developing countries, the Chinese precariat has even less citizen rights. If the precariat in a democratic country is told "that it must answer to market forces and be infinitely adaptable" (Standing 2011a: 24), the precariat in China is told that it must answer to the market as well as the CCP and be infinitely adaptable. They get frustrated by underemployment, status inconsistency, limited career opportunities, or the lack of civil, cultural, social, economic and political rights.

This section will elaborate on their life experiences based on four defining features of the precariat in terms of social relations, proposed by Standing (2014: 3-4):

- 1) the precariat has distinctive relations of production, with their labor being insecure and unstable;
- 2) the precariat also has distinctive relations of distribution, in that it relies almost entirely on money wages, usually experiencing fluctuations and never having income security;
- 3) the precariat has distinctive relations to the state, in having fewer rights than most others; fundamentally, it has rights insecurity;
- 4) the final distinctive feature is its class consciousness, which is a powerful sense of status frustration and relative deprivation shared by all of them.

1.3.1 Employment insecurity

“Unemployment is a part of life in the precariat” (Standing 2011a: 45). According to a survey conducted among graduates for the year 2009 in universities in Beijing and Shanghai, by the end of March 2009, the rate of employment was 36% and 41% for the two cities respectively.¹¹ While in Wuhan, a second-tier city in central China, by 23 March 2009, the employment rate publicized by the local government was only 20.56% (Yan Xingfang 2012: 253). However, these figures, as pointed out by Yan Xingfang (2012: 253), “include graduates who had already applied for the post-graduate degree, or decided to go abroad, or decided to set up their own business.” This indicates a higher unemployment rate if only counting the graduates who had signed a contract with a specific company. For example, by the end of March 2009, the officially publicized rate of contract employment for graduates in Guangdong province was only 8.45%, which means that among 0.33 million graduates in Guangdong, about 0.3 million had not found a job till then.¹²

According to Zhao Litao and Huang Yanjie (2010: 2), “the problem of educated unemployment first appeared in 2003 with the graduation of the 1999 cohort [1999 is the first year that China expanded higher education on a large scale]. As many as 750,000 college graduates could not find a job upon graduation,” and the number has kept soaring since then. In 2013, almost 7 million college graduates poured into China’s labor market, the highest number ever recorded in the PRC’s history. According to a survey by MyCOS, a data firm in Beijing (Gu Yongqiang 2013), by the end of April 2013, only 35% of soon-to-be college graduates had found jobs, applied for postgraduate education, or decided to go abroad. According to a report by Finance.Sina.com,¹³ by the end of July 2014, among 7.27 million college graduates, only 38% had found jobs. According to this report, if excluding to-be postgraduates, to-be abroad students, and to-be entrepreneurs, the employment rate was only 7%.

Unemployment is not the only problem facing college graduates. The oversupply of college graduates has also caused underemployment. Glyde, Snyder and Stemberger (1975: 2) define underemployment as “an employment condition where workers’ acquired skills exceed their job requirements; workers are over-trained for the work that they actually perform.” As observed by Schucher (2014: 4), “members of a large youth cohort may also face underemployment, mismatch, or other forms of inadequate employment that frustrate and discourage them.” Notably in developing countries such as China, when the expansion of higher education calls for more positions in the knowledge economy, there are simply not enough suitable jobs, or only rather precarious ones in the informal sector. Underemployment has two

¹¹ See <http://view.news.qq.com/a/20090421/000043.htm>, retrieved 15 May 2013.

¹² Guangzhou Daily, 30 March 2009, http://gzdaily.dayoo.com/html/2009-03/30/content_519130.htm, retrieved 4 July 2011.

¹³ <http://finance.sina.com.cn/china/20140801/232819891195.shtml>, retrieved 26 November 2014.

symptoms and consequences: bringing down the average wage levels, as many are forced to take low-paying jobs, and causing labor market mismatch.

According to a study conducted by the Beijing Youth Stress Management Service Center¹⁴ that surveyed some 16,000 college graduates, expected salaries have been dropping for the previous two years. University graduates entering the workforce in 2013 expected to earn a meager 3,683 yuan (about \$549) per month, a figure down by 1,000 yuan (about \$149) from 2012. The new low in 2013 marks a nearly 2,000 yuan (about \$298) drop from a high of 5,537 yuan (about \$826) in 2011. According to this study, “the only possible interpretation is that 2013 graduates are aligning their expectations with the reality of the severe lack of job opportunities,” said an unnamed researcher from the center, who had been doing research for five years. The report also indicates that graduates prefer to work in second-tier cities, such as provincial capitals, instead of Beijing and Shanghai, to avoid high home prices or rent and intense competition. Students are also more likely to register for entrance exams to graduate schools to avoid the pressures of seeking work in the current job market.

However, the above figures are only about the graduates’ expectation; what the graduates finally get is even less. According to a national survey by a consulting firm included in *The Blue Book of China’s Society*,¹⁵ the starting monthly pay of college graduates was barely 1,825 yuan (about \$272) for degree holders in 2009 and only 1,375 yuan (about \$205) for diploma holders.

Another symptom of underemployment is labor market mismatch. According to the online version of China’s social class structure discussed above, tier 6 and tier 7, where most precarious white collar workers find themselves, don’t have as much control over their career as people in tier 5 do, and they don’t like their job as much as people of other occupations do in the same social group, for example doctors or lawyers.

China is waking up to a potentially damaging mismatch in its labor market. According to a report titled *China taps tech training to tackle labor market mismatch* by NBSC (National Bureau of Statistics of China) on 8 June 2014,¹⁶ China’s job market in recent years has been suffering from a shortage of skilled workers. Many university and college students are ill equipped to fill those jobs. According to a survey conducted by the China Education Research Institute (Peng Niya 2014) among employed graduates, only 30.6% of the science graduates found a job matching their major in college, and the figure for humanities graduates was only 21.6%. 70.67% of the employed college graduates surveyed would like to change their current job if possible,

¹⁴ <http://finance.sina.com.cn/china/20140801/232819891195.shtml>, retrieved 21 March 2015.

¹⁵ *The Blue Book of China’s Society* (社会蓝皮书), is a series of annual reports edited by sociologists from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). With over 1.3 billion people and continuous economic growth, Chinese society is experiencing changes on an unprecedented scale. These yearbooks collect influential articles written by prominent sociologists in China that wrestle with social developments of the previous year and address predicted changes for the approaching year.

¹⁶ <http://www.cnbc.com/2014/06/08/china-taps-tech-training-to-tackle-labor-market-mismatch.html>, retrieved 8 December 2015.

and among them, about 60% expressed that they would choose to quit because of profession mismatch.¹⁷ According to the NBSC, in the year 2014, the number of migrant workers who have a college degree is about 20 million, covering 7.3% of the whole migrant worker population.¹⁸

A paradigmatic, almost grotesque example of labor market mismatch was this: a warehouse keeping position in Xiamen city demanded a master's degree as qualification requirement.¹⁹ This story was reported by *China News* on 4 February 2012. Status inconsistency is an experience closely connected with unemployment and underemployment encountered by the educated precariat. In July 2009, an article titled *A 21-year-old girl's despair*²⁰ in the *Sunday Telegraph* (25 July 2009) attracted much attention:

July [of 2009] was supposed to have marked the start of Liu Wei's new life. With more than six million other students across China, the 21-year-old was due to graduate from college this month. For Miss Liu, the daughter of poor farmers, a degree was to be her passport out of a life of poverty, a way to escape working in the fields, or toiling as a humble migrant worker in a far-off factory in southern China. But her dream of making the huge leap from farm girl to college graduate will never become reality. Deeply depressed and ashamed about her failure to find a job to take up when she graduated, and consumed with guilt about the financial sacrifices her family had made for her, Miss Liu brought her studies and her life to a premature end by drowning herself in a ditch full of freezing, filthy water.

The *Sunday Telegraph* commented on Liu Wei's story as follows:

For the children of China's 700 million farmers, like Liu Wei, it is the only realistic route out of a life of backbreaking work for subsistence wages. Miss Liu's parents knew that, and encouraged her to pursue her dream. 'She was an excellent student. She won a scholarship to the best school in the county because of her high scores. It was a big honour for the family,' said Mr. Liu. From the moment she began at university, Liu Wei was aware of the sacrifices her family was making to keep her there. In a diary entry from her first year, she recorded her desire to repay them. 'My goal is to study hard, get a good job and provide for my family. If I cannot do that, then it is impossible to say that I have a good life,' she wrote. Towards the end of her second year, she began job-hunting. Like most students, she started to attend the job fairs that take place between February and June. They are dispiriting occasions. [Her failures in job hunting] left her

¹⁷ http://www.nies.net.cn/zy/wjdc/201410/t20141027_316370.html, retrieved 5 May 2015.

¹⁸ http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/201504/t20150429_797821.html, retrieved 14 November 2015.

¹⁹ See more about this report at <http://www.chinanews.com/edu/2012/02-04/3644793.shtml>, retrieved 24 July 2014.

²⁰ See more about this report at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/5907368/Wave-of-suicide-sweeps-Chinas-graduate-class.html>, retrieved 24 July 2014.

utterly despondent. 'I am a college student but I can't find a job. How ashamed will I be when I have to go back to my village after I graduate?'

Another vignette was provided by one of my relatives, Weijia, who works in a small private company in Qingdao – a second-tier city in east China. He does not like his job at all, but in order to sustain life, he tries to bear it. Weijia is from a big but poor peasantry family with four siblings. In 2004, he scored the highest in his county in the national entrance exam, and went to a privileged university. He became a celebrity in the county when he went to the university. Everyone, especially his parents expected so much of him and hoped that upon graduation he would find a good job in the government or a large company, which could help change his as well as the whole family's fate. But this expectation turned out to be an illusion. He could not find a position in the government or any big company. Finally, he had to accept a job in a small private company, which he does not like at all. Although now he is already the vice-manager of the company and has been working very hard, with his salary he can only afford his house and car loan (Fieldwork notes July 2013). In the summer of 2013, when I visited Weijia, after several bottles of beer, he kept sighing:

I really don't like my job, but I just cannot quit. My major in college is chemistry, and my ideal job is to be a chemical engineer. But now I am forced to do marketing, and sometimes, to meet order deadlines, I am even requested to participate in the production along with workers. Another problem is money. With 6000 yuan (about \$896) per month without any additional insurance, I can only pay the house and car loan, gas and daily expenses, and then there is nothing left. Life to me is just like a paying game. I talked several times with my boss, but he kept complaining about the bad business, and had no sincere intention to make any change at all. The work itself is high pressure, but again doable if approached the right way. Unfortunately, this firm has an incredible degree of drama, intrigue, petty politicking and incompetence. I really want to change my job, but I am not sure about the future. In this economy, for people without solid social networks like me, ideal jobs are rare and scarce. Now I am a husband and father, I cannot afford to be stuck in an unstable situation. I also feel sorry for my parents. They sacrificed so much to support my university study expecting that I could stand out after graduation. But I let them down. The upshot is that I'm going nuts. For the last month I've had trouble sleeping. And I have constant headaches and feel emotionally drained. (Fieldwork notes April 2014)

What Liu Wei and Weijia were suffering from is what Standing (2011a) calls 'status inconsistency,' i.e. people who have a relatively high formal education but are forced to accept jobs or income well below those considered in accordance with their qualifications.

People with a relatively high level of formal education, who have to accept jobs that have a status or income beneath what they believe accord with their qualifications, are likely to suffer from status frustration. This sentiment has been prevalent in the youth precariat in Japan. (Kosugi 2008 as quoted by Standing 2011a: 10)

From 1977, when China introduced the National Entrance Examination, to 1995, college students in China were called Tianzhijiaozi (天之骄子, literally 'son of God'). Getting enrolled in a college at that time meant having obtained 'the iron bowl' with everything being ensured by the state – from a job to every other aspect of life.²¹ However, as observed by Lian Si (2009), since 1995, the marketization of higher education has gradually changed 'the sons of God' into 'the ants on the ground': "They don't match adjectives such as 'pride' or 'privilege' anymore, but are 'helpless' and 'grief-stricken'" (Lian Si 2009: 2).

As observed by Estrada (2013: np):

The consequence of this 'status inconsistency' is a genuine frustration, and even social resentment in many of these people. Keeping this in mind is very important when analyzing the possible social and political behavior of the 'educated precariat'. In their view, they have met with society's requirements, making a considerable effort to train and qualify and then society has failed them (...) It can be summarized, more colloquially, by the phrase that many children, graduates and unemployed or on precarious work contracts reproach their parents: 'You lied to me. I've studied, I've done everything you've told me and it has not served for anything.'

1.3.2 Consumption anxiety

Lian Si (2009: 3) described the life of the educated precariat as follows:

Most of them are university graduates, collectively living in some corner of the city. They have a job and a certain amount of income, while becoming increasingly frustrated encountering the grinding of a consumer society.

This description points to two important aspects of the educated precariat's life: first, most of them cannot afford a house in the city and have to live in the slums, ghetto areas, or 'urban villages'. Second, it reflects these young people's anxiety related to consumption. In a country where every aspect of life starts to be defined by norms of consumption, when their income and social rights cannot provide what they are supposed to consume, they feel anxious.

Liu Xiting (2012) quotes Bauman's (1998) explanation of Chinese white-collar precariat: if 'being poor' once derived its meaning from the condition of being

²¹ 'College Students in the 1980s – Son of God ensured by the state.' www.southcn.com, 21 August 2009, see <http://job.chsi.com.cn/jydz/jygz/200908/20090821/33349043.html>, retrieved 25 November 2012.

unemployed, today it draws its meaning primarily from the plight of a flawed consumer – the frustration of ‘bourgeois’ aspirations as to lifestyle and identity, in short. This distinction truly makes a difference in the way poverty is experienced and in the chances to redeem one’s misery (Bauman 1998: 85). And Liu Xiting (2012) goes on to analyze the new poor in China: being a new poor in a new consumer society means being excluded from a ‘normal life’, the failure to meet the criteria for success, and feelings of shame and guilt. When a consumer society is trying hard to teach its members how to experience the new consumer life, for the new poor, what they are suffering from is not only material poverty, but also feelings of loss and deprivation (Liu Xiting 2012). Buying a house in today’s China is such a form of consumption that worries most of the educated precariat.

Regarding China’s housing policy, after the welfare period of 1949-1977, and the dual provision period of 1978-1998, China has entered the market-dominant period (Deng Wenjing, Hoekstra and Elsinga 2015). After the housing reform decree in 1998, the central government has officially forbidden work units to provide reformed housing to their employees, although they continued to do so on a smaller scale. In this market-dominant period of housing provision, commodity housing is the main housing tenure promoted in Chinese policies (Deng Wenjing, Hoekstra and Elsinga 2015: 10). From 1999 to 2011, the Gross Domestic Production of the real estate industry increased 20% annually (Deng Wenjing, Hoekstra and Elsinga 2015: 11)

One of the consequences of the marketization of housing is soaring house prices. According to the statistics published by City Property,²² in August 2015, the average house price in 20 leading cities in China is 18,216 yuan (about \$2719) per square meter, with Shenzhen as the highest with 39,170 yuan (about \$5846) per square meter, and Taizhou the lowest with 10,736 yuan (about \$1602) yuan per square meter.

In April 2015, a Chinese magazine, the *New Weekly*, conducted a survey on its official website and Sina Weibo²³ about life in the post-1980s. The 2521 people surveyed contributed valid information. According to this survey, about 80% of the post-1980s have savings of less than 100,000 yuan (about \$14,925), far less than the sum needed to pay the down payment on a house. 34% of them choose to rent a house, and 18% live with their parents. Only 29% of the post-1980s-generation members included in the survey, have managed to buy a house by paying the down payment, but only 14% of them paid off the loan. Regarding the money to buy a house, about 26% of them admitted that their parents paid most of the money, and they only paid a small percentage. 19.48% of the surveyed said that the house was totally paid for by their parents, and only 14% paid the house by themselves.²⁴

Similar anxieties can be noticed among the educated precariat towards other aspects of consumption behavior. For example, the iPhone in China has a nickname,

²² <http://www.cityhouse.cn/default/forsalerank.html>, retrieved 21 June 2013.

²³ Sina Weibo is a Chinese microblogging website, known as a hybrid of Twitter and Facebook.

²⁴ http://www.weibo.com/1653689003/Bsr0G50tK?type=comment#_rnd1436097766163, retrieved 9 November 2015.

'kidney' (肾, shen). Whenever a new version of iPhone is released, social media users will call it 'Shen 5' or 'Shen 6' instead of 'iPhone 5' or 'iPhone 6'. This nickname indicates that if precariat members want to buy an iPhone, they need to sell one of their kidneys. Such a bitter nickname reflects the precariat's anxiety and helplessness facing the dominant middle-class consumption norms.

1.3.3 Denizens

Historically the demands for citizenship rights emerged in response to the growing power of the modern state. Originally, the demand for citizenship involved the enjoyment of legal and political rights, but early in the twentieth century, citizenship was redefined to also include social or welfare rights.²⁵

Derived from the term citizen, Standing defines a denizen as "someone who, for one reason or another, has a more limited range of rights than ['full'] citizens do": civil, cultural, social, economic and political rights. He also points out that "a growing number of people around the world lack at least one of these rights, and as such belong to the 'denizenry' rather than the citizenry, wherever they are living (Standing 2011a: 14).

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, Standing (2011a) gave a detailed description of Chinese rural migrant workers who work precariously without a Hukou of the cities they work in and therefore are denied the rights of urban natives. Similarly, the educated precariat often do not have a Hukou of the city where they stay either, and thus do not have the welfare benefits attached to it. According to Beijing's Hukou regulations, college graduates can only obtain a Beijing Hukou through recruitment by working units that have Hukou quota. These units are usually departments and institutions of the Beijing government, central government of China, or state-owned enterprises. The positions provided are quite few. In 2014, there were 110,000 graduates from the non-Beijing area hunting for a job in Beijing, but the quota for obtaining a Beijing Hukou was below 10,000. Thus, it is extremely difficult for a fresh graduate without powerful social networks to be recruited and get a Beijing Hukou.²⁶

In 2014, about 50,000 graduates started to work in Beijing, with only 10,000 of them registered as a Hukou holder, which means that for that year, about 80% of them joined the denizenry precariat in Beijing. This number is said to be growing: in 2015, the quota was reduced by 17% compared to 2014. Thus, it is a fact that most graduates have to work in big cities without access to social and welfare rights enjoyed by the local citizens. In other words, they are denizens just like the migrant workers.

The educated precariat does have something, however. This is why some of them are categorized as part of the middle class, although at the bottom level. It can be a

²⁵ Unesco, <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/international-migration/glossary/citizenship/>, retrieved 24 March 2016.

²⁶ See more at <http://finance.qq.com/a/20140802/007386.htm>, retrieved 3 November 2015.

high degree, a white-collar job, a fixed salary, or a nice girlfriend/boyfriend;²⁷ but at the same time, they always also miss something. They are part of the denizenry and therefore they do not feel safe.

1.3.4 Structure of feeling: Anxiety, anomie, alienation and anger

In addition to the material poverty to cope with consuming, the educated precariat is also being condemned to be 'spiritually' poor due to a lack of critical spirit and social responsibility (Chen Guozhan 2012). Standing (2011a) described a set of feelings shared by the precariat as the four A's: anxiety, anomie, alienation and anger. All these feelings can be found in the Chinese white-collar precariat.

Anxiety

Anxiety is a major characteristic of this group's condition.

The precariat lives with anxiety – chronic insecurity associated not only with teetering on the edge, knowing that one mistake or one piece of bad luck could tip the balance between modest dignity and being a bag lady, but also with a fear of losing what they possess even while feeling cheated by not having more. (Standing 2011a: 20)

Uncertainty creates uninsurable risks for them. The promise that a high degree can translate into a middle-class future proves to be a dream; the idea that a job gives an identity to be proud of is hollow and false to them, since most of their white-collar jobs are boring and mechanical, not to mention the blue-collar jobs they have to take when they cannot find a white-collar one. In a consumer society, the satisfaction and fulfillment known to the upper and middle class through consuming, is unknown to them. The idea of a college degree as a key route to fulfillment, meaning identity, wellbeing and happiness is a mirage for them since most members of this community stay single and far away from their parents. They are anxious to get a decent job, to become a real middle-class member, to buy commodities they think can match their taste, to marry a beautiful girl or boy and live a happy life. All these were once promised by advanced degree education; but now, it is a just hollow dream.

Anomie

Anomie is a feeling of passivity born out of despair. This is surely intensified by the prospect of art-less, career-less jobs. There is despair, in the lower reaches of the group, that an escape to a better life is not possible. Prospects are low in the precariat, social mobility is rare, and the possibility of improved and secure material living standards seems remote. Thus, the group is increasingly excluded from the

²⁷ To say to have a nice girlfriend/boyfriend is one of the defining features of a member of the middle class in China. It is based on an interpretation of China's mainstream criteria of success, in which, being heterosexual is the norm.

mainstream of society. This process of exclusion is giving rise to a particular mindset among the precariat (Standing 2011a). In case of the Chinese educated precariat, when they find themselves not matching the norms of the mainstream society, they are increasingly excluded and marginalized, and the mainstream society becomes rigid and lacks mobility, they would say: "Ok, I give up. I admit I am a loser, but only according to your rules of the game."²⁸ They stop trusting the capital, the state and the culture of mainstream society, and they begin to set up new norms.

Alienation

Standing (2011a: 20) explains that "alienation arises from knowing that what one is doing is not for one's own purpose or for what one could respect or appreciate." Members of the precariat are forced to do too many things, which they do not want to do in the sphere of employment. This results in the presentation of an image of the self that is contrary to a more desirable idea of the self as an autonomous entity who has a say in the major dimensions of how to live one's life. Such aspirations are dashed in the everyday lived experience of low pay and economic insecurity. Simultaneously, members of the precariat are not able to engage in roles and activities that do help to produce the possibility of a coherent and autonomous self. This also means that the precariat is at the same time overemployed, working long hours in low paid insecure jobs in the struggle to make ends meet, and underemployed, since these jobs do not require many of the skills, aptitudes or enthusiasm that characterize a flourishing human being. Thus, the precariat is alienated from itself, from each other and from others outside the precariat (Standing 2011a).

Anger

Unsurprisingly, the combination of the above factors is causing increasing anger among the precariat. "The anger stems from frustration at the seemingly blocked avenues for advancing a meaningful life and from a sense of relative deprivation" (Standing 2011a: 19). When the precariat is increasingly excluded from the mainstream of society, this process of exclusion is giving rise to a particular mindset among the precariat, i.e. anxiety of status inconsistency and a deep sense of deprivation as observed by Standing (2011a).

Consider Figure 1.1. In 2012, a global survey found that nearly eight out of ten Chinese workers are under growing pressure at work, as China leads the world toward economic recovery.

This survey by Regus, a US-based provider of workplace solutions, was a follow-up of an earlier one in August 2009. Here they polled 16,000 workers in 80 countries during 2011. It found that 48% of the workers globally felt more stress in the workplace than before. According to the survey, 75% of the Chinese workers polled said their stress level had risen in the past year. Their stress mainly comes from work, worries about their individual financial status and clients/bosses, while in the Western

²⁸ See post on <http://tieba.baidu.com/p/2001481295>, retrieved 27 July 2015.

world the main factor is the consequences of economic recession. The 2009 one showed similar results.

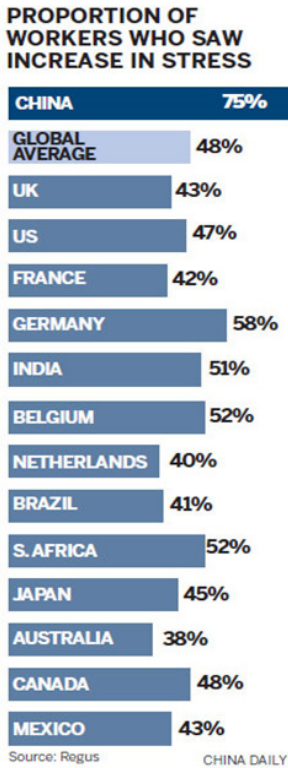


Figure 1.1: Proportion of Chinese workers whose stress has increased in the last year (2011)
 (source: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-10/19/content_15829619.htm, retrieved 12 March 2016)

In another survey from the Horizon Research Group conducted in 2009, about 34.2% of respondents said the crisis had increased workplace pressure. Those most affected by the added stress were in the 24-30 age group and the majority worked for foreign-invested enterprises. Most of the pressure at work came from career development, performance appraisal and salary issues. In the midst of the downturn, employees were involved in fewer malpractices, were more likely to volunteer to do overtime and more inclined to postpone planned leave (quoted in Wang Zhuoqiong 2009).

This Regus poll, as well as the 2009 one, was widely circulated via Chinese media after its publication. The result of the 2009 one was echoed by another online survey launched by Sina Weibo, China’s most popular Twitter-like service. According to an

article by Xinhua News Agency,²⁹ this Sina poll, which had garnered responses from more than 6,800 Chinese Internet users, showed that more than 6,500, or more than 95% of the total, said they feel ‘pressure’. The choices of the poll were limited to ‘Yes’ or ‘No’. Many Chinese Internet users have commented on the topic. Some believe pressures are increasing in the workplace because of more competition, greater aspirations to succeed, the lack of a social security network, and the inaccessibility of psychological counseling. “The biggest pressure is that I’m not sure of what will happen in the future,” wrote a netizen identified by the screen name Song of Darkness.³⁰

According to an article on *News Morning* (14 September 2005),³¹ there was, already more than a decade ago, an increase in the number of suicides committed by Chinese educated young people. Suicide became the first killer of people aged 15-40, and about 25% of college students had at least once thought of attempting suicide. According to the figures from a report by Xinhua News Agency,³² 287 thousand people in China commit suicide every year and around 2 million attempt suicide but fail to kill themselves. Also, 40% of the people who commit suicide do not have a mental disease. That is to say, they consciously made the decision. Internationally, only 10% of people who commit suicide are without mental illness.

These deaths have aroused echoes on the Internet as it has become more and more difficult for highly educated people to attain the social status that they struggle for. The magic of a university diploma is vanishing. Blogger Hai Ling muses about the asymmetry between educational achievement and salary in Chinese society in her article on who should bear the responsibility for the death of poor graduates. To translate the original quote from Hai Ling’s blog:

Sometimes humans, who end their lives for one or two perplexing questions, are weak and fragile. Outsiders may reckon it extraordinary for a poor family to raise one Master and one Doctor, but in this society where students’ diplomas can’t guarantee the corresponding job positions and salaries, who cares about your educational background? Rather, employers pay more attention to the value that employees bring them. Such a reality has brought about the tragedy for this poor family who stick to the belief that a higher diploma will improve their life. (quoted in Jenifer Zhang 2009: np)

Standing (2011a) calls the precariat a dangerous class by arguing that this class of people could produce new instabilities in society. They are increasingly frustrated and dangerous because they have no voice, and hence they are vulnerable to the siren calls of extreme political parties. Given China’s strict control of speech and assembly, there

²⁹ See more about this article at <http://english.cntv.cn/20121019/104196.shtml>, retrieved 8 November 2014.

³⁰ See more about this survey at <http://english.cntv.cn/20121019/104196.shtml>, retrieved 19 July 2015.

³¹ <http://edu.qq.com/a/20050914/000060.htm>, retrieved 24 May 2015.

³² <http://bbs.ifeng.com/viewthread.php?tid=4715372>, retrieved 13 August 2013.

are still no visible public political initiatives conducted by the Chinese precariat, but the mushrooming suicides prove that they are suffering from Standing's four A's – anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation. Based on the four A's, especially a prevalently felt anomie, a structure of feeling has been gradually emerging, if not yet a class consciousness. Being young and educated, if the white-collar precariat continues to be ignored, there will be days of rage to come. Although they may have no clear idea where to go, as indicated by *Primitive Rebels* (Hobsbawm 1965) people at the early point of social transformation tend to be rebellious against what they dislike, even if they do not yet know what they stand for.

For now, in China, there is no 'revolution' coming from this structure of feeling yet, because no political agenda or strategy has been forged; but there is already effective anger online. Precarious young people are searching for symbols online to express their frustration and construct alternative identities.

The day following my interview with Weijia (Field notes April 2014), I found that he had updated his QQ space with the lyrics of a popular song circulating on the Internet – *Stolen Time*:³³

*Who polluted the sky and painted your face so pale?
Who educated you to be naïve, but let you sink low in fear of reality?
Who promised you an illusory future, and then let you bury your dreams?
Who turned your diploma into a piece of valueless paper, and told you this is the survival of the fittest?*

*Who told you this is your era?
Who told you this is your era young man?
Who stole your era? An era which is supposed to be yours.
Who stole your era?*

*Who changed money into a belief and set it as the symbol of success?
Who made living a peaceful life a fantasy and then let you crazy about it the whole life?
Who made you so exhausted without any time for thinking?
Who filled your reality with only desperation and only allowing you to dream in a virtual world?*

*What are you expecting, young men? With all your silence.
Youth is never only a gesture of impulsive anger.
What era do you want to follow?
What era you are copying?
What kind of era are you creating?
Who stole your era, and left it in this state?³⁴*

³³ <http://site.douban.com/dannv/widget/notes/607809/note/73556689/?start=100>, retrieved 17 May 2014.

³⁴ This is a song written and sung by a Chinese young singer Shao Yibei. See more about this song at <https://site.douban.com/dannv/>, retrieved 12 May 2014.

1.4 Anomie and social inequality

Among the four feelings, especially ‘anomie’ is a typical psychological feature for Chinese white-collar precariat due to China’s rigid upward mobility trajectories. The social immobility is the source of all their frustration. After 35 years of breakneck-speed development, social class in China has become increasingly entrenched, opportunities for upward mobility increasingly limited (Lu Rachel 2014).

While the upward mobility becomes rigid, the downward way is very smooth. It is very easy for a tier 5 – the mid-level middle class – to drop to tier 6, the lower-level middle class, or tier 6 to drop to the underclass. The situation of ‘Ant Tribe’– the educated precariat who fails to find an ideal job and has to take an odd one, and who is forced to live in the corners of the city together with the underclasses – illustrates how easily the white-collar workers slide down the social ladder.

Durkheim used ‘anomie’ to speak of the ways in which an individual’s actions are mismatched with a system of social norms and practices. In other words, anomie is the breakdown of social bonds between an individual and the community (as cited in Schreuder 2014: 521).

In his studies of suicide, Durkheim associated anomie to a lack of norms, or to norms that were too rigid. But such normlessness or norm-rigidity was a symptom of anomie, caused by the lack of differential adaptation that would enable norms to evolve naturally due to self-regulation, either to develop norms where none existed or to change norms that had become rigid and obsolete (Durkheim 1951). The reality of the educated precariat in China is that in an economically capitalist China, the mainstream norms have not changed in their favor. An increasingly rigid social structure leaves almost no room for them.

In the first place, economically this rigid mainstream society works under globally prevalent neo-liberal rules. One strategy as well as a consequence of neo-liberal logic in China is the commodification of higher education. The commodification of higher education is universal in the context of neo-liberalism, and China is no exception. As observed by many researchers (e.g. Li Weiguang 2007; Zhao Litao and Huang Yanjie 2010),

the problem of educated unemployment has its root in the earlier higher education reforms, particularly the government’s decision to expand tertiary enrollment by nearly 50% in 1999. Not surprisingly, four years later, unemployment for the first time became a big problem for college graduates. (Zhao Litao and Huang Yanjie 2010: i)

According to figures from NBSC, between 1998 and 2006, enrollment in higher education increased from 1.1 million to 5.5 million and the number of new intakes grew about 22% per annum. The expansion slowed down in 2006 and thereafter, but the number of new intakes continued to increase, due to the prior expansion of primary and secondary education (as quoted in Zhao Litao and Huang Yanjie 2010:

1-2). In 2014, the new entrants into the general tertiary education reached 7.21 million.³⁵

More notably, educational quality declined in the process of expansion (Li Weiguang 2007; Zhao Litao and Huang Yanjie 2010). Universities lowered admission requirements in competition for fee-paying students. Job opportunities for high-quality faculty members could not possibly match the growing student enrollment.

Moreover, [the creation] of profitable programs was prioritised over the creation of a good teaching and learning environment. (...) In the single-minded pursuit of size and revenue, most universities have little motivation to improve the quality and employability of its students. Technical education and polytechnics, on the other hand, have long been identified as under-developed. As a result, a large gap has emerged between the educational profile and knowledge structure of college graduates and the actual demand of the industries. (Zhao Litao and Huang Yanjie 2010: 2, 7-8)

The expansion of higher education produced graduates with a structure of knowledge and skills that orient towards white-collar modern technology and service industry on such a large scale that it is not compatible with the needs of the market. As observed by Zhao Litao and Huang Yanjie (2010: 8),

in comparison with developing economies of similar or lower level per-capita GDP [countries], such as Brazil and India, the Chinese economy has a uniquely large manufacturing sector and relatively small modern service industries. The bulk of the manufacturing sector consists of millions of small labor-intensive factories, a booming construction sector and a large energy and capital intensive heavy industries dominated by the state. None of these three major industrial sectors offer large numbers of white-collar jobs suitable for college graduates.

When “the expansion of higher education exceeds the parallel expansion of job opportunities,” the problem emerges as a structural one which is difficult to tackle as a cycle problem. It “may threaten the elites’ aspirations for upward career mobility” (Schucher 2014: 4). “Structural unemployment is harder to fix,” as A.C.S.³⁶ (2012: np) argues. Structural unemployment results from problems such as skills mismatches, and policies to address such mismatches are inherently longer-term in scope, involving education and encouraging innovation. An expansionary policy is not able to reduce structural unemployment; more expansion generates nothing but rising inflation. In today’s China, as observed by Zhao Litao and Huang Yanjie (2010: 1), “the unemployment issue is dominated by structural unemployment, mostly resulting from

³⁵ http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/PressRelease/201502/t20150228_687439.html, retrieved 6 January 2016.

³⁶ A.C.S. is the abbreviated blogname of the writer of the article in question on *The Economist's* free exchange Economics page.

a mismatch between the conditions and nature of jobs and the skills and expectations of the young generation.”

When analyzing why China’s economic and industrial structure is cited as the cause of a bottleneck for college graduates’ full employment, Zhao Litao and Huang Yanjie (2010: 8) provide two arguments. First, Chinese society is not capable of providing enough jobs that match the knowledge, skills and expectations of college graduates; “the 2.5 million white-collar jobs generated by the economy each year could hardly satisfy the demand of 6 million graduates;” in addition,

[T]he Chinese labor market has also long suffered from the lack of a strong small and medium enterprise (SME) sector. As a dynamic and innovative force in the economy, the SMEs are often more willing to employ fresh college graduates as junior staff or interns. (...) The employment rate could be even higher if more space had been given to the development of SMEs.

The second structural element causing youth unemployment is the poor environment for entrepreneurial activities.

[In] the United States, as much as 20% of fresh college graduates choose to start their own businesses as their first job, whereas the percentage of enterprising graduates in China, in spite of many favorable policies such as tax cuts and lowered capital requirement, barely reaches 0.3% for the cohort of 2009 [*China Youth Daily* 2010].³⁷ For most observers, this huge difference speaks of, among other factors, the implicit risks, hidden costs, and poor legal infrastructure for entrepreneurial activities in China. (Zhao Litao and Huang Yanjie 2010: 9)

While diploma and degree holders are suffering from their inability to find a suitable job, “second generation migrant workers, with probably lower educational profiles but much stronger willingness to take manual works, stand to benefit more from the economic recovery in the manufacturing sector” (Zhao Litao and Huang Yanjie 2010: 8). Tse and Esposito (2014) have found an inverse correlation between educational attainment and ease of finding employment. As shown in Figure 1.2, those who are less educated are far more likely to be employed than those who are better educated. This is contrary to the US and the UK, where a higher level of education helps young people secure jobs.

³⁷ <http://www.chinanews.com/edu/edu-qzcy/news/2010/03-22/2182256.shtml>, retrieved 23 January 2013.

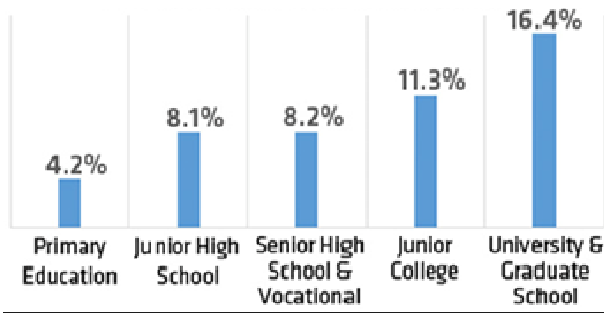


Figure 1.2: Unemployment rate for the 21 to 25 age group breakdown by education level (source: China Household Finance Survey 2012, retrieved 12 June 2015)

According to Huang Yanjie (2013), there was a change from a ‘migrant-worker panic’ to ‘migrant-worker shortage’ during the turn of the 21st century in China. Since 2004 there has been a continuing shortage of rural migrant workers, and the wage level of rural migrant workers has increased considerably due to a shortage of unskilled labor in the coastal region.

According to the data from NBSC, although the global financial crisis caused about 20 million migrant workers to be laid off in 2008, since the second half of 2009, a shortage of migrant workers reemerged. It seems unemployment is less of a problem for migrant workers than for college graduates. NBSC reported an employment rate as high as 97% for migrant workers in the second half of 2009.³⁸ This trend is perhaps not that surprising, as analyzed:

China’s economic miracle has insofar been driven by three sectors: export-driven manufacturing, construction and large energy and capital intensive heavy industries dominated by the state, none of which offer large numbers of white-collar jobs suitable for university graduates. In 2013, it was estimated that at least 600,000 graduates from the prior year had yet to have found employment. This is adding to the approximately 7 million students who are leaving their universities with most want to enter the workforce immediately. By contrast, low-skilled workers with a primary and junior secondary education, especially young migrants from rural China, can easily find jobs in the transportation, construction and catering industries. (Tse and Esposito 2014: np)

This [observation] highlights a fundamental issue: youth unemployment in China is a structural rather than a cyclical problem – the country is not creating a sufficient number of high-quality positions to soak up its educated youngsters. (Tse and Esposito 2014: np)

³⁸ http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/StatisticalCommuniq/201002/t20100226_61447.html, retrieved 13 May 2013.

The emergence of second-generation migrant workers is the chief reason behind the phenomenon of labor shortage in labor-intensive industries. The second-generation migrant workers, now making up 60% of all migrant workers (China State Council 2010³⁹), are not necessarily better educated than the first-generation migrant workers are. Yet unlike the latter, they are less tolerant of low wages, bad labor conditions and long working hours.

While a market economy is supposed to encourage free and fair competition, the educated precariat does not stand on the same starting line with those who have ties with the ruling class. This situation provides another narrative to account for the frustration suffered by the young precariat, i.e. their awareness of their downward social mobility (or lack of upward mobility) caused by social inequality. According to *Analyses and Projections for Chinese Society in 2013* (Lu Xueyi et al. 2012: 333), half of the graduates declare that they are not satisfied with their professional integration. It is noted in this report that this dissatisfaction is not only due to the lack of suitable jobs. It is anchored in experiences in the job market where social competition is skewed heavily in favor of those who enjoy 'back-door entry' (走后门, Zou Hou Men), which is an indigenous expression referring to people who have powerful social connections or are backed by family links.

As Whyte (2012) observes, China's reforms and economic growth since 1978 have transformed inequality patterns. Contemporary social stratification features a re-emerging class hierarchy and China is now a much more unequal place than it was in the Mao Zedong era. At that time nobody possessed substantial personal wealth, the maximum monthly income was only about 800 yuan (about \$119), and China's national Gini coefficient of income distribution was below .30, a very moderate figure compared to other societies.

Today things are very different, with millionaires and even billionaires in growing numbers, and with China's Gini coefficient now estimated at close to .50, among the highest in the world. Over the past 20 years, commodified higher education systems "had enabled a tiny, privileged minority to buy enlightened education at top universities, while people in the precariat were forced to emphasize the human capital that gave them a competitive advantage over the next person" (Standing 2014: np).

Those who go to good primary schools go to good secondary schools; the top universities take students from there. But most are born in poor families, live in poor regions, go to poor primary schools and end up in poor secondary schools from which the top universities do not take students. (Standing 2011a: 73)

This situation has produced a familiar path of social immobility (Chan 2009). Chinese economist Zhao Haijun (2003) argues that, although the 'common poverty' has already disappeared in China, 'common rich' still remains a blueprint. The Matthew Effect has risen and Chinese society has become increasingly polarized. The white collar have

³⁹ <http://data.stats.gov.cn/tablequery.htm?code=AD03>, retrieved 27 June 2015.

bought their houses and cars in an overdrawing way, constructing a fake reality as if they are already living a middle-class life. However, the good feeling will not last long, the pressure of getting married and having kids, or any change in their life and career can abruptly break the illusion and shatter their dream of being middle-class (Zhao Haijun 2003).

If the old poor and new poor and even the middle class all got stuck in their precarious dilemma, who is occupying the other side of the pole? Cai Zhiqiang (2011) argues that during the initial period of reform and opening up, these policies enabled certain regions to become prosperous first, on the assumption that the prosperity for the rest would follow in time. However, after more than thirty years of reform and opening up, different interest groups⁴⁰ have become established. With the deepening and further adjustments of reforms, those who have benefited from the policies are likely to oppose any reform they view as adverse to their vested interests. All of this impedes the will to implement reforms toward a common prosperity. Differentiation, coupled with alienation, has the effect of reinforcing the rich-poor divide. This has made it even harder for the underclass to attain equality of opportunity and development. The momentum for upward social mobility is being gradually lost.

According to Deng Yuwen (2015), seven spheres of interest have been formulated in today's China, i.e. powerful central government departments and their officials; local governments and their officials; state-owned enterprises and their executives; the transnational capital and its domestic agents; real estate developers; large private enterprises and capitals, including industrial capitalists and financial capitalists; experts and scholars that depend on all six of the aforementioned interest groups.

Experts (e.g. Cai Zhiqiang 2011; Ma Xiheng 2011) believe that special interest groups were formed at different times for different reasons, with some being remnants of China's planned economy and others being formed in the so-called transitional institutions established during the process of reform and opening-up. Special interest groups in China constitute the real upper class in China. What is more harmful and more relevant to the young precariat is the inter-generational transfer of social status as argued by Ma Xiheng (2011). This, for the interest groups, implies a generational transfer of power, fortune and social resources; but for the underclass, it tragically means generational transfer of poverty. To be specific, on the one hand, a new and divisive young cohort has emerged: the wealthy, powerful and privileged young. They are generally children who come from the interest groups in China,

⁴⁰ Mancur Olson, a leading American economist, believes that social groups always fight for income redistribution but no income creation, a course which usually lowers the economic growth rate and average per capital income, which has negative effects on society. In China, special interest groups can be described as interest coalitions made up of people and social classes who have the right to dominate public power and resources. Each coalition exists to safeguard the special interests of its own members. Special interest groups have three defining characteristics. They have grabbed, and will continue to grab most of the benefits generated by China's reform and opening-up policy; they will oppose social and political reforms in China, as such reforms are likely to damage their interests; and they have the ability to interfere with China's reform program (as cited in Deng Yuwen 2015: np).

colloquially called ‘Erdai’ (二代, ‘second generation’). This cohort includes ‘Fu Erdai’ (富二代, ‘rich second generation’), ‘Guan Erdai’ (官二代, ‘government official second generation’), ‘Xing Erdai’ (星二代, ‘super-star second generation’), and ‘Hong Erdai’ (红二代, children whose families have strong roots in the Communist Party). These terms are often associated with many negative stereotypes in grassroots discourse spaces such as the Internet. On the other hand, the new strata include classes such as the white-collar and lower middle classes, gradually moving down to the level held by migrant workers or urban poor. They are starting to share similar life experiences as a new precariat class. In contrast with Fu Erdai, Guan Erdai, Xing Erdai or Hong Erdai, they call themselves ‘Qiong Erdai’ (穷二代,⁴¹ ‘second generation of the poor’).

When the social resources are controlled by the interest groups and their second generation, as Cai Zhiqiang (2011) argues, the current educational system is gradually losing the ability to facilitate inter-class flows. The competitiveness of the job market has produced a situation where ‘having a good dad’ has replaced ‘having a good grade’ as the essential ‘hardware’ in job hunting. Hereditary poverty has become a reality, one that many people face. The precariat know that no matter how hard they work, they can never be as rich as the people in power, or as Mao Li (2014: np) put it: “No matter how hard they try, they find there is always a glass board in their way, which only provides an illusion of the future at a distance but would never let them get through.” The unbalanced allocation of social resources between interest groups and underclasses is directly responsible for social inequality and social structural polarization and this perceived social inequality and stagnancy has triggered the emergence of the precariat.

1.5 Formulating an alliance against the power bloc

In the online version of Chinese social class structure (see Section 1.2.3), we saw a loose but clear alliance constituted by tier 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9, i.e. the mid-level and lower middle class, the massive class and underclass. The reason is that tier 4, the privileged upper middle class has distinctive features due to its tight and complicated ties with the ruling class. Because of the strong connection between upper middle class and ruling class, Goodman (2008: 24) argues that the middle class people in China are less of a middle class than a future central part of the ruling class. It is very difficult for tier 5 and tier 6 to ascend to tier 4, because the gap between upper-level and middle-level is so large that it requires powerful institutional connections, which they do not have. Thus, as observed by Goodman (2014: 128), a majority of Chinese – all the people below tier 5, all outside the elite stratum, i.e. 85% of the population – make up the Chinese ‘subordinate class’. They are all denizens who have no access to full citizen rights.

⁴¹ See more about Qiong Erdai at http://baike.baidu.com/link?url=JvNMJvZVN93jv9_dpvdL8_4qjTjwsud6bVwq6R6CB2_66OH2RWHjtUSxGiP3G7-e0_zgQTXicL3UGQhuTu12q, retrieved 23 January 2014.

So, when migrant workers and precarious, white-collar workers constitute the main body of the Chinese precariat, they are not isolated, but tightly connected with their neighboring social classes – the mid-level middle class and underclass. The precariat is more tied with these neighboring classes in the following way. First, the mobility is still there for them to ascend to the mid-level middle class (tier 5 and 6) if they are lucky enough, but what is even more easy and likely, they will drop to the underclass if they are not lucky enough; second, the mid-level middle class (tier 5), the precariat (tier 6 and 7) and the underclass (tier 7, 8 and 9) – basically all sub-groups outside the elite stratum – constitute ‘the people’ who are jointly against the power bloc made up by the elite class, i.e. the ruling class (tier 1, 2 and 3) and upper middle class (tier 4).

The deep reason that they can become an alliance lies in one fact: they are all denizens. First, for tens of millions of rural migrants – the real underdogs, doing much of their disdained work in cities – there are no rights at all, and those for whom they work despise them as people “without culture” (Goodman 2014: 128). Regarding the white-collar precariat, most of them do not have access to full citizen rights, just like the migrant workers. As for the mid-level middle class (tier 5), while they are comfortable in terms of economic situation, without ties with the ruling class they do not have political resources and the social benefits and interests that the elite class has. They especially lack a basic citizen right, i.e. political rights. This is also the basic right that neither migrant workers nor educated precariat have; it ties all the subordinate social groups together.

This alliance is very salient and visible on the Internet and shows its effect especially through online cultural production. I will illustrate this point in the empirical chapters (Chapter 3-5).

1.6 The absence of a precariat discourse and the Chinese Dream

1.6.1 The voicelessness of the Chinese precariat

When this new precariat class started to take shape in the wake of China’s accelerated integration into globalization, the precariat discourse was absent from China’s public sphere. The reasons can be summarized as follows: (1) ‘Class’ is a sensitive word in China. Chinese people have a collective fear of the term ‘class’ due to the collective memory of enormous tragedies caused by ‘class struggle’ in the Maoist period of China (Pun and Chan 2008). Marxist-Leninist rhetoric of ‘class enemies,’ ‘class conflict,’ and ‘class struggle’ is rarely seen in the country’s media these days, despite the fact that since China began its market reforms in 1979, stratification has emerged in a society that had hitherto tried to eradicate the very concept; (2) the post-socialist neo-liberal logic that China is utilizing in its modernization process economically encourages a free market and turns a blind eye on an ever-growing precariat class created as a result of China being the world’s new center of production (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Liew

Leong 2005), as the existence of the precariat benefits the market; (3) politically, Chinese authorities try to ignore the existence of an emerging precariat class and the enlarged gap between the rich and the poor, so as to maintain social stability (Xiaoshu 2012).

While the precariat is emerging along with China's rise to the world's superpower standard, they face two problems. One, a social economic problem or labor insecurity as Standing (2011a) put it: they are essentially a low-wage and flexible workforce whose hard work does not automatically lead to material security. Second, an ideological one: as a new class with bourgeois aspirations, they do not fit the Chinese political hegemony of 'peasants and workers'. They belong neither to the rural agricultural working class, nor to the urban industrial proletariat. They remain therefore problematic as a social formation in the political and ideological self-imagination of China. They can even be labeled as class enemy, and their lifestyle and ambitions can be dismissed as politically undesirable. This identity embarrassment leads to a top-down prohibition of precariat discourse in China. To paraphrase Pun and Chan (2008), this inhibition of precariat discourse is an outcome of "political arbitration and a disembodiment of structurality – a negation of the production of relations in the rapidly changing Chinese society" (Pun and Chan 2008: 78).

1.6.2 The underground precariat discourses

Due to their exclusion from official public spaces, precariat discourses can only be found in underground spaces. One example are the movies made by Jia Zhangke. Jia Zhangke is often quoted as one of the so-called 'sixth generation' of Chinese directors. His films contain themes of alienated youth, contemporary Chinese history and globalization, openly criticizing the Chinese government (Dean5 2012).

A Touch of Sin (天注定, Tian Zhu Ding) is Jia's 2013 film, revolving around four threads set in vastly different geographical and social milieus across modern-day China, ranging from the bustling southern metropolis of Guangzhou to the more rural townships in Jia's home province of Shanxi. The four stories contained in this film are based on allegedly true events from the recent past (Wikipedia⁴²; Film Comment⁴³). Story 1 is about the conflicts and revenge between a young precariat member suffering from bullying and the local power that bullies him. Story 2 tells the story of a Da Gong Mei's ('migrant female worker') fighting against sexual harassment. Story 3 narrates a migrant worker's pathogenic addiction to murdering as a way to survive in big cities. Story 4 illustrates a precariat member's desperation caused by his dead-end job and pressure from family, work and marriage. The film seems to be based on a number of real, recent social events, such as a 2001 case where a villager killed 14 people due to his conflicts with local officials,⁴⁴ a 2009 case where a pedicurist killed a

⁴² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jia_Zhangke, retrieved 4 January 2014.

⁴³ <http://www.filmcomment.com/article/jia-zhangke-interview>, retrieved 23 May 2014.

⁴⁴ See more at http://en.people.cn/200201/26/eng20020126_89363.shtml, retrieved 3 March 2014.

local official after he reportedly slapped her in the face with a wad of cash when she refused to sleep with him,⁴⁵ and a serial killer who was sentenced to death in 2012.⁴⁶ Other parts of the film make references to the suicides at Foxconn factories.⁴⁷

When a Hollywood reporter asked: “A Touch of Sin addresses many of the same themes as your prior work but does so with a much more extreme aesthetic. What made you want to deal with violence?” Jia Zhangke answered:

I live in a country that is changing at an incredible pace, and that’s been the case since my first film. In the past, of course, we came across conflicts and personal issues, but in the last two or three years of my life – of the Chinese people’s public life – there have been many extremely violent incidents. The film’s four characters and their stories are based on true events that were widely discussed a few years ago on Weibo. This new media inevitably brought these events to light. Not only did those events sadden me, but they deeply shocked me. That was when I decided to use my filmmaking to confront violence. Because of our traditions and our culture, violence was discouraged in the past from being presented in Chinese films. However, in my opinion, if there’s violence actually occurring, then it should be openly discussed, not just on Weibo or social media, but in films too. We can’t stay silent. Through the film, I wanted to explore the process and progress of violence, the mounting injustices of society, and also the scarcity of resources available to the individual. Also, the interpersonal violence that takes away each other’s pride. I gradually realized that there is another root of this violence: When people are faced with these cruel social realities, the opportunity to express oneself gets taken away. There’s no intellectual way to reflect upon these realities. That violence becomes a mode of expression for those who do not have the language to express themselves in these moments.⁴⁸

To follow Jia’s documentary style, i.e. “to follow and record the real China” (Shijianzhizang 2015: np), the style and story of *A Touch of Sin* indicate intensified social conflicts and unbearable frustration and desperation felt by the increasingly marginalized grassroots in present-day China. Whereas Jia’s earlier films broached the inequity and hardship of modernizing China via an aesthetic of slow-paced social realism – shot through with melancholy – the new film, as Jia said, “was motivated by anger”⁴⁹ and portrays the social toll of China’s breakneck development on the lives of individuals marginalized or left behind by the country’s ‘economic miracle’.

⁴⁵ See more at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deng_Yujiao_incident, retrieved 4 May 2014.

⁴⁶ See more at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zhou_Kehua, retrieved 26 March 2014.

⁴⁷ See more at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foxconn_suicides, retrieved 2 April 2014.

⁴⁸ <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/jia-zhangke-interview-i-want-559076>, retrieved 28 March 2014.

⁴⁹ <http://zhenhua.163.com/13/0531/00/905P803R000464CB.html>, retrieved 7 May 2015.

1.6.3 The Chinese Dream

In the new Chinese hegemony, there is no place for discourses legitimizing the existence and presence (let alone the problems and demands) of the precariat. The language of class is subsumed so as to clear the way for a neoliberal discourse as well as to sustain social stability as discussed above. One of these top-down efforts is the recent promotion of a grand Chinese Dream narrative, as an attempt to attract young people's attention to the rejuvenation of the nation, avoiding issues like social inequality. Since 2013, Chinese state media have been extolling the virtues of the China Dream: newspaper headlines, 'dream walls' in schools, research projects in universities, music, films, etc.⁵⁰ The Chinese Dream is a phrase popularized after 2013 that describes a set of personal and national ideals in China.

The term is closely associated with President Xi Jinping, who began promoting the phrase as a slogan in a high-profile visit to the National Museum of China (Wang Liangan 2014). While the overarching policy implications of the 'dream' remained vague, Xi described the dream as 'national rejuvenation, improvement of people's livelihoods, prosperity, construction of a better society and a strengthened military' (Osno 2013). Xi particularly encouraged young people to dare "to dream, work assiduously to fulfill the dreams and contribute to the revitalization of the nation," to quote Xinhua Net.⁵¹ According to a report titled *Chinese President Talks with Representatives of Model Youth* by the Xinhua News Agency (6 May 2013), Xi made the remarks during a discussion with a group of outstanding young people from all walks of life. The following are some quotes from Xi's statements in this report:

A young generation with firm will, strong sense of responsibility and great professional competence is the hope of achieving the 'Chinese dream'. (...) Young people should be optimistic and tenacious when facing adversities, remain steadfast in their faith, refine their professional skills, embrace innovation, work hard and build noble characters. (...) A nation will be prosperous if its young generation is ambitious and reliable. (...) Young people should emancipate the mind, advance with the times, forge ahead and innovate so as to accumulate experience and make achievements (...) Only by integrating individual dreams to the national cause can one finally make great achievement (...) You should cherish the glorious youth, strive with pioneer spirit and contribute your wisdom and energy to the realization of the Chinese dream. (Xi Jinping 2013: np)

In the Maoist era, the meaning of slogans like 'Cultural Revolution is good' was accepted by both the chanters and the audience without any resistance. Now in the Internet era, all seemingly powerful dominant ideologies are facing challenges from

⁵⁰ See for example: <http://www.topsrx.com/index.php?m=default&nc=news&nda=detail&id=78>, retrieved 27 February 2016.

⁵¹ http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-05/04/c_132359537.htm, retrieved 16 April 2015.

information receivers. While the official rhetoric in the Chinese Dream discourse is rather grand and encouraging, the Chinese youth does not react in a positive way.

According to Barria (2012), many Weibo users were critical of Xi's choice of words. For example, blogger Changhuaduanshuo wrote:

The 'Chinese Dream' appears on television all the time, but I still don't understand it at all; what is the so-called 'Chinese Dream' really about? Is it about making 1.3 billion Chinese people help one organization or one person to fulfill this dream, or, is it about keeping 1.3 billion Chinese daydreaming? [My] research result indicates that the latter is more convincing: keeping 1.3 billion people in a dreamlike state while sending all your children and relatives to the United States to pursue the 'American Dream!' (quoted in Barria 2012: np)

Another blogger quoted by Barria (2012) is Zhou Hongyi, chairman of Chinese software company Qihoo360, who wrote a comment re-posted over 18,000 times, which read:

I hope the next ten years will not be a time when people compete based on family wealth and connections; one's background will be mentioned less. I hope everyone will be able to achieve his/her dream as long as they are hardworking, smart, and dare to take risks. I hope people will have opportunities to work at jobs that they truly love, rather than for the love of money. I hope all these hopes are not daydreams, but achievable Chinese Dreams. (Barria 2012: np)

On 8 May 2015, eight people were hurt, two of them badly, when a stage collapsed while some 80 police officers were rehearsing for a singing contest in Bijie city in Guizhou Province. The theme of the singing contest was *The Chinese Dream and the beauty of labor*, which is part of national propaganda jointly organized by the All China Federation of Trade Unions, the Central Propaganda Department and the China Central Television Station (CCTV). A netizen on Boxun⁵² commented on this event as follows, as quoted by Qiwan Lam (2015: np):

The Chinese Dream is too heavy. Tofu-dreg projects⁵³ are everywhere. The taxpayers' money is not to hire you for a singing contest. Standing and singing praise on a collapsing

⁵² Boxun (simplified Chinese: 博讯) is an overseas Chinese community website created by Meicun 'Watson' Meng, who studied in the United States after working for two multinational companies in China. Boxun covers international political news and human rights abuses in the People's Republic of China, among other topics. Boxun allows anyone to submit news to the website, which results in a large number of articles remaining anonymous.

⁵³ The phrase 'tofu-dreg' project is a phrase current in Mainland China used to describe a poorly constructed building. In China, the term 'tofu dregs' (the messy bits left after making tofu) is widely used as a metaphor for shoddy work, hence the implication that a 'tofu-dreg project' is a poorly executed project for which the government should accept responsibility (see more in 'Rising death toll, popular anger in China quake', *World Socialist Web Site*, 21 May 2008).

stage will lead you to fall. Obviously too heavy. The stage collapsed when the three latecomers stepped onto the stage. Too sarcastic. The Chinese Dream is like this? Even the stage is a tofu-dreg project. One second ago, it was a grand show of prosperity. One second later, everything collapsed. The last straw will eventually appear.

Facing the gigantic propaganda of the Chinese Dream, the precariat does not protest in the 'public transcripts' (Scott 1990). In the public, as Lian Si (2009) put it, the precariat accept the dominant ideology and display a silent consenting attitude. However, they accept it only passively and they would never transmit the dominant ideology actively. This indifference expressed by the precariat indicates that the politics of those disaffected youth in China already started to emerge. As argued by Liu Yang (2013), when the disaffected young face unemployment after many years of expensive education, when they encounter unfair competition in the market, when they see an enlarged gap between the rich and the poor, and when they find no way to climb up the social ladder only by their own efforts, they cannot help but asking: why? Therefore, as Mok (2013) argues, the Chinese Dream has to be checked against reality, especially when basic aspirations such as a good job and a decent home, are becoming out of reach for the younger generation. Otherwise, as Mu Chunshan (2013) argues, the young may only laugh at the Chinese Dream slogan behind the backs of the powerful.

To summarize, the overwhelming promotion of the Chinese Dream discourse accelerated the obliteration of the emerging class conflicts resulting from China's rapid societal change. Social class has thus been naturalized; it has become something obvious yet rarely discussed in the public transcripts. To paraphrase Pun and Chan (2008), the new precariat class, at the moment of its birth, experiences a struggle between life and death; it is a specter flowing here and there without a voice, an identity, or a place to locate itself.

1.7 The educated precariat, apolitical or not?

Since the publication of Standing's book *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* in 2011, the precariat has become an ever more significant global phenomenon, highly visible in the Occupy movement and in protest movements around the world, from Italy, to Spain, from Japan to Greece. These protests recruited widely from a precariat class that includes students, teachers, artists, social workers and other knowledge 'cultural workers' (Postill 2012). Standing provided a footnote for these protest-movements: "Every progressive movement has been built on the anger, needs and aspirations of the huge emerging major class. Today that is the precariat" (Standing 2011b, np). However, despite the large population of the Chinese precariat, its members do not assume resistance publicly, let alone take to the streets like their counterparts in Europe. The Chinese precariat is thus criticized as being apolitical. For

example Beddor (2007: np), a researcher who made his observations based on fieldwork in China, wrote:

Between the Chinese youth, I encountered and their American counterparts is the remarkable degree of apathy, which they displayed towards politics and political concepts. They almost unanimously expressed implicit (or even explicit) ambivalence towards any concept which Americans take as fundamental axioms, such as political liberty. They recognized that the media was censored and did not care. Ultimately, they did not see the abstract concepts of liberty and political representation as playing a role in their day-to-day lives.

They were overwhelmingly more concerned with the economic situation of China. They believed that economic disruption is to be avoided at all costs, and that any large-scale political reform would cause such economic disruption. They were quite cynical about their own economy, and often expressed a deep fear of losing China's newfound wealth. The most frequent complaint about the government was corruption. I was told appalling anecdotes about corrupt government officials, and how Guanxi (social connections) created a division between haves and have-nots. But interestingly, complaints were all lodged against the local and provincial governments, and never against Beijing itself. (Beddor 2007: np)

Goodman (2014) also questions the political agency of China's new classes. He rejects the simplistic equation of the rise of the middle class in China with that of the West, and the assumption that the former must lead to democracy as the latter did by arguing that China's middle class may be rising, but not in revolt. Ash (2013) tried to explain the apathy of the Chinese precariat through four reasons:

(1) politics is boring. The media, predictably, report the results of politics but not the process. The leaders are so indistinguishable that, after ten years of Hu Jintao's poker face, the slightest smile from Xi Jinping has foreign correspondents waxing lyrical. And every schoolchild takes many hours a month of compulsory 'thought and politics class'. Module names including 'Mao Zedong Thought' and 'Jiang Zemin Economic Theory' are also mind-numbingly dull as to put them off politics for a lifetime; (2) politics is dangerous. In a system where a single power can decide what is acceptable and what is punishable, you develop an inbuilt barometer about what you can say and do, and what you can't. Of course, things are better now – no struggle sessions, no forced ideology, no children denouncing their parents. But the mothers and fathers of this generation did go through all those things, and so try to instill in their only children the lesson that politics is best left alone; (3) politics isn't a priority. The fact that the older generation saw that material concerns trump political privileges still influences the present and becomes even sharper because of the proliferation of neo-liberalism in China. There is too much competition – for school places, for jobs, for spouses. There is too much financial pressure – to buy an apartment, a car, to provide for your aging parents. And there are too many distractions – casual sex,

recreational drugs, or World of Warcraft for those who get neither of the first two; (4) politics is hopeless. Why try to change something if you know you can't? If that petition, pamphlet, or organization is going to get you in big trouble but won't make the slightest ripple on the ocean, most would agree the sacrifice is admirable but foolhardy. It's not that you don't care, it's not that you don't dare – you're simply being realistic, as you would advise a friend to be. (Ash 2013: np)

Qian Liqun (2005) tries to go back to China's contemporary history to find the explanation for the political indifference of Chinese youth. Qian argues that events showing the risks involved in dissent and the pervasive state control of politics, e.g. the various 'anti' campaigns (the Three-Anti and the Five-Anti campaigns in 1951 and 1952), the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and the Tiananmen Square protest and repression (1989), have resulted in fear of expression, political apathy and cynicism in Chinese youth. They would rather escape the risk by turning to what might appear as trivial entertainment than to serious socially or politically engaged content.

However, Lu Jie (2012) made a different conclusion based on her analysis of a survey. She concludes that the post-80s and post-90s generations in China compared to their Asian counterparts, are not substantively different in terms of their interest in politics, political efficacy, political tolerance, internalization of liberal democratic values, normative commitment to democracy, and appreciation of the intrinsic value of democracy. Compared to their older cohort, today's Chinese young adults are equally or more interested in politics and show a higher efficacy in understanding politics and influencing the government's decisions and policies. They also show a higher commitment to liberal democratic values, e.g., cherishing their political rights, autonomy, and liberty, and appreciating the value of rule of law and pluralism, as well as holding a more critical assessment of China's political freedom and the government's performance. These findings clearly contradict the argument that Chinese young adults are politically apathetic. According to Lu Jie's survey, the most salient difference between Chinese young adults and their Asian counterparts lies in their much less critical views of Chinese politics and the government. This can be attributed to the influence of China's unique political, economic and social realities. However, if we interpret Chinese youths' ostensible submissiveness in the public atmosphere with the concept 'resistance' in James Scott's sense, surface obedience does not mean that they are apathetic; their agency and resistance are just transformed into hidden discursive resistance online.

James Scott's work will be discussed more fully in the next chapter. But here, some points need to be made in anticipation. Scott (1985) lists four traditional criteria for 'genuine' resistance: it must be collective and organized rather than private and unorganized; it must be principled and selfless rather than opportunistic and selfish; it must have revolutionary consequences; and it must negate rather than accept the basis of domination. However, based on his ethnographic investigation in the village of Sedaka (Kedah State, Malaysia), he finds that these criteria all make no sense. He thus

provides another perspective on resistance that has been both influential and controversial. In his book *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Resistance* Scott (1985) introduces the idea that oppression and resistance are in constant flux, and that by focusing (as political scientists often do) on visible historic 'events' such as organized rebellions or collective action we can easily miss subtle but powerful forms of 'everyday resistance'. Scott looks at peasant and slave societies and their ways of responding to domination, with a focus not on observable acts of rebellion but on forms of cultural resistance and non-cooperation that are employed over time through the course of persistent servitude. Every-day forms of resistance include things like "foot-dragging, evasion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander and sabotage" (Scott 1985: 34).

Just as Scott denies the application of these criteria to the village of Sedaka, I also do not think these requirements make sense when one looks at Chinese disaffected youth. As observed by Cohen (2013), people are always looking for a youth movement in China. With an autocratic government, extreme levels of inequality, and a growing precariat class, contemporary China has many of the ingredients we associate with political uprisings like the Arab Spring. Since 1989, international media have flirted with dozens of incipient 'next Tiananmens' – some, like the rise of social media, have had major effects on Chinese society, while others, like Ai Weiwei⁵⁴ and the 'Jasmine Revolution',⁵⁵ have proved to be little more than wishful thinking. But all this did not turn into overt revolts as expected. To a great extent, China analysts have become jaded about disaffected youth stories. However, to paraphrase Scott, the seeming 'conformity' of the Chinese precariat is 'calculated, not unthinking'. The Chinese precariat know it well from the lesson they have learned from history and the reality that conducting overt protests in China is dangerous and hopeless. More importantly, for them politics is not a priority at least for now. There is too much competition and financial pressure. Beneath the surface of compliance in official public spaces, there is an undercurrent of ideological resistance draining through the Internet; beneath the superficial peace, there are continuous conflicts between mainstream cultures and precariat subcultures. To be in line with Scott, the consequences of all this should be considered for defining resistance.

In the study of today's precariat resistance, too much attention has been paid to the occurrences of open revolt in advanced democratic countries, and too little to ordinary, everyday or even hidden forms of resistance and their symbolic and ideological underpinnings. Which is why I shall focus on this.

⁵⁴ Ai Weiwei is a Chinese contemporary artist and activist, who, as a political activist, has been highly and openly critical of the Chinese Government's stance on democracy and human rights.

⁵⁵ The 2011 Chinese pro-democracy protests in China that were inspired by the Tunisian revolution and was called the 'Jasmine Revolution' by some of the organisers.

1.8 Internet-savvy precariat and the new space

The Chinese precariat basically consists of young people born in the 1970s and 1980s, who grew up in China's reform era and are also dubbed as the first Internet generation. The reform led them to their current life situation as the precariat and the Internet provides a new space for their voices. Especially when their voices are prohibited in offline China, the Internet is becoming the alternative platform for them to articulate, identify and locate themselves.

Although the Internet is a global, worldwide phenomenon that is not delimited by national borders, it is not a globally uniform phenomenon; there are national and local differences as pointed out by Liu Fengshu (2010). Although China synchronized with the West entering the Internet era, it has distinctive evolving processes as well as social, political and technological particularities, which will be explained presently.

The first connection of Mainland China with the Internet was established in 1987.⁵⁶ In the same year the first email was successfully sent out with the content 'Across the Great Wall, we can reach every corner in the world'.⁵⁷ Since then the Internet in China has grown to host the largest base of net users in the world. By the end of December 2013, 618 million Chinese accessed the Internet, a 9.5% increase from the year before and a penetration rate of 45.8%. By June 2014, the number of Internet users reached 632 million and a penetration rate of 46.9% (CNNIC 2014).⁵⁸ China lagged behind the rest of the world decades or even centuries when entering the nuclear era and the electronic era, but it stepped into the Internet era almost at the same time with the United States and Europe (Yang Jiechi 2011). However, the Chinese Internet is the Internet with Chinese characteristics, with strict censorship as the most typical and well-known feature.

The political and ideological background of Internet censorship in China is considered to be based on one of Deng Xiaoping's well-known sayings in the early 1980s: "If you open the window for fresh air, you have to expect some flies to blow in."⁵⁹ The saying is related to a period of economic reform of China that became known as the 'socialist market economy'. Superseding the political ideologies of the Cultural Revolution, the reform led China towards a market economy and opened up the market for foreign investors. Nonetheless the Communist Party of China wished to protect its values and political ideas from 'swatting flies' of other ideologies (MacKinnon 2008).

⁵⁶ See more information at <http://news.sciencenet.cn/htmlnews/2014/8/301669.shtml>, retrieved 2 January 2015.

⁵⁷ See more information at <http://tech.sina.com.cn/i/c/2003-07-18/1127210948.shtml>, retrieved 18 July 2015.

⁵⁸ China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), CNNIC's 33rd statistical report on Internet development in China.

⁵⁹ Deng said this on several occasions at the beginning of the reform in China and was cited many times by Chinese researchers and journalists, e.g. an article by China News in 2010 at: <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/news/2010/02-17/2125014.shtml>, retrieved 16 May 2015.

Internet censorship in China is conducted under a wide variety of laws and administrative regulations. In accordance with these laws, more than 60 Internet regulations designed by the government of China have been implemented by provincial branches of state-owned ISPs (Internet Service Providers), companies, and organizations.⁶⁰ The apparatus of China's Internet control is considered more extensive and more advanced than in any other country in the world; the governmental authorities not only block website content but also monitor the Internet access of individuals. The Chinese Internet censorship is also a focus of academic research on Chinese Internet. Many researchers devote attention to how the giant censoring machine works (e.g. Tsui 2001; Herold 2013). As observed by Herold (2013), in China, the government owns online access routes, and private enterprises and individuals can only rent bandwidth from the state. As a massive surveillance and content control system, the Golden Shield Project was launched in November 2000, and became known as the Great Firewall of China (Xiao Qiang 2011). However, besides this legislative and enforcement apparatus, a more typically Chinese and more effective part of censorship is self-regulation. Internet censorship in China has been called 'a panopticon that encourages self-censorship through the perception that users are being watched'.⁶¹ According to Tsui (2001), the enforcement (or threat of enforcement) of censorship creates a chilling effect where individuals and businesses willingly censor their own communications to avoid legal and economic repercussions.

International studies on the Chinese Internet, as mentioned above, focus on investigation and criticism of online censorship and its relation with the Chinese Communist Party's authoritarian media control, which on the one hand captures a very important and eye-catching aspect of Chinese Internet, but on the other hand also leaves a gap in perceiving the meaning of the Internet for the Chinese people, rather than for the state.

Being Internet-savvy is a defining aspect of the Chinese precariat. According to the results of a survey published on Statista.com (see Figure 1.3), in the year 2014, 30% of Internet users in the region were between 15 and 24 years old, 32% were between 25-34 years old, 23% were between 35-44 years old, while only 5% of Internet users were above 55 years of age.

⁶⁰ See more information at: <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2006/china0806/3.htm>, retrieved 8 July 2014.

⁶¹ China's 'Eye' on the Internet. *Ucdavis* (11 September 2007) http://news.ucdavis.edu/search/news_detail.lasso?id=8321, retrieved 12 January 2016.

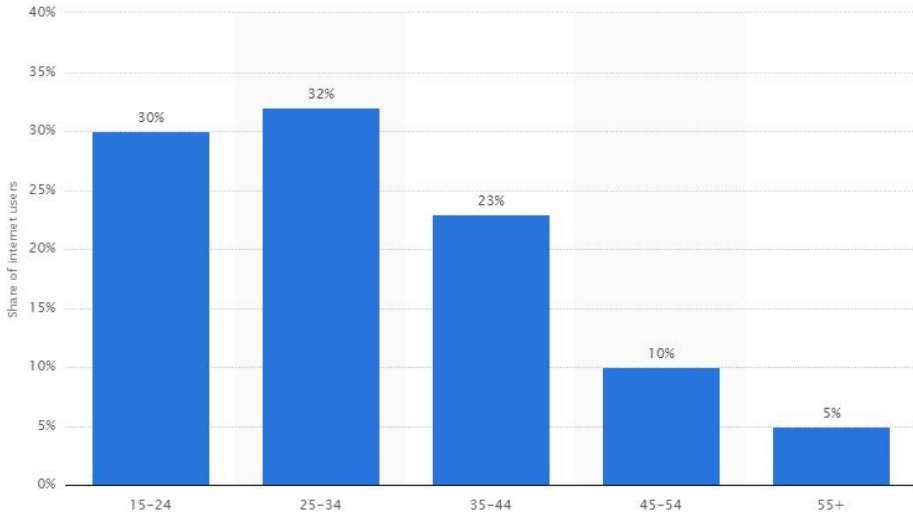


Figure 1.3: Distribution of Internet users in China as of 2014, by age group

(source: <http://www.statista.com/statistics/272385/age-distribution-of-internet-users-in-china/>, retrieved 18 July 2015)

The age distribution of Chinese Internet users differs greatly with the situation in the US, where, according to a survey published on Statista.com (see Figure 1.4), in the year 2014, Internet users aged beyond 55 account for the largest proportion 26.8%.

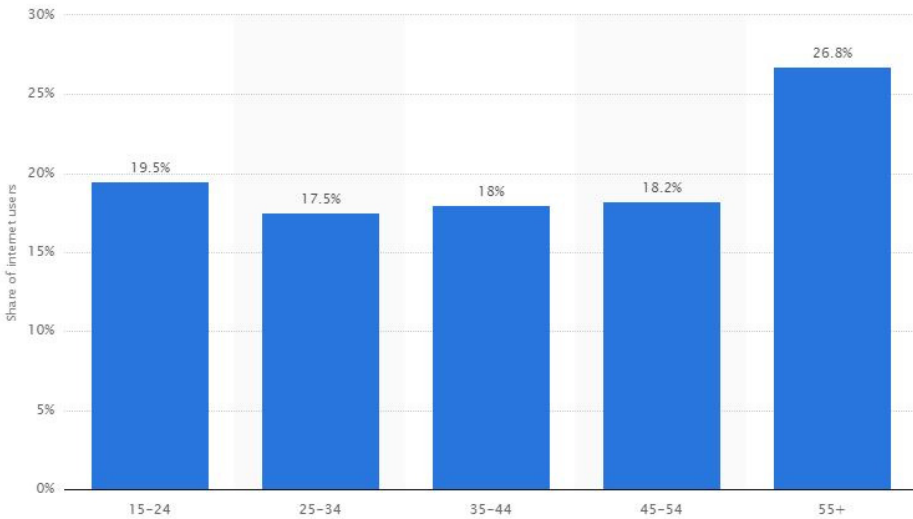


Figure 1.4: Distribution of Internet users in North America as of 2014, by age group

(source: <http://www.statista.com/statistics/319909/age-distribution-of-internet-users-north-america/>, retrieved 6 May 2015)

When looking at people who get together on Chinese social media, where online subcultures have gained most momentum (Huntington 2014) young users cover an even bigger percentage. According to a report issued by KANTAR⁶² in 2015, Chinese social media users born between 1970 and 1990 cover 93.4% of all users in 2013, and 89.2% in 2014.⁶³ From a financial angle, Chinese social media users are also a low-income cohort according to the New Media Report No. 6 (2015)⁶⁴ issued by The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). According to this report, 90.07% of Weibo users have a monthly income below 5,000 yuan (about \$746).

From the above we can deduce that Chinese netizens, especially social media users, are a young and poor cohort. Basically, they belong to the precariat group I defined at the beginning of this chapter and are the main force for creating and transmitting online subcultures. When their voices are erased from offline China, as an Internet generation they naturally resort to the online space, using new ways of communication to make themselves heard, seen, located and even united.

Against a backdrop of state authoritarianism, and socio-economic marginality and inequality, the potential of the role of the Internet in social class construction is salient. "The potency of speaking in the public sphere, the power of carnivalesque reversals and inversions, the 'positive' form of protest and dissent as well as its potential as a space for bearing witness to state manipulation and corruption" (Moser 2003: 188-189). Together these elements form an important mechanism which allows Chinese disaffected youth to express their views on a public stage although it is a virtual one. The articulation of the Chinese precariat online suggests that where civil society is out of bounds, that empty space can be filled by subcultures. To paraphrase Mda's description of the role of theatre in participatory development processes and communication in Africa, for Chinese precariat, the Internet "(...) is a theatre of complaint (...) of self-pity, of moralizing, of mourning and of hopelessness" (Mda 1993: 8-9). I will elaborate on the Chinese precariat's discursive performance online in the rest of this dissertation.

1.9 Concluding remarks and research questions

The precariat in China is quite heterogeneous. They are neither peasants nor traditional working class; they are not CCP cadres or super rich; they may come from different social backgrounds with various identities: migrant workers, squeezed white-collar workers, marginalized underemployed graduates, etc. They get frustrated by

⁶² KANTAR is the Market Research, Insight and Consultancy Division of WPP plc, a London-based public company.

⁶³ See more information about this report at: http://cn.kantar.com/media/909009/2015_____pdf, retrieved 12 January 2016.

⁶⁴ See more at http://wenku.baidu.com/link?url=QgwikGS8gs2Khr-Y3pKtBG-ttsRT0gZ2l6aU_lk6rivRtD1xirff24GDsa0Wu2djC6QFaktOcsDceR-vRp7W9Ew0hc8B0nkY41v5vZoTVFG, retrieved 23 January 2016.

underemployment, status inconsistency, frustrated careers, or the lack of important citizen rights: civil, cultural, social, economic and political rights – they are all denizens. And they are all suffering from a conscious, joint sense of insecurity illustrated by the four A's, especially anomie.

The educated precariat in China, if categorized in a Marxian sense, can be included into the middle class, although the term 'middle class' is notoriously clumsy as a label to describe social formations. The transformation of economies from mass production to knowledge and service economies plays a crucial role in the diversification of social stratification. The transformed economic model has generated a heavily fragmented 'middle class' which contains groups that share very little with each other apart from the fact that they are not factory workers in the traditional sense of the word. Income, lifestyle, and social trajectories of upward mobility and privilege can differ enormously within this middle class. And within the middle class, we can find people who are comparatively wealthy in society, next to people who struggle to make ends meet, and who are facing continuous insecurities as to what the future might bring them, while they strongly aspire to middle-class ('bourgeois') status. The new poor belong to the latter. They are what C. Wright Mills (1951) famously described as a group with 'a history without events', with common interests that do not lead to unity, and with a future that "will not be of their own making" (Mills 1951: ix).

While the precariat is emerging in China as a class in the making, the precariat discourse is absent from mainstream China. This has forced them to use the Internet as a new space to get their voices heard and their identities constructed. Online, they unite with other subordinate groups in China, i.e. the lower middle class and the underclass, to form an alliance against the power bloc, which is composed of the ruling class allied with the new super rich.

Their online performance has created new types of subcultures, communities, and identities. This thesis will document the way in which this negatively defined class in the making gradually constructs a self-definition: we are Diaosi, a bunch of losers in consumerized China; we are precariat, victims of China's rapid neo-liberal growth; we feel deprived and marginalized, and we need a voice and identity.

Let me now turn to the two research questions I will try to address in the remainder of this study on the online discursive performance of the Chinese precariat:

- The first research question is how a precariat 'voice' is articulated in the public online domain in China.
- The second research question involves what this online-articulated 'voice' means to the Chinese precariat.

The first research question can be divided into three sub-questions: First, have the denizens created their own language online and how? Second, which shared cultures

or communities have been formulated online and what are their characteristics? Third, which identities have been constructed online?

The three empirical Chapters 3, 4 and 5, demonstrate each one of these sub-questions, and together they offer a three-step analysis in which each chapter offers materials for the next one. The point of these chapters is to demonstrate the presence and relevance of particular forms of cultural practice that should grant plausibility to the thesis of an emerging precariat in China. The specific features of these practices will be discussed; however, it is their sheer presence that, in the context of the Chinese sociopolitical system and its approach to the Internet, builds the main argument of this study.

In a first step, I will deal with the precariat's online language and investigate its diversification. Memes illustrate the way in which an emerging and illegitimate community organizes itself by means of 'cryptic' modes of communication; the precariat marks its difference from mainstream culture and power through this semiotic trick. This chapter is the empirical foundation of the two next ones, because memes will occur in every following chapter.

In a second step, I will deal with the precariat's shared cultural interest, i.e. a strong focus on consumption. E'gao (a memic phenomenon) illustrates the way in which consumption behavior is important in understanding the frustration of the precariat: they make 'cheap' caricatures of 'expensive' consumption items. The cultural material they use refers to distinctions between rich and poor and sets them apart as a category in Chinese society.

In a third step, I will deal with their self-constructed identities and how memes and consumption culture together lead to self-qualifications as a distinct category in Chinese society. Diaosi illustrates the emergence of a joint call to identity: this is who we are and we manifest ourselves as such.

The second research question is designed to be kept open, without a definite answer, although after the three empirical chapters, I will discuss how the online transcripts or subcultures dealt with the formation of a clear collective consciousness, or just represent a pre-form of class consciousness – a "structure of feeling" in the sense of Raymond Williams, shared by the Chinese precariat as a class in the making (Williams 1961, 1977).

The stage has now been set and I can engage with my analysis. But before I do so, I need to lay out the theoretical and methodological principles that will guide this study.

CHAPTER 2

Theories and methods

I announced in the previous chapter that I shall focus in this book on the online practices of the Chinese precariat. This raises two separate but related sets of issues, one theoretical, another methodological. Theoretically, issues of social class, sub-cultures and forms of resistance will be encountered, and I need to describe the core conceptual vocabulary I shall use. Methodologically, this study needs to be situated in the relatively new branch of online ethnography, and here as well, some specific challenges must be addressed.

2.1 Theoretical preliminaries

The intellectual heroes of the precariat include Pierre Bourdieu (1998), who articulated precarity (cited in Standing 2014); Michel Foucault who sympathized with people who 'have fallen below the level at which they can take part in the social game' (cited in Standing 2014), Hardt and Negri (2000), whose *Empire* describes the globalized capitalist world as an empire where economic inequality persists, and where all identities are wiped out and replaced by a universal one, the identity of the poor: "Only the poor," Hardt and Negri say, "live radically the actual and present being" (Hardt and Negri 2000: 157). There was also Herbert Marcuse's (1964) *One Dimensional Man*. Marcuse describes how capitalism generated an oppressive culture in which human existence was reduced to work and consumption. This, he argued, caused generalized alienation because the richness of human life and experience was denied and replaced by something that could not lead to true human satisfaction and happiness.⁶⁵

The pessimism of Marcuse's observations seemed to preclude forms of agency and resistance. However, delicate, non-overt forms of resistance had been described by other scholars, the most representative of which, James Scott (1990), uses the concept 'hidden transcripts' to describe the many complex symbolic forms in which the oppressed developed and used instruments of resistance, dissidence and community formation. The oppressed created their own counter culture, often below the radar of the powerful and at odds with the 'public transcripts' in which their power and status

⁶⁵ The same sentiment was also described two decades later by the novelist Milan Kundera in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984). Kundera describes the sense of futility, anger and frustration in the everyday activities of ordinary people in the face of power over which they feel they have no impact.

was being enacted and performed. The oppressed had their own ‘hidden transcripts’ and lived part of their lives in a different universe from the one they experienced as oppressive. In the same vein, the Birmingham School (e.g. Hebdige 1979; Brake 1985) focused on a group of disaffected working class youth who struggle to resist through creating subcultures against the process of hegemony. Through subculturalization, the marginalized reject the hegemonic goals and values of the mainstream.

2.1.1 Public transcripts and hidden transcripts

In *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Resistance* (1985) and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (1990), James Scott attempted to provide a language in terms of which to understand underclass politics and the subjective side of class relations – the experience of subordination and the cultural vocabulary in terms of which subordination is lived in particular social circumstances (Little 2009: np). We already touched on some aspects of his work in the previous chapter.

In *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Resistance* (1985), Scott redefined resistance from the perspective of ‘everyday’ life of the oppressed. He argues that visible historic ‘events’ such as organized rebellions or collective action are actually rather uncommon, and do not occur when and where expected, and often do not have much impact. Most of the political life of subordinate groups is to be found in the vast territory between “the overt collective defiance” and “complete hegemonic compliance” (Scott 1985: 136). Thus, “a view of politics focused either on what may be command performances of consent or open rebellion represents a far too narrow concept of political life – especially under conditions of tyranny or near-tyranny in which much of the world lives” (Scott 1985: 20).

According to Scott, the political life of subordinate groups is constructed by the interaction between ‘public transcripts’ and ‘hidden transcripts’ – two key concepts delineated in his influential 1992 book *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. Briefly, ‘public transcripts’ refer to “the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate” (Scott 1985: 2); and ‘hidden transcripts’ refer to “discourse that takes place ‘offstage,’ beyond direct observation by power holders” (Scott 1985: 4). Scott (1985: 18) distinguishes four varieties of political discourse among subordinate groups “which vary according to how closely they conform to the official discourse and according to who comprises their audience”. The most public discourse, which is also the safest, is based on “the flattering self-image of elites”.

To provide an example of such public transcripts in China: in recent years, Chinese leaders including Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang, have been expressing on various occasions their support for the graduate entrepreneurs as one of the strategies to address graduate unemployment.⁶⁶ There are also well-defined national and local policies

⁶⁶ See e.g. Xi Jinping’s speech made at his visit to Peking University on 4 May 2014. <http://cyy.xaiu.edu.cn/info/4481/11943.htm>; and Li Keqiang’s speech made at his visit to Hunan University at <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2015/02-17/7071281.shtml>, retrieved 6 May 2015.

concerning specific supporting measures. For example, in 2010, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security issued a Guiding Plan aimed at supporting young entrepreneurs and tackling youth unemployment. The guidelines specify that authorities will streamline procedures, provide financial support and incentives, and create funding mechanisms to make it easier for early-stage entrepreneurs to start their own businesses.⁶⁷

In 2012, the Human Resources and Social Security of Zhuhai city conducted some propaganda activities on the campus of universities in Zhuhai. However, after these promotion activities, according to the report by China Civil Education,⁶⁸ the reaction from the university and graduates were not positive. Most of the students expressed that they did not have a clear idea about how to operate. Gao Yang, who is in charge of the Graduate Entrepreneur Union of Beijing Normal University Zhuhai Campus told the reporter of China Civil Education, “the rate for obtaining an entrepreneur loan is quite low.” Gao Yang continued:

The most crucial measure to facilitate an entrepreneur is a start-up loan. However, despite the policy, it is almost impossible for the students to get a loan. For now, in 100 students, only one can get a loan and this one is usually a joint project cooperated with the government.⁶⁹

This case is one of many ‘image projects’ that the CCP has been conducting in China to establish a patriotic image – ‘the Party of the people’.

Despite its apparent hypocrisy, this small rhetorical space is still utilized by the young unemployed to appeal for more efficiency in policy enforcement, better job opportunities, and so forth. Thus, some of their interests could find representation in the prevailing ideology. This variety of subordinate political discourse is close to the public transcript, i.e., as interpreted by Little (1993: 153), “a conventional pattern of speech, a stylized public performance through which they adopt the forms of deference and respect for the powerful that are needed to avoid conflict with the powerful.”

For example, after the explosion in the port of Tianjin, which happened on 12 August 2015 and killed more than a hundred people, a hundred homeowners who lived near the explosion site took to the streets to demand the government to buy back their damaged flats. They wrote the following sentence on a banner: “We love the Party, we trust the government, please buy back our houses” (see Figure 2.1).

⁶⁷ See more about this plan at http://news.tsinghua.edu.cn/publish/news/4195/2011/20110225232519015479053/20110225232519015479053_.html, retrieved 23 March 2015.

⁶⁸ http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_a4fc9ac801014y7x.html, retrieved 6 June 2014.

⁶⁹ See more about this report at http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_a4fc9ac801014y7x.html, retrieved 24 July 2014.



Figure 2.1: A banner in the protest by Tianjin explosion victims
(source: <http://weibo.com/chinabusinessjournal>, retrieved 9 February 2016)

In a public petition letter held by a victim in the protest (as in Figure 2.2), before presenting his petition, he wrote: “First of all, we are very grateful to the central government and the local government and Party Committee...”

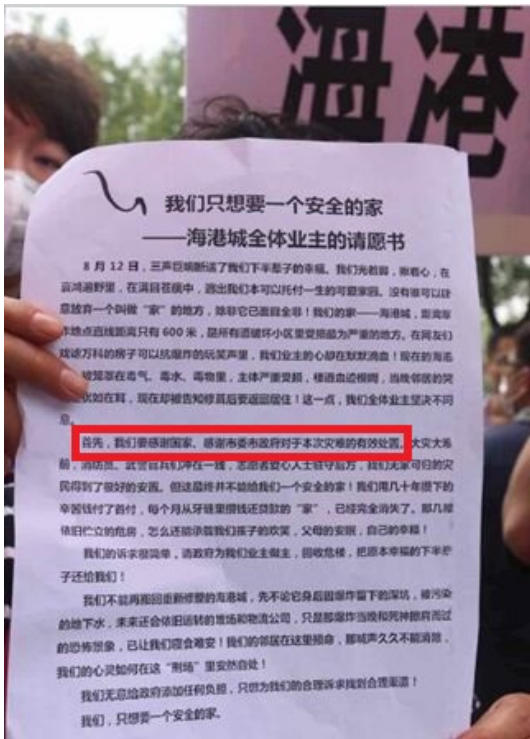


Figure 2.2: A petition letter in the protest by Tianjin explosion victims (box added, CD)
(source: http://finance.ifeng.com/a/20150817/13913446_0.shtml, retrieved 2 March 2016)

These two texts are typical public transcripts showing disadvantaged people's submission to a recognized authority in order to achieve their goal.

However, Scott points out that this performance is only skin-deep. The dominated are by no means taken in by their own affirmations of the justice and good manners of their masters and behind the scenes there is much raucous laughing, merciless lampooning, and bitter criticism (Scott 1985). Here comes a second form of political discourse, that of the hidden transcript itself: "Here, offstage, where subordinates may gather outside the intimidating gaze of power, a sharply dissonant political culture is possible" (Scott 1990: 18). Grassroots actors "in the relative safety of their quarters can speak the words of anger, revenge, self-assertion that they must normally choke back when in the presence of the masters and mistresses" (Scott 1985: 18). A typical example of this type of discourse is 'banquet scripts' continuously disclosed on the Chinese Internet. Bi Fujian, a well-known celebrity who used to work for the state-run China Central Television, was filmed at a private banquet singing a revolutionary song from a Mao-era opera, *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*. But he changed the lyrics to say "we've suffered enough" and calling Chairman Mao "that old son of a bitch," prompting fellow guests to laugh. The 75-second video clip, seemingly filmed on the cellphone of another dinner guest, was uploaded on the Internet and went viral immediately.⁷⁰ Consequently, Mr. Bi was made to apologize on his Weibo and stopped his work on CCTV. This type of real hidden transcript is not supposed to be read directly by the power-holder and should remain safe in a certain private zone free from censorship. However, when they are disclosed accidentally, they will lead to disastrous consequences, because the form of these discourses usually assumes a direct defiance without shielding the identity of the actors.

There is another type of hidden transcript, which aims at "the rupture of the political cordon sanitaire between the hidden and the public transcript" (Scott 1985: 19). These hidden transcripts are made public by the author(s) to test or challenge the authority. This type of discourse will cause "a swift stroke of repression or, if unanswered, often lead to further words and acts of daring" (Scott 1985: 19).

For example, *Charter 08* – a manifesto published on 10 December 2008 and initially signed by over 350 Chinese intellectuals and human rights activists – is a typical hidden transcript made public by its main author Liu Xiaobo on the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopting its name and style from the anti-Soviet Charter 77 issued by dissidents in Czechoslovakia. The Charter calls for 19 changes including an independent legal system, freedom of association and the elimination of one-party rule. The police detained Liu Xiaobo, hours before the online release of the Charter. He was arrested later, and on 25 December 2009, Liu Xiaobo was sentenced to 11 years in prison for 'inciting subversion of state power'. On 8 October 2010, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize 'for his long and non-violent

⁷⁰ See more about the Bi Fujian event at <http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-5054353-1.shtml>, retrieved 17 May 2015.

struggle for fundamental human rights in China.⁷¹ This case shows the explosive nature and extensive social influence of publicized hidden transcripts.

A central argument of the transcripts theory by Scott (1985) however, is that there is a third realm of subordinate group discourses that lies strategically between public transcripts and hidden transcripts. He points out:

This is a politics of disguise and anonymity that takes place in public view but is designed to have a double meaning or to shield the identity of the actors. Rumor, gossip, folktales, jokes, songs, rituals, codes, and euphemisms – good part of the folk culture of subordinate groups – fit this description. (Scott 1985: 19)

This third realm is where we find most Chinese online political memes and metaphorical word play to bypass censorship. This is also the main field of data collection for this research, since most of the subcultures created by the Chinese precariat online find their expression in anonymous, coded, and metaphorical discourses.

Different from the first variety of subordinate political discourse, most online precariat discourse does not take advantage of rhetorical concessions contained in the self-image of elites and find expression in dominant discourse, but create and express views in their own languages and styles. These discourses are not spoken out directly to the rulers but are supposed to be communicated between the subordinates.

The online subcultures are not hidden transcripts as discussed above either. They are performed in public instead of off-stage; they are ‘legal enough’ to avoid online censorship. At one level, they are nothing but innocent Internet buzzwords or parodies; at another level, they appear to celebrate the vengeful spirit of the weak as they triumph over the strict censorship and construct an imagined collective identity for a disillusioned precariat. In this sense, they are disguised, coded hidden transcripts.

As argued by Scott (1985: 19): “a partly sanitized, ambiguous, and coded version of the hidden transcript is always present in the public discourse of subordinate groups.” This is especially true in situations where violence is used to maintain the status quo, allowing “a veiled discourse of dignity and self-assertion within the public transcript” (Scott 1990: 137). These forms of resistance require little coordination or planning, and are used by both individuals and groups to resist without directly confronting or challenging elite norms. They belong to what Scott (1985: 19) calls “the infrapolitics of subordinate groups,” by which he means “to designate a wide variety of low-profile forms of resistance that dare not speak in their own name.”

By using the concept ‘disguised hidden transcripts’, I hope to shed light on a specific level of feelings shared by Chinese young precariat, which is much closer to the reality of their lived experience, especially online, where their resistance takes less

⁷¹ See more information about ‘Charter 08’ in: A Manifesto on Freedom Sets China’s Persecution Machinery in Motion, *New York Times*, 3 May 2009. http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/01/world/asia/01beijing.html?_r=0, retrieved 6 March 2014.

visible forms of subculture, through which, it “is disguised, muted and veiled for safety’s sake” (Scott 1985: 137).

This type of disguised hidden transcripts emerges prosperously on the Chinese Internet due to the fact that China is not a democratic country yet and the precariat is forced in the first place to answer to the CCP and be infinitely adaptable. Under political dictatorship and in order to get their voices heard, the disillusioned young express themselves politically through disguised hidden transcripts. Memes such as Cao Ni Ma (草泥马, literally ‘Grass Mud Horse’) for anti-censorship, Empty Chair (空椅子, kong yi zi) for the Chinese dissident Liu Xiao Bo, and Tank Man (坦克人, tan ke ren) for commemorating the Tiananmen Square Event, all belong to this kind of coded political hidden transcripts. I will discuss these memes in detail in the empirical chapters.

2.1.2 Subculture

Another way of symbolic resistance is through ‘subculturalization’ (Brake 1980: 5). The marginalized attempt to resolve collectively experienced problems arises from contradictions in the social structure by subcultural participation. As observed by Ferguson (2002), the Birmingham School emphasized the lower-class youth’s subculturalization as a strategy to deal with their lack of legitimized access to the means for achieving hegemonic goals and mainstream signifiers of high status. Through subculturalization – participation in a subculture – the marginalized groups reject the hegemonic goals and values of mainstream culture. Thus, as a type of culture committed to social deviance, subcultures are “meaning systems, modes of expression or lifestyles developed by groups in subordinate structural positions,” which exist in a state of systemic contradiction with the mainstream culture, which work for marginalized social groups or communities (Brake 1985: 8). In my research, I assume that when Chinese precariat is suffering from the four A’s, especially ‘anomie’ resulting from their awareness of the mismatch between dominant norms and theirs, and especially when they find that there is no space for their voice to be heard offline, it is natural for them to resort to online subculturalization to solve their frustrations caused by inequality in terms of social class.

Another dominant ideology in today’s China which the precariat is resisting, is neo-liberalism. As discussed in Chapter 1, the precariat results from transformed production relations under neo-liberal logic. Its relationship to work and production is tenuous and unpredictable, leading to collectively felt insecurity in terms of employment, income, and social benefits and minimal trust in capital or the state. This new production relation, and people’s reactions and resistance, also find reflection in the production and consumption of popular culture.

When neo-liberal ideologies of commercialization and consumption become globally prevalent, the precariat has the desire and will to have control over the cultural products they are forced to consume. People succeed in creating various

cultural products individually because new digital technologies and media provide new resources and tools for individual cultural production. New technologies like Corel Draw, or mash-up programs on the Internet, give consumers a means of asserting more direct control over what they consume: to affect it and to own it. A good example of this bottom-up participation in cultural production is online parody, which has become so widespread because it empowers consumers – the driving force of late capitalism – to be more than simply consumers. It turns them into a massive web of dynamic producer/consumers, cultural remixers, and DIYs (Do It Yourself), and furthers a fundamentally inclusive process of production. Chinese parody – E'gao, an online subculture that I will elaborate on in Chapter 4, is even more meaningful and important for the Chinese online precariat, who use E'gao not only as a means to exert agency in cultural production and consumption, but also as a way to construct an alternative identity and community. Thus, E'gao has obtained profound social implications as a cultural practice, and is a prime example of subculturalization.

Brake (1985: ix) considers five functions that subcultures may have for their participants: (1) providing magical solutions to socio-economic structural problems; (2) offering a form of collective identity different from that of mainstream society; (3) winning space for alternative experiences and scripts of social reality; (4) supplying sets of meaningful leisure activities in contrast to the mainstream; (5) furnishing solutions to the existential dilemmas of identity.

All the above five functions are being activated in the subcultures created by the Chinese precariat investigated in this thesis. For example RRSS (人肉搜索, Ren Rou Sou Suo, literally 'Human Flesh Engine'), E'gao (恶搞, literally 'evil parody'), and Diaosi (屌丝, literally 'pubic hair') all concern disillusioned young people's struggles for alternative norms and identities through alternative genres and styles.

RRSS, an online search system based on massive human collaboration, is increasingly used as a form of online vigilante justice to hunt down and punish people engaging in 'socially unacceptable' behavior (e.g. political corruption, extramarital affairs). With all its imperfections, RRSS is one of the tools empowering the Chinese precariat to pursue an online-acquired citizenship by revealing societal wrongs. And the societal wrongs that have been revealed also provide alternative scripts of social reality.

E'gao, by deconstructing and remixing the elements of classic mainstream culture, presents China's reality with alternative scripts, which are usually, to some extent exaggerating, adapting, parodying or even distorting. E'gao also supplies a new type of meaningful online leisure activity that ordinary netizens can all participate in, since E'gao only requires very simple editing techniques and pursues humorous effects only. As a consequence, a large population of netizens participating in E'gao has formulated many temporary online communities centering around a specific E'gao work, or following a popular E'gao author, which thus offers a form of collective identity different from that of mainstream consumer society.

'Diaosi', an online loser culture, can be seen as a joint call to an alternative identity by the Chinese precariat. These disillusioned youths find themselves in an increasingly rigid society where they find no future, where they have lost an autonomous self but got an alienated and marginalized one, having to answer to the neo-liberal oppression as well as a dictatorial regime. They choose to give up the identity as a co-constructor of 'the Chinese Dream' designed for them by CCP, and start to delineate themselves as 'losers' because they become aware of the fact that they do not really match the norms of success and decent life as defined by the mainstream.

In Chapter 5 when I discuss Diaosi in detail, I will mention Nixi (逆袭, literally 'counter-attack') as an imagined final solution adopted by Diaosi to handle the insurmountable social structural divide. The Nixi plot usually appears in online Diaosi stories in a heroic sense, where usually a low-status young man (Diaosi) without a favorable social background or resources, finally manages to become successful and win the love of a Bai Fu Mei girl (白富美, 'white, rich and pretty'). Nixi provides a magical but imagined solution to socio-economic structural problems that the precariat encounters in today's China: a rigid society with little mobility, it is almost impossible for an underclass youth to become successful.

When subculture is closely connected with marginalized communities and identities, it is necessary to also investigate how the members of a subculture construct their group identity and community. Here is where style comes into the picture.

Style is the key word of subculture, because it is the means through which subcultures make meaning. As Hebdige (1979: 17) points out, "the challenge to hegemony which subcultures represent is not issued directly by them. Rather it is expressed obliquely, in 'style'." The objections are lodged, the contradictions displayed (and, as we shall see, 'magically resolved') at the level of appearances: that is, at the level of signs. As stressed by Božilović (2010), subculture as a socio-cultural phenomenon is most directly correlated to the meaning of style and subculture groups are creators and possessors of a variety of styles. He writes:

The style represents a connotation of the given culture. If the way of life can be ascribed to a wider social community or social group, then the style marks the contents of life of social layers and, in general, smaller social groups – so-called strategy of 'I' by which the actor, through subculture, marks himself and defines his personal affiliation. (Božilović 2010: 46)

Subculture is different from organized movements or protesting activities as a type of symbolic, discursive, or cultural resistance. As reviewed by Torode (1981), Hebdige presents a model for analyzing subcultures, i.e. by analyzing different styles of specific subcultures as symbolic forms of resistance. Using this model, he outlines the individual style differences of specific subcultures, such as Teddy boys, mods, rockers, skinheads, and punks and delineates the historical, class, race, and socioeconomic

conditions that surrounded the formation of each subculture (see Hebdige 1979). Therefore, in order to investigate the social conditions of, and meanings and identities made by a subculture, conducting an analysis of its styles is fundamental.

Online subcultures created by the Chinese precariat display some unique styles. In the first place, because online subcultures are 'virtual' in nature, the participants do not see each other physically, and do not show their affiliation to a subculture through styles of physical appearance as members of a traditional subculture do, such as a specific kind of clothes, music, decoration, etc. Instead, they demonstrate their styles through a variety of specific characteristics of their discursive performance. Thus the styles of online subcultures are basically discursive styles.

Secondly, created and circulated online, precariat subcultures in China are highly digitalized: bricolage becomes the main compositional technique which empowers ordinary netizens to create new cultural products simply by 'cut and paste'; cheapness and interactivity become the dominant styles, since the Internet provides an extensive repertoire of new linguistic and discursive resources and a huge interactive communication platform.

Last but not least, as subcultures, Chinese online precariat subcultures adopt a confrontational posture against the mainstream culture in setting up their own styles. As we shall see shortly, the dominant culture emphasizes grandness, seriousness, pretentiousness, and is of high normativity, while the subcultures tend to stress styles such as lightness, humor, vulgarity, super-diversity, etc. They also have a preference for metaphorical expressions, which is directly determined by and designed for handling China's online censorship. In the following three chapters, I will elaborate on these styles by means of specific case studies.

2.2 Methodological preliminaries

2.2.1 A critical online ethnography

I approached this research as an ethnographic study because this approach enabled me to investigate, analyze and report the meanings of the subcultural practices of the Chinese precariat in a very detailed and complex manner in the context of everyday (online) life. I agree with boyd⁷² (2008: 46) in seeing "ethnography as a descriptive account of cultural practices, grounded in data attained through ethnographic fieldwork and situated in conversation with broader theoretical frameworks." I set my fieldwork against the multiple theoretical backdrops, reviewed in the previous section.

Having its roots formally in anthropology (e.g. Malinowski 1922; Mead 1928; Boas 1938; Geertz 1973; Clifford and Marcus 1986), ethnography has different types, one of which is critical ethnography. Critical ethnography applies a critical theory-based approach to ethnography (Madison 2005). In contrast with conventional ethnography,

⁷² I follow boyd in the spelling of her name with b instead of B.

which describes what is, critical ethnography also asks what *could be* in order to disrupt tacit power relationships and perceived social inequalities (Thomas 1993). Critical ethnographers typically are politically minded people who look for taking a stand against inequality and domination. A critical ethnography will study issues of power, empowerment, inequality, dominance, repression, hegemony and victimization, empowering people by giving them more authority, challenging the status quo and addressing concerns about power and control (Creswell 2013: 94).

This research aims at providing a 'description' of the life experiences of the newly emerging precariat in China who are being marginalized as denizens. I advocate for the liberation of this group of people by at least giving them voice and identity. So, this research is a critical ethnography.

This research is also an online ethnography. Against the background of the enormous growth of people's engagement in global online discursive activities, it will come as no surprise that also online ethnography becomes booming business. This is also a controversial business. While ethnographically studying a sociotechnical phenomenon online is thrilling, it also has created various methodological challenges for ethnographers, among which, the online-offline dynamics and ethical issues.

2.2.2 Online vs offline

Online-offline dynamics is a contextually important issue for ethnographers of digital communication (Varis 2016). The methodological divide between online and offline is one of the core concerns underlying Internet ethnography and raises all sorts of methodological questions about boundaries, privacy, and ethics (Buchanan 2004; Markham and Baym 2008).

Technoutopian vs realistic determinism

The philosophical basis for the online-offline divide is defined by two different attitudes towards Internet culture: 'technoutopian' vs 'realistic determinism'. According to boyd (2008: 48-49), technoutopianism tends to view the Internet as a new kind of 'third place' with its own cultural dynamics (Bruckman and Resnick 1995; Soukup 2006), and focuses on how the Internet could free people from their corporeal limitations (Stone 1995), their social restraints (Turkle 1995), and the political regimes that regulate them (Barlow 1996). Realistic determinism sees the online world as a copy of the 'real', and the Internet is a tool that inflects everyday life in interesting ways (Wellman and Haythornthwaite 2002).

A technoutopian position advocates an ethnography which sets the fieldwork basically on the Internet. One typical example is the work done by Boellstorff (2008), who decided to locate his fieldwork wholly inside Second Life, an immersive virtual world. Boellstorff argued that it is critical to study virtual worlds in their own right as a culture with their own context and that "to demand that ethnographic research always incorporate meeting residents in the actual world for 'context' presumes that virtual

worlds are not themselves contexts” (Boellstorff 2008: 61). While he acknowledges that some questions require multi-sited fieldwork, he challenges the assumption that unmediated practices inform mediated ones.

Realistic determinism insists on the essential role that offline fieldwork plays in an ethnographic study of online cultures or phenomena. For example, as cited in boyd (2008: 48), “Kendall documented how people who engaged in online forums create online representations that bear close resemblance to their offline selves.” Sundén (2003) further challenged the disembodiment rhetoric by showing how the body plays a crucial role in people’s mediated experiences.

Multi-sited ethnography

Despite debates over online-offline dynamics, multi-sited fieldwork is increasingly common in ethnography (Green 1999). For example, Burrell (2009) suggests viewing multi-sites in ethnographic fieldwork as a consistent network to relate the different sites to one another, which allows ethnographers to approach social phenomena as a continuous system. In the same vein, boyd (2010) and Howard (2002) both suggest a network-driven approach, which allows ethnographers to fluidly move along axes of people, places, and objects, generating meaningful networks. Howard (2002) suggests pairing network analysis with forms of qualitative inquiry, defining ‘network ethnography’ as a synergistic research approach for the study of the organizational forms built around new media. As argued by Green, Harvey and Knox (2005), a networked approach to online ethnography allows ethnographers to explore the ways in which sites are created and made meaningful and the practices that sustain networking as a meaningful thing to do in particular settings.

However, while the methodological discussions about online ethnography are developing, the relation between online and offline cultures is also changing. As pointed out by Varis (2016), the current situation is an increasing convergence trend of online and offline contexts. It is becoming increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to make clear-cut distinctions between what is ‘online’ and what is ‘offline’, especially with the recent ‘de-computerization’, i.e., the emergence and increasing popularity of mobile technologies (smartphones, tablets) with Internet access, and thus the penetration of online knowledge and communication resources down to the most mundane levels of everyday (‘offline’) conduct (Blommaert 2016; Varis 2016).

While Boellstorff’s (2008) totally online approach remains controversial, his critiques of the way in which the divide between online and offline fieldworks implicitly prioritizes the offline are valuable. I agree with Boellstorff in that offline fieldwork should not be a mechanism to assess if people’s online representations of themselves are accurate or to understand how offline experiences of everyday life affect online practices. The target of ethnography is the culture and the people under study, regardless of whether this culture is online or offline. When ethnographers are investigating an online culture, the focus should be this online culture; it will miss the point if their efforts are targeting the offline reality while the online reality is being

dealt with as the reflection of the offline reality. However, this does not mean that offline contexts are not important for an online ethnography; it means that offline should not be prioritized over online. Offline contexts can become important only when they help exploring and better understanding the culture under study. As argued by Geertz (1973), the academic pursuit of ethnography is to provide a 'thick' description of the culture under study, and the methodology should focus on how to obtain valuable data and make such a 'thick' description (Geertz 1973). His statement implies that the choice of a field site should be made when required by questions arising in fieldwork and data analysis as the process to obtain a 'thick' description, rather than being presumed and stipulated for ethnographers before they start their fieldwork. Or as argued by Hine (2000), ethnographers should focus on exploring threads of meaning making that might cross the online-offline divide. In this sense, Varis (2016) points out that ethnography as an approach should be 'methodologically flexible and adaptive, regardless of its context.' In terms of the online-offline dynamics, an online ethnography should not confine itself to specific field sites, but rather remain open to wherever necessary for issues or research questions arising from the fieldwork.

So, the potential problem of multi-sited or networked ethnography is that their advocates still focus on finding an all-powerful complete methodological solution, which pursues an authentic, legitimate and systematically perfect methodology that help the ethnographers solve all the problems encountered in data collection as well as in data analysis, which is supposed to include both online and offline as fieldwork sites. This methodological perfectionism risks weakening the central position of the culture and people under study in an ethnography. The research questions should be considered more important than either the method or paradigm that underlies the method (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003: 20). It is the research questions arising from the fieldwork that determine which site the ethnographer should enter and how the data should be analyzed: "While some research questions can be answered through research relationships conducted solely online, others will be best served by moving research relationships either from online to offline or vice versa" (Hine 2005: 20). It does not necessarily have to be a multi-sited network. For example, when Boellstorff (2008) found that his research questions only concerned Second Life as the context, I agree with him locating his fieldwork wholly inside Second Life, an immersive virtual world. It is not necessary to always incorporate offline contexts just for the sake of a 'complete' methodological framework.

Triangulated ethnography

As Hine (2013) points out, in line with the ethnographic commitment to reflexivity, new technologies might provide an opportunity for interrogating and understanding our methodological commitments. Considering the speed and scope of change that digitalization has brought to social interaction, Varis (2016) emphasizes the importance

to use the inherent adaptability and flexibility of ethnography so as to find out what exactly is going on. She writes:

With digital culture, things have changed – we do have new kinds of socio-cultural activity, and new types of environments, and this may require us to be methodologically creative. At the same time, however, the principles of ethnography remain the same – and ethnography has been through innovations before, incorporating new contexts and new sites and forms of practice. (Varis 2016: 64)

Based on the same understanding and my fieldwork experiences, I propose a triangulation perspective for this ethnographic study.

Triangulation originally is a term linked to navigation, used by people to determine the position of a point by measuring angles to it from two known points. In essence, it is a simple process – two or more perspectives should meet at only one point, thus fixing the position (Cram 2002). In the social sciences, triangulation refers to the application and combination of several research methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon with a view to double (or triple) checking results (Bogdan and Biklen 2006). Triangulation is used both in quantitative and in qualitative research including ethnographic studies. Ethnographers commonly triangulate (that is, compare and contrast) interview and observation techniques to enhance the quality of their work (see e.g. Reeves, Kuper and Hodges 2008), even though as Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000: 112) pointed out, “triangulation is a technique of research, to which many subscribe in principle, but which only a minority uses in practice.”

By employing a triangulation perspective, the ethnographer addresses different research questions emerging at different phases of the research with different methods, thus to make the study a real open-ended emergent learning process rather than a static researcher-controlled experiment. The following types of triangulation methods are identified by Denzin (1970):

- 1) *Data triangulation*; collecting data from different sources to ensure validity – at different points of time, in different spaces and from different informants, so as to overcome the limitations of studies conducted at one point only in time, within one space, and from one person or one group;
- 2) *Investigator triangulation*; involving the use of more than one observer (or participant) in an investigation;
- 3) *Methodological triangulation*; involving using the same method on different occasions or different methods on the same object of study;
- 4) *Combined levels of triangulation*; combining more than one level of observation and analysis, e.g. individual, group, societal, to obtain a more complete and meaningful picture of the object of study;

- 5) *Theory triangulation*; involving the use of more than one theoretical scheme in the interpretation of the phenomenon. The choice of method depends on what the research is and what kind of triangulation it requires.

By proposing triangulation as a perspective, I try to challenge the presumption that unmediated practices inform mediated ones, and advocate a methodological perspective that an online ethnographic study is triangulated by questions and findings arising from the field.

In this dissertation, data triangulation is frequently used when for example texts found online are not sufficient to provide enough clues for 'thick' analysis. In this case, online interviews with relevant informant(s) have been conducted, and offline fieldwork has also been done. Different methods and theories are also triangulated flexibly when needed in the process of investigating research questions of this dissertation: linguistic theory, communication theory, cultural studies, sociological theory, political studies, critical discourse analysis, etc.

The ethnographer's position matters a lot in an ethnographic study. Ethnography needs an insider's perspective to achieve a native interpretation of the people and phenomena and thus the ethnographer must be immersed in the local environment; the ethnographer must simultaneously stay 'other', while remaining 'native', to give an outsider's account of the phenomena under study. In my case, I also need position or role triangulation in doing fieldwork. On the one hand, I place myself as locally as possible into various fields of Chinese online subcultures, to feel their feelings, experience their life, so as to obtain the most native data; on the other hand, I consciously adjust my position, i.e., to keep a certain distance to maintain independent thinking and interpretation.

2.2.3 Context-collapse vs recontextualization

Marwick and boyd (2010) discuss the notion of 'context collapse' to refer to the idea that in networked online environments such as social media, users' networks potentially include people from different spheres of life (family, friends, co-workers, people one has only met online, people one has not been in offline contact with for years, etc.). In such conditions, boyd (2008) argues that the intended uptake for communications may not be clear or transparent at all (cited in Varis 2016: 57-58).

This point sounds problematic to me in the sense that it prioritizes the offline contexts over online contexts by indicating the absence of some offline physical contexts leading to the 'collapse' of 'context'. The contexts that online communications rely on to make meaning can also be new contexts particularly formulated online with semiotic resources. These online contexts are different from the offline contexts and have different norms and different ways to make different meanings for different groups of people. For example, when you are chatting with a net-friend online, the image representing him in his profile can be a selfie, a

photoshopped selfie, a selfie of his favorite singer, his favorite Japanese cartoon figure, or just a default image assigned by the social media system. These different images deliver different messages to you about your interlocutor: a selfie is what he looks like in his offline life, and he wants to be honest with his online friends; a photoshopped selfie shows that he cares about what he looks like to his net-friend, or that he is not so satisfied with his physical appearance; a selfie of his idol is showing his taste: that singer or that kind of music means a lot to him; a manga figure sends a message about his hobby and lifestyle. If you also like manga, it is very likely that the two of you will have an interesting conversation. These all belong to digitalized semiotic contexts particularly formulated online. They recontextualize both online and offline cultural materials and incorporate them into individual online communicative repertoires. They are different from offline contexts in the traditional sense, but they do help to make meanings. So, to describe the online communication as “context collapse” in some sense denies the meaning-making capability of online semiotic contexts.

As Rymes (2012) pointed out, recontextualization of cultural material and incorporation into individual communicative repertoires is not something new, exclusively digital, or limited to online forms of communication; but new media such as YouTube make this process visible to the analyst (as quoted in Varis 2016). This is true, but maybe more significant about the online recontextualization and incorporation is that it provides masses of ordinary people with the resources and contexts they did not have access to before the Internet era, by which they make new meanings and produce new cultures unprecedented in terms of both quantity and quality. In other words, they are able to articulate a voice online with this extended communicative repertoire. Voice is defined by Blommaert (2005: 4) as the ways in which people manage to make themselves understood or fail to do so. This capacity to make oneself understood is to accomplish desired functions through language, to create favorable conditions for a desired uptake. But this capacity is not self-evident – while essentially creative, it is subject to several conditions and constraints and influenced by inequality as power effects in communication: differential access to linguistic and discursive resources and differential access to contextual spaces. Resources per se are also hierarchized in terms of functional adequacy, and those who have different resources often find that they have unequal resources, because access to rights and benefits in society is constrained by access to specific communicative resources (Hymes 1996).

When recontextualization happening online provides Internet users a different type of resources from offline, contexts also become resources (Blommaert 2005; see also Leppänen et al. 2014). The degree of access and control of semiotic resources is a feature of power and inequality, and that power and authority depend, among other things, on exclusive access to particular contextual spaces (Blommaert 2005: Chapter 3). In the case of China, given the increasingly converged online and offline contexts, there are still some basic differences between both. In offline China, the precariat as discussed in Chapter 1, is silenced in official discourses, which means it does not have a voice there. And this is because it does not have the discursive resources as well as

access to contexts to make them heard and understood. As an alternative context for the Chinese precariat's making of voice, the Internet provides extended semiotic resources, empowering the marginalized youths to produce their own cultures, so as to realize their agency and construct identities. So, on the Internet, the precariat comparatively has both the resources and the contexts to articulate a voice.

To conclude, the Chinese Internet has formed quite a different way of and contexts for meaning making than those prevalent in offline China. In this sense, methodologically, the online contexts and offline contexts have to be distinguished in this research. This distinction is important, because it reveals inequality in contextual resources, and is crucial in investigating the power and control, agency and meaning making in online precariat subcultures.

2.2.4 Ethical issues

Holmes (2009) indicates that in general, most online research involves minimal risks for participants regardless of whether they participate actively or passively without being asked for consent. Flicker, Haans and Skinner (2004) warn that those conducting research online should continue to be reminded of the importance of ethical conduct.

Persistence and searchability are two of the four characteristics described by boyd (2010) as the innate nature of social media spaces. They are not difficult for any Internet user to understand: pretty much everything online is persistent now – not just static pages, blog posts and so on, but also our activities on social networks. Basically, pretty much everything you post online is going to stay there 'forever' in some form, even if just on some server at Twitter or Facebook. But what affects the user is how easy it is for anyone else to find it. Persistence and searchability thus prelude the rising of ethical issues concerning privacy violation. The focus of these debates is the differing understandings of what is 'public' and what is 'private'.

These differences persist despite extensive public debate on privacy and surveillance throughout the world: there remains a lack of awareness of what is public and what is private online, and a general underestimation of how persistent online communications can be.

While print-based and face-to-face research has some agreed-upon guidelines and customs to follow, online ethnographers who turn to their specific fields of study for guidance in sorting through these questions often find little help. There appears to be a 'technology lag' where ethics has played catch-up to the various methodological options available to the researcher (Hair and Clark 2007). For example, the International Sociological Society's Code of Ethics⁷³ calls for researchers to obtain consent when sharing personal information about participants, but it also notes that "they can, however, make use of data gathered in historical archives, both private and public, under the legal conditions laid down in the country concerned and usually accepted by the international scientific community, and subject to the rule of the

⁷³ See more at http://www.isa-sociology.org/about/isa_code_of_ethics.htm, retrieved 13 March 2014.

archive.” Thus, according to this guideline, a researcher could access publicly available content without securing the consent of the authors (cited in McKee and Porter 2009: 6-7).

Another challenge for following an explicit ethical code in online ethnography is the fact that there is simply too much diversity across Internet cultures, values and modes of operation for that to be the case. As Hair and Clark (2007) indicate, what counts as ethical research in one community will clearly differ from the next.

While the ambiguity and complexity of the ethical issues of online ethnography make it difficult to be prescriptive, fundamentally, however, the application of ethical principles should not be compromised.

The traditional processes of obtaining informed consent can be upheld, though the format and medium for this may be different. Based largely on the work (and credibility) of the AoIR (2002),⁷⁴ (...) Madge (2007) suggests that for private or semi-private sources (for example, email or closed chat rooms) informed consent should be considered essential. In open-access forums (for example, newsgroups, bulletin boards), however, informed consent may not always be required. The Internet is usually considered a public place and public behavior does not necessarily require informed consent (Convery and Cox 2012: 54)

This is also the guideline for data collection of this research. Convery and Cox (2012) propose ‘negotiated ethics’ in online research. “This approach is grounded in the specifics of the community, the methodology and the research question(s). This does not mean an ‘anything goes’ relativist approach, but rather an open, pluralistic policy in relation to online research ethical issues (AoIR 2002)” (Convery and Cox 2012: 54).

This research also follows this ‘negotiated ethics’. This approach is in line with triangulation in the sense that handling ethical issues should be based on specific communities and research questions. For example, in case of this research, given the unique political environment of China, I need to be very careful when using politically-sensitive data to make sure that the publication of the data will not do harm to anyone related and informed consent must be conducted.⁷⁵

2.3 Ready for the next step

I hope that these theoretical and methodological preliminaries provide the reader with a sense of direction regarding the orientation and direction of my research, and regarding its main principles. The terrain I shall enter is (in spite of a rapidly growing

⁷⁴ Association of Internet Researchers (2002) Ethical decision-making and Internet research. <http://www.aoir.org/reports/ethics.pdf>, retrieved 2 April 2015.

⁷⁵ This has consequences in the sense that throughout the dissertation I am not always able to reveal detailed information of all my Internet resources.

body of work) still relatively poorly charted. But the discussion in this chapter, I believe, has adequately prepared us for the next step: engaging directly with the empirical materials documenting the lifeworld of the emerging Chinese precariat. I shall start with the instrument that preconditions these practices: the development of an online code, or language, used by the precariat and deployed, apart from offering some comfort for 'safe' communication, as an identity emblem for their communities.

CHAPTER 3

Memes, the new language

The first set of empirical materials I must address are, broadly taken, 'linguistic'. What is meant by 'broadly taken'? We shall see that the online world is above all a visual and multimodal world, and the term 'language' here stands for a fast developing semiotic system of multimodal signs. This 'language', we shall see, enables the precariat a degree of safety and freedom in its in-group interactions, and (like any language) serves as a key instrument for building and defining the community of precariat members.

When the Internet provides an alternative sphere for Chinese precariat discourses, it never means that they are free of state control. As reiterated many times by the Chinese state media, "cyber space is no more than the extension of the real society; and it is never free from the law" (Zheng Ying 2015: np). It is obviously true when one looks at China's sophisticated censorship system. In this tightly censored space, obvious political criticisms made by dissidents like Ai Weiwei and his followers are frequently checked and will be deleted when they cross the line. As observed by Shifman:

In its early days, publicized political discourses and attempts at political protest flourished in Chinese cyberspace. Aware of the dangers this kind of subversive communication could pose to the regime, the Chinese government has been implanting an active censorship system, including blocking certain keyword searches and websites; monitoring chat rooms, blogs, and micro-blogging platforms; and requiring the installation of censorship software on new computers. It also promotes self-censorship, obliging administrators of chat rooms. (Shifman 2013: 144)

However, in addition to those public political critiques, there is a second tier of critiques that is not spoken out directly in the face of the CCP, but is between the subordinates by metaphorical means. These forms of symbolic criticisms require little coordination or planning, and are used by both individuals and groups to resist without directly confronting or challenging the authorities. They belong to what Scott (1985: 19) calls "the infrapolitics of subordinate groups," by which he means "to designate a wide variety of low-profile forms of resistance that dare not speak in their own name." The criticisms made by the second tier are made by the more fear-tolerant groups in the population of China. In this group, as observed by Johnston and Carnesecca (2014), there is a strong overrepresentation of students (high school and university) and youth (sometimes unemployed). This part of the population coincides with the precariat in

China, and the reason for them to act as the main agents using online symbolic actions is partly because of the characteristic of young adults, which makes them more creative, subversive, risk-averse and passionate (Johnston 2012), and partly because of the prohibition of precariat discourse in offline China as well as enlarged symbolic resources and freedom brought about by the Internet. In the case of China, the precariat constitutes the main force of perpetrating seemingly small online symbolic acts of defiance against the regime.

The topics of these second tier critiques are not limited to political issues, but tightly connected with the precariat's life experiences, rights that they lack and the voice they want to construct. In the case of the Chinese precariat, the topics can be any aspect of their life as denizens: unemployment, an over-consumerizing society, freedom of speech, political rights and other citizen rights that they are supposed to have.

In the following sections of this chapter, I will elaborate on the meanings that memes have made available to the precariat. The discourses or texts adopted by the infrapolitics of the precariat belong to Scott's concept of disguised or coded transcripts, in the sense that they are "partly sanitized, ambiguous," and are "always present in the public discourse of subordinate groups" (Scott 1985: 19). Memes are a typical coded version of a hidden transcript. They are used by the online public for communication and are safe enough to avoid online censorship. They seem nothing more than some innocent in-group codes, but under the peaceful surface, they are a form of symbolic resistance.

Through memes, which are usually muted, coded and disguised, the Chinese precariat remind the broader population that, first, there is an emerging precariat class in the making, that is becoming increasingly marginalized by the mainstream society; and second, with guile and creativity, the voice of the precariat can be made public. Even in an authoritarian regime like China, the online repertoire of symbolic actions for the precariat can take numerous forms, among which memes are an important and basic one. As discussed above, memes are light, diverse, vulgar and disguised, and therefore they carry most of the basic genes of online youth discourses. Thus it is understandable that memes are adopted as the basic language of online cultural production by the precariat; many subcultures they have produced, for example E'gao, contain elements of memes, and Diaosi is per se a meme. As observed by Meiza (2014: np):

A knotty battle between meme creators and fans and the censors of the Chinese government is underway. The comedic meme seems to be the Achilles' heel of the Chinese Internet censorship system as its power lies in the assumed rather than the obviously readable.

3.1 Defining memes

The English evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins first coined the term ‘meme’ in his book *The Selfish Gene* in 1976 by linking the process by which memes survive and change through the evolution of culture to the natural selection of genes in biological evolution (Dawkins 1976: 352). Memes, according to Dawkins, refer to any cultural entity that an observer might consider a replicator: e.g. melodies, fashions and learned skills as examples. Dawkins provided some initial examples: “tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, and ways of making pots or building arches.” Dawkins was neither the first nor the last theorist to speculate that there might be something akin to a gene operating behind social communication. However, his coinage – a neologism that combines hints of ‘memory,’ ‘memetic,’ and ‘gene’ in one pithy package – has proved popular. But still, the meme concept is somewhat slippery to define.

The online Oxford English Dictionary defines a meme as “An element of a culture that may be considered to be passed on by non-genetic means, especially imitation.”⁷⁶ This definition reflects a specialized biological expression derived from a Greek word meaning: “that which is imitated.”⁷⁷ Regarding the defining characteristics of memes, Dennett confirms that memes are replicators, saying that memes are “elements [that] have the capacity to create copies or replicas of themselves” (Dennett 1990: 127). Blackmore (2000: 7) says, “Imitation is a kind of replication, or copying, and that is what makes a meme a replicator.”

All these definitions have pointed out the “self-replicating” nature of memes and its spreading “by copying or imitation” (Shifman 2013: 188). Bjarneskans, Grønnevik and Sandberg (1997) further argued that self-replicating is the characteristic that distinguishes memes from ideas or thoughts, which are not self-replicating and are spread passively (i.e. for extrinsic reasons) if spread beyond its initial host at all. However, Bjarneskans, Grønnevik and Sandberg (1997) also noted the influence of human hosts in the process of a meme’s evolvment. They define a meme as a (cognitive) information-structure, able to replicate, using human hosts and to influence their behavior to promote replication. This definition thus excludes many structures able to replicate without influencing host behavior or using non-human hosts such as chimpanzees, dolphins and computers.

These definitions emphasizing the ‘self-replicating’ nature of memes rely too much on the organizing power of the structure and meaning of the original sign in the evolvment of a meme. This tendency arouses questions that can be represented by the following: who is talking when people use memes, the memes or people? Are the very thoughts something people are able to decide on, or are they just parasites attempting to get out of people and thus infect others?

⁷⁶ See <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/meme>, retrieved 6 March 2015.

⁷⁷ See the ‘origin’ section of the entry ‘meme’ in the online OED at <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/meme>, retrieved 6 March 2015.

Jenkins (2014: np) also feels this tendency to be far too deterministic, “stripping aside the role of agency at a time when the public is exerting much greater control of the content which spreads across the culture than ever before.” As also argued by Aunger (2000) memes arise as a consequence of social learning. Aunger (2000: np) wrote: “Information was duplicated, yes. But because it was a replicator? No! Responsibility for duplicating information lies squarely and solely in the hands (mouths or brains) of the communicators.” In recent years, the definition of memes has evolved to refer to a popular culture that emerges from the Internet, and Internet memes have become an important new symbolic phenomenon.

Hopkins (2011: np) respects the replicating nature of the Internet memes and defines Internet memes from the aspect of their generating process, as “fads or inside jokes of microbial scale that worm their ways through the Internet, while evolving from slogans to crudely Photoshopped images to videos while maintaining some basic DNA.” Hopkins argued that even when this DNA is a trivial and arbitrary substance, memes can be as powerful as computer viruses. Shifman (2013) emphasizes the common characteristics of forms of memes at different stages of evolution, and defines memes in the particular context of the Internet as “(a) group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created with awareness of each other; and (c) were circulated, imitated, and transformed via the Internet by multiple users” (quoted in Jenkins 2014, np).

These definitions of Internet memes, following the traditional way of defining memes, also emphasize the replicating characteristic of memes without taking the agency of memeticists into account. However, the interactivity of the Internet, especially since the advent of Web 2.0, gradually led to a participatory model of online culture, in which Internet users are not merely passive consumers; instead, they function within collaborative networks in order to actively and critically evaluate, reshape and disseminate media content, including the memes (Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013).

In 2013 Dawkins characterized an Internet meme as one deliberately altered by human creativity, distinguished from Dawkins’ original idea involving mutation by random change and a form of Darwinian selection (Solon 2013). With this statement, Dawkins indicated the distinguished human agency embodied in the Internet memes. So, it is fair to say that the Internet has provided new evidence for the role that human agency plays in the creation and transmission of memes. In this new context, researchers start to note the agency of the memeticists. For example, Varis and Blommaert (2015) note the semiotic productivity of memes facilitated by their multimodality and re-contextualization they have gone through during their evolution:

Memes – often multimodal signs in which images and texts are combined – would typically enable intense resemiotization as well, in that original signs are altered in various ways, generically germane – a kind of ‘substrate’ recognizability would be

maintained – but situationally adjusted and altered so as to produce very different communicative effects. Memes tend to have an extraordinary level of semiotic productivity which involves very different kinds of semiotic activity – genres, in other words. (Varis and Blommaert 2015: 36)

The productivity of memes is supported by the memeticists, who communicate with memes, by which they adjust and appropriate memes in new contexts, and thus sustain the evolution of memes. This new power and autonomy that the Internet users have obtained through the development of digital technology has been providing updated evidence for ‘the death of the author’ (Barthes 1967); the empowered e-generation, by copying and other digital editing techniques, as Poster (1998: 7) argues, “extract the author from the text, to remove from its obvious meaning his or her intentions, style, concepts, rhetoric, mind.”

But Foucault warned us about the danger to get lost in the ‘post author utopia’ in his 1969 rejoinder *What Is an Author?* In contrast to Barthes’ sense of the laboratory effects that the author’s death might produce for the reader, Foucault warned that though the author is dead in a postmodern society, the networks of power that produce cultural ‘authority’ remain fully in place, and discourse would circulate without any need for an author (Foucault 1969, in Bouchard 1977: 138). By this argument, Foucault touches on the power embodied in ‘author’: the notion of author represents and is produced by cultural authority.

Thus, to take a middle-ground perspective, as argued by Shifman (2014) in an interview with Jenkins: on the one hand, memes have to be seen as “cultural building blocks that are articulated and diffused by active human agents.” On the other hand, people do “live in social and cultural worlds that constraint them.” Yet, “what drives processes of cultural diffusion is not the mysterious power of memes but the webs of meanings and structures people build around them” (Jenkins 2014: np).

In the most immediate discursive context, when forwarding a meme, you have to follow at least some features of the original sign to make the meme recognizable in its circulation; this is already a structural constraint. In the broader social cultural context, the structural power also never loses its control. Continuous top-down regulations have been issued to provide Internet languages and discourses including memes; allure and incorporation from commercialism have got involved since the beginning – constrained by these structural forces, and empowered by new technology, the Chinese Internet has been a fertile producer of memes. The CCP conducts online policing, and Chinese netizens’ expressions online are being checked all the time. Chinese netizens utilize the homophony and pictography of Chinese language and script to create various Internet memes. As Hopkins (2011: 1) states:

The Chinese online campaign for free speech is remarkable in that it takes advantage of unique possibilities of the Chinese language, as well as the technological possibilities of the Internet. (...) Chinese Internet resistance aims for the kind of instant poignancy that

generates further memes and leads to mass micro-movements. The online medium's challenges and opportunities inspire subversive memes. (...) By inciting outrage with a few characters, memes can pass by censors and turn jokes and profanities into unified protest.

Given the unique political environment in China, creating, developing and transmitting memes becomes an important means for netizens to communicate and express themselves.⁷⁸ By following the development of a meme, we can detect how resistance is transformed into an ever-changing discursive euphemizing process. Memes on the Chinese Internet as new modes of cultural participation are spontaneous and entertaining just as their counterparts in the West; however, given the unique social political context in China, the Chinese memes are also characterized by symbolism and undetectability (Meiza 2014). In general, Internet memes can be seen as "grassroots-style online satirical works" that have empowered the disillusioned precariat youth and become "one of contemporary China's finest forms of cultural and political expression" supercharged by the arrival of social media (Chin 2012: np).

3.2 The trajectory of memes, the case of Grass Mud Horse

The most famous Chinese meme must be 'Grass Mud Horse', or Cao Ni Ma (草泥马) in Chinese. It may look like a nonsense word, but it is the homophone (with different tones) of another Chinese expression, Cao Ni Ma (操你妈), which means 'mother fucker'. While the Chinese censorship system aims to block obscene forms of language, the phrase Grass Mud Horse actually allows netizens to transgress as well as to satirize the policy of censorship with impunity, which eventually makes the word an icon of grassroots aspirations for freedom of speech. They even invented a written form for this three-character phrase, by combining part of each of the three characters 草, 泥 and 马 (see Figure 3.1). As Kenneth Tan explains, the 艹 radical refers to 'grass' (草), 尼 resembles 泥 and both are homophones, while 马 is the character for 'horse'. The new character even has a recommended pronunciation 'jiayu' (quoted in Wang, Juffermans and Du 2012).

⁷⁸ The same particular political environment has an effect on my data. Some of the examples that I discuss below were, for obvious reasons, only circulated very briefly after which they were removed by the censors. This means that no existing source can be given for these data, and that I shall have to work on the remaining traces such as screenshots or ulterior copies of the data.



Figure 3.1: Grass Mud Horse: a new Chinese character

(source: http://shanghaiist.com/2009/03/23/character_of_the_day.php, retrieved 1 June 2013)

In the beginning, the invention of Grass Mud Horse became popularized among the Chinese netizens only as a clever euphemism of a swear word that can escape censorship. But gradually, it took on a whole new life beyond this function. A mythical animal depicted as a furry, amiable-looking alpaca was created to give a physical embodiment of Grass Mud Horse, a previously nonexistent creature, and started roaming on the Internet. Then, a story was made up about a Grass Mud Horse which goes as follows: there is a magical beast living in a desert known as ‘Mahler Gobi’ (ma le ge bi 马勒戈壁). Although the environment in Mahler Gobi desert is extremely harsh, this Grass Mud Horse lives a happy life there. But one day, the River Crab moves into Mahler Gobi. The phrase ‘River Crab’ is another online meme coming from He Xie (河蟹) in Chinese, which is known as a euphemism for China’s Internet censorship. The Grass Mud Horse and the River Crab have a fierce fight and, finally, the Grass Mud Horse wins the battle (see Figure 3.2) and goes on living in the fantasy land of Mahler Gobi desert thereafter.



Figure 3.2: Grass Mud Horse swallowing River Crab

(source: <http://n1.81813.com/news/20090812/01/8y18bc2l3wj6qqo31.shtml>, retrieved 4 June 2013)

The story (with several slightly varied versions) is a dramatic elaboration of resistance against Internet policing by netizens in China, in which the protagonist, the Grass Mud Horse, represents the repressed and the River Crab represents the repressor. The use of this story further explores the 'hidden transcript' (Scott 1985) of public political discourse by developing euphemistic lexicons, images and narratives through which language use and meanings are coded in such a way that they are recognized and shared by oppressed groups, but lie beyond the patrol and surveillance of the authorities. In using extreme profanity, subversive puns as well as the metaphorical plot of the Grass Mud Horse defeating the River Crab, netizens are able to express deep resentment and symbolic defiance of the Chinese Internet censorship. The triumph of Grass Mud Horse over River Crab was celebrated across the Internet in more vivid forms of language by using the Internet technology.

One such example is an online music video called 'the Song of the Grass Mud Horse' that went viral (even available on YouTube) after its release in 2009. The song (again with a number of versions) features the digital voice of a children's chorus singing about the life of the Grass Mud Horse in the theme tune of the famous children's cartoon TV series *The Smurfs*, as if to highlight the cuddly creature's unambiguous decency, innocence and vitality. Its lyrics go as follows:⁷⁹

*In the remote but beautiful Mahler Gobi desert
Lives a group of Grass Mud Horses
They are lively and smart
They are cheeky and sensitive
They live freely on Mahler Gobi desert
They are strong and brave, overcoming harsh conditions
Oh excellent Grass Mud Horse
Oh superb Grass Mud Horse
You defeated the River Crab to save fertile grass (land)
The River Crab disappeared from Mahler Gobi desert forever*

The image of the Grass Mud Horse even goes offline, enters people's everyday life and becomes a consumable good and identity statement in popular culture (see Figure 3.3).

Not only has Grass Mud Horse been transformed into a new cultural product of online spoofs and symbolic interactions for mass consumption as illustrated above, it also goes on to expand deeper into Chinese society and becomes an exploitable material with multiple meanings that inspires and provokes more explicitly a democratic movement, especially by public intellectuals. The Chinese artist and dissident Ai Weiwei made himself a leading actor of such a movement by making a bronze zodiac head in the form of a Grass Mud Horse (Figure 3.4) and posting on his website and blog photo images of himself posing naked and riding on a Grass Mud

⁷⁹ See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=01RPek5uAJ4>, translation is my own.

Horse doll as in Figure 3.5. This is highly controversial not least because of the public display of nudity: the composition of these images comes with a highly offensive caption which indicates Ai's ultimate condemnation, rebellion and subversion against the hegemony of policing exercised by the authority.

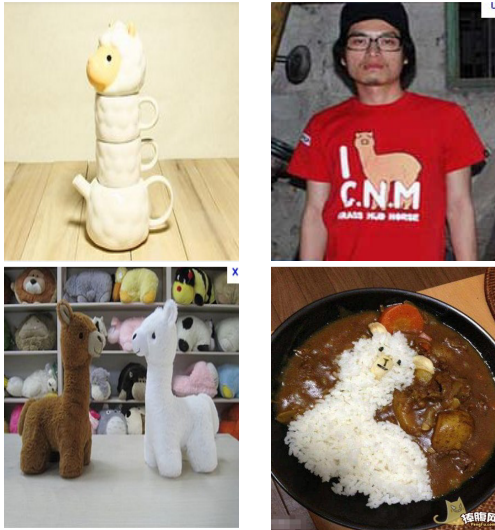


Figure 3.3: Grass Mud Horse in tea ware, T-shirt, toys and cuisine
(source: <http://image.baidu.com>, retrieved 8 June 2013)



Figure 3.4: Ai Weiwei's Grass Mud Horse bronze zodiac head (6th from left) at Washington's Hirshhorn Museum
(source: <http://benedante.blogspot.nl/2011/11/ai-weiwei.html>, retrieved 1 May 2016)⁸⁰

⁸⁰ A close-up picture can be found at https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/ai-weiwei-dissident-chinese-artist-and-fragments-of-a-cultural-past/2012/05/11/gIQAt6SaiU_story.html



Figure 3.5: Naked Ai Weiwei riding on a Grass Mud Horse⁸¹

(source: <https://freeweibo.com/weibo/%E8%89%BE%E6%9C%AA%E6%9C%AA>, retrieved 11 June 2015)

This visual and semiotic reframing of Grass Mud Horse further broadens the sociolinguistic repertoire of the term and makes it a transparent symbol of ridicule and contempt over the control of online communication imposed from above. From words to images, to songs, to videos, to dolls, from a smart word game to play with blog moderators, to a complicated online fairy tale, to part of people's daily life, to elements of popular and consumption culture, and to a widely acknowledged

⁸¹ There is a website called free weibo, particularly to keep some deleted posts on China Sina Weibo. This is a weibo post by a Chinese netizen 壞蛋蛋蛋壞 (Huaidandandanhui). The post is about Ai Weiwei's recent social activities and includes Ai's photo on the Cao Ni Ma. The original post was deleted but Ai Weiwei and his artworks can be found on his Twitter and other social media abroad. In order to find "living" data to illustrate my research, such as Ai Weiwei support, Liu Xiaobo and the Empty Chair or the June 4th remembrance (Tankman) amongst other, when I can not get workable data in Chinese social media, I opt to use the ones retrieved from foreign websites. Some data which I retrieved at some special moments, e.g. the images of the Empty Chair, as they were deleted very quickly, I can only use the screenshot image from my fieldwork notes, without a precise links or source. Nevertheless I chose to include them as they are very relevant to my research and the fact they were deleted and nowhere to be found anymore; - is evidence in itself of the lack of freedom of speech of Chinese precariat and explains why the precariat cultures online are metaphoric in the form of hidden transcripts.

The precariat's support for Ai Weiwei, due to his Grass Mud Horse art, stil is very vivid and the photograph is still used for showing their support. Cf. <http://hyperallergic.com/27635/breaking-ai-weiwei-released-on-bail/>, retrieved 1 July 2013.

democratic symbol, the story of Grass Mud Horse has illustrated how a meme is being created, transmitted, transformed and developed. It is created out of the need for communication in the context of censorship, but gradually it starts to transform and generate more meanings; it worms through the Internet and even the society at large to become a symbol. A meme can be taken as the DNA that generates the whole trajectory of a discursive resistance. The process of creating and transmitting memes constitutes a unique communication mode for Chinese netizens.

In July 2012 when the Chinese President Hu Jintao was in Hong Kong to swear in the city's new chief executive, C.Y. Leung, and to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the city's handover to China, many people took to the streets to protest what they see as the Chinafication of the metropolis. As protesters filled the streets, a few carried signs featuring the Grass Mud Horse, and others were featuring the middle finger of defiance (Carter 2015).

The evolvement of Grass Mud Horse has illustrated how a meme worms its way through the Internet to the offline society, while evolving from word play to cartoon images to audios and videos while maintaining some basic defining features of the original sign. Grass Mud Horse is not a single sign, but a group of digital items sharing common characteristics in terms of form, content, as well as the subversive stance. These common characteristics provide the intertextuality that sustains the evolvement.

As illustrated above, Grass Mud Horse in the first place is one of the online 'cultural building blocks' that are created and diffused by active Chinese netizens. Taking advantage of Web 2.0, the authors of Grass Mud Horse actively participate in the creation and evolvement of Grass Mud Horse, by critically evaluating, reshaping and disseminating the established forms and meanings of the meme. It is a vivid expression and articulation of the Chinese netizens' agency and creativity. On the other hand, it is also one of the direct consequences of China's online censorship that constrain Chinese Internet users socially, culturally and even politically. It is around the tension as well as dynamics generated between the agency and constraints they feel, that Chinese netizens build meanings and structures around the meme.

In the most immediate discursive context, for example when forwarding the meme, the memeticists have to follow at least some features of the established forms of the sign to be recognizable in the circulation of a meme. As shown above, the new form of Grass Mud Horse has to keep at least some features of the established form, for example the phonetic features Cao Ni Ma, the graphic features of the three Chinese characters 草泥马, or the image of alpaca. Thus, from the moment that Grass Mud Horse appeared online as a sign for symbolic resistance, the forms it took and the meanings it carried already set up a form structure which regulates and generates new forms, and which also helps the meme to gain its identity.

3.3 Styles of Chinese Internet memes

Chinese memes have broken the boundary between linguistic and discursive genres of traditional Chinese public discourse at the level of signifier, signified and the process of signifying, exhibiting quite a diverse and heterogeneous style. At the signifier level, all the semiotic resources facilitated by the digital technology that are available on the Internet have the potential to be part of a multimodal repertoire. As a result, memes take the form of photos, videos, animations, and texts, or any other semiotic form that is possible on the Internet. At the level of signified, most Chinese Internet memes are satirical texts that defy various problematic aspects of the Chinese society. Many sensitive topics, social events or phenomena and ideas that used to be forbidden in China's official public space, are now being talked about although in a metaphorical way: prohibition of freedom of speech, corruption, social inequality, etc. From the perspective of the signifying process, meaning making through memes becomes more democratic and bottom-up. Young netizens provide new meanings to vulgar slang words and use them in new contexts, or imitate and adapt a popular image to express new meanings, so as to build up their own 'dictionary' as the toolkit to get their voices heard on the Internet.

A well-known Chinese meme called 'Three Chinese Officials' was analyzed by Shifman (2013), and it is worth turning to her analysis. It all began when a Chinese government website of the Huili County published a photo showing three local officials inspecting a newly completed road. The only problem was that the photo looked like a badly produced Photoshop paste-up: the officials seemed to be levitating several inches above the ground. The photo generated many mocking memetic responses, in which the officials were relocated in other contexts. As a result, the website issued an apology, explaining that the three men did visit the road in question, but the photographer felt his original pictures were not impressive enough and relocated the officials. Shifman (2013) commented that users' memetic responses to such manipulations of political images could be seen as the bottom-up, digital resistance of media manipulation. Through these memetic responses, the monitorial citizens will become accustomed to looking for signs of manipulation and fabrication. By manipulating political photos, users signal that they are aware of the artificial construction of images and that they can create competing (and somewhat less flattering) images themselves.

Memes thus expand the range of participatory options in democracies: citizens can express their political options in new and accessible ways, engage in heated debates, and enjoy the process to boot. But in non-democracies, Internet memes are not just about expanding discursive opportunities – they may represent the idea of democracy itself. Although research on the peculiar aspects of meaning in relation to memes has only just started (e.g. Blommaert 2015; Varis and Blommaert 2015 for references; Nie 2016) a few early observations can support this claim about the democratic potential of memic communication. First, memes are open-ended signs, of which the 'original'

meaning appears not to be very important for their users. Users have an unusual freedom to ‘do their thing’ with memes, since memes often operate on the basis of a kind of randomness as to original meanings, functions and forms of usage. This means that very different communities of users can appropriate the same meme without having to submit to one (or a small range of) fixed or codified meanings and functions. The joint usage of the same meme, thus, enables a ‘unity within diversity’, in which a level of sharedness and recognizability (they all use the same sign) does not inhibit the attribution of very diverse and highly specific actual meanings and functions to the meme. Thus, while these diverse communities are tied together, for instance, by a shared experience of the same meme as ‘cool’, they deploy this coolness in a range of group-specific contexts and in relation to group-specific concerns (Blommaert 2015). New forms of light, dynamic and flexible communities, not directly tied to existing ‘offline’ communities, can emerge that way and acquire their place in the online public sphere (Varis and Blommaert 2015).

All of this has made Internet memes a new discursive practice as well as a new subculture with unique styles. The rest of this chapter will examine some Chinese memes as examples to illustrate the styles of Chinese Internet memes and to investigate how memes empower the Chinese precariat online.

3.3.1 Super-diversity

Based on the Internet and new digital technology, any element(s) of given (available) cultures can be cut down and restructured into new signifying modes, adapted to new contexts to meet new demands, i.e. used as a part of or the whole form of a meme. This leads to a super-diversity of the forms of memes. For example, at each stage of evolution of the meme Grass Mud Horse, the transformation of its form is quite dynamic. While some subtle features of the sign were kept to maintain the intertextuality, the form, the content, and the context all keep evolving. It has utilized various semiotic resources and shows an impressive super-diversity in terms of forms: from homophone Chinese characters to invented Chinese characters, from characters to alpaca images, from songs to videos, from physical alpacas in the zoo to dolls, cooking ware and clothes; from a smart word game to bypass censorship to a complicated online fairy tale, from a resistance symbol used by an activist artist to the logo on the banners of protesters in Hong Kong, with ever-diversifying forms, the meme Grass Mud Horse has reached extensive social spaces both online and offline.

There is a growing awareness that the Internet has altered the picture of linguistic diversity. Since Web 2.0, the user-generated content plus the interaction and collaboration between netizens, the linguistic diversity in the sense of multilingualism has been gradually replaced by what Blommaert and Rampton (2011) call ‘super-diversity’. Super-diversity as a term for social cultural studies was first proposed by Vertovec (2007), but it is elaborated in the linguistic and discourse field by researchers including Blommaert (2014), Rampton (2011), Leppänen (2012), etc. Super-diversity is

characterized by a tremendous increase in the categories of linguistic resources, not only in terms of named languages or dialects, but also in terms of genres, styles, the hybrid of different languages or even traditionally non-linguistic semiotic resources. For example, in the case of memes, any mode of symbols – languages, seemingly meaningless strokes, images, audios, videos, and mash-up – all have the potential to be made meaningful and circulated as a meme. This perspective of super-diversity revolves around the acceptance of ‘uncertainty’ in sociolinguistic analysis. This acceptance of uncertainty enables us to see complexity, hybridity, ‘impurity’ and other features of ‘abnormal’ sociolinguistic objects as ‘normal’ (Blommaert 2014).

The enhanced expressivity of an extended Internet-oriented linguistic repertoire has also led to the redefinition of literacy. Blommaert and Velghe (2014) observe that what grants people voice and makes them understood is not necessarily ‘named languages’, but can be specific and specialized bits of languages. According to Velghe (2014: 79), people’s repertoires are consequently rather

an organized complex of semiotic traces of power they gather in the course of their lives (Blommaert and Backus 2011). People thus ‘gather *things they need* in order to be seen by others as ‘normal’, understandable social beings’ (Blommaert and Backus 2011: 28), or in order to have a voice in specific contexts, specific time frames and with specific interlocutors. [emphasis in original]

As we saw, according to the *China New Media Development Report* (2013),⁸² the users of Weibo, tend to be low-educated, young and low-paid persons. Users with primary middle school education cover 74.88%. However, that does not stop young netizens from expressing themselves freely online. Blommaert and Velghe (2014: 1) argue that learning processes of language(s) develop through a variety of learning modes, ranging from regimented and uniform learning modes characterizing schools and other formal learning environments, to fleeting and ephemeral ‘encounters’ with language in informal learning environments. Informal learning is of paramount importance here.

On the Internet, the free flow of information and knowledge, and the interactive communication have shaped certain forms of literacy, including device literacy, for example how to use a computer, a smart phone and various types of software for communication and linguistic literacy, for example understanding and expressing oneself in various dialects including foreign languages and learning and using various Internet languages, etc. Online communication technologies open new opportunities for various forms of informal learning, offering users access to vocabularies, registers, styles and genres, as well as templates for practices (Blommaert and Velghe 2014: 1). Internet users use whatever they encounter online to enrich their repertoire and support their online communication. Therefore even an Internet user who does not

⁸² See more about this report at http://www.ssapchina.com/ssapzx/c_00000009000200010005/d_0790.htm, retrieved 12 March 2015.

have a high level of education is not necessarily regarded as an illiterate on the Internet.

In a QQ group,⁸³ where I do my fieldwork, the members are all fans of Photoshop (PS), and they usually communicate with GIF⁸⁴ or images made by themselves or other members instead of typing characters. The founder of the group is a dropout from primary school aged 19. He is very good at PS, and his PS products, which he usually shows in his chats with other members, always are applauded. For this, he is adored and respected by his peers in the group and his low literacy level in the traditional schooled sense is ignored. It is obvious that literacy in the virtual context has a different definition from that in the traditional sense. On the Internet, people still have different degrees of proficiency in speaking or writing a language, but this language is not necessarily a named language such as English or Chinese, but a language stipulated and recognized collectively by the members of a subgroup such as the PS QQ group mentioned above. Resources are still hierarchized in terms of functional adequacy inside the subgroup, but not judged by the mainstream linguistic norms anymore, but by the standard, the members of the subgroup all agree on. Like the young man in the PS QQ group, although his literacy level in the traditional sense is not high, in the specific context of the PS QQ group his high PS skills endow him with a new type of literacy, which works very well in communicating within this group.

For the Chinese young precariat, having access to super-diverse semiotic resources on the Internet provides them with an alternative discursive repertoire for expression when they are silenced in offline China. These new linguistic possibilities empower them to get their voice heard online; their new languages acquired online compared to languages in the traditional sense, belong to different orders of indexicality, which also facilitates groupness or identity construction. This brings us to another remarkable example of memes (Blommaert 2005: 73).

'Empty Chair' is a meme whose evolution illustrates well how a photo as the original sign was dramatically transformed due to tight online policing while maintaining subtle intertextuality. The Empty Chair concerns Liu Xiaobo, a Chinese dissident who was jailed in 2009 for calling for radical democratic reform in China and who won the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize. When the prize was announced and awarded, Chinese authorities executed strict Internet censorship measures and his name '刘晓波' was set as a sensitive word and blocked from the Internet. In order to bypass censorship and express their opinions on this incident, the bloggers of Sina Weibo employed various semiotic means to refer to Liu Xiaobo's name: Homophones,

⁸³ Tencent QQ, popularly known as QQ, is an instant messaging software service developed by Chinese company Tencent Holdings Limited. QQ also offers a variety of services, including online social games, music, shopping, microblogging, movies, platform of games and group and voice chat.

⁸⁴ The Graphics Interchange Format (better known by its acronym GIF) is a bitmap image format that was introduced by CompuServe in 1987 and has since come into widespread usage on the World Wide Web due to its wide support and portability (see Wikipedia).

blending, inserting symbols, also some rhetorical strategies like metonymy as shown in Figure 3.6.

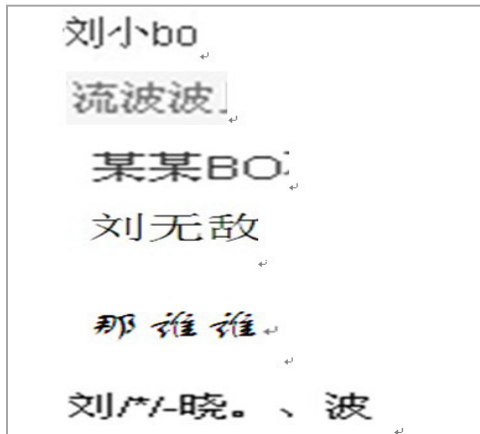


Figure 3.6: Various semiotic means to refer to Liu Xiaobo's name
(source: SinaWeibo and fieldwork notes, retrieved 10 December 2010)

For example, ‘刘无敌’ (Figure 3.6, line 4), literally ‘having no enemies’, refers to Liu’s final public speech entitled ‘I Have No Enemies’ he gave in the court before he was jailed in 2009. Another phrase which is often used to refer to Lui Xiaobo’s name but which is not shown in the above example is ‘刘和平’, literally ‘Liu Peace’, suggests Liu Xiaobo winning the Nobel Peace Prize.

The more interesting part of the data in question are the alternative forms of the name inspired directly by the word-filtering system applied to Sina Weibo during the Nobel Peace Prize event. At that moment, whenever Liu Xiaobo’s name was mentioned in a post, the alternative forms like ‘口口口’, ‘X X X’, or ‘* * *’ would appear on the screen instead of ‘刘晓波’ due to the word-filtering system; or the blogger would simply receive the following warning from the moderator: “您的言论包含敏感词, 不能发表” (‘your comments include *sensitive words*, and are not allowed to be publicized’). The bloggers of Sina Weibo were inspired by this move and immediately reacted to it with new creative expressions such as ‘刘口口’, ‘刘 X X’, ‘刘* *’ (see Figure 3.6, line 6 for similar example) or ‘敏感词’ to refer to Liu Xiaobo. For instance, a blogger posted a statement in the style of a news report: “快讯: 17点, 中国公民敏感词获 2010 年敏感词奖” (‘News: At 17:00, Chinese citizen *Sensitive Word* wins *Sensitive Word Prize* for 2010’).

The alternative forms of Liu Xiaobo’s name even go beyond the linguistic scope, and include other cultural genres, among which, images are very typical as illustrated in Figure 3.7.

Figure 3.7 (a) is a shot from the Nobel Prize event – a picture of the Awarding ceremony of the Nobel Peace Prize for 2010. Because Liu Xiaobo was in jail and not allowed by the Chinese government to go to Oslo to accept the Prize, the Prize instead

was awarded to a blue empty chair in which Liu Xiaobo was supposed to be seated if he would have made it to the ceremony. And Figure 3.7 (b) is part of the shot – the blue empty chair, which was focused and composed into an image standing for Liu Xiaobo. And this is where the diversification process started, in which the initial sign was gradually transformed into different colors (from blue to red, orange and yellow), different shapes (from armchair to straight-back chair) and different genres (from picture to drawing) as illustrated in Figure 3.7 (c), (d), (e), and (f). Empty Chair became a catch buzzword on the Chinese Internet during the last months of the year 2010.

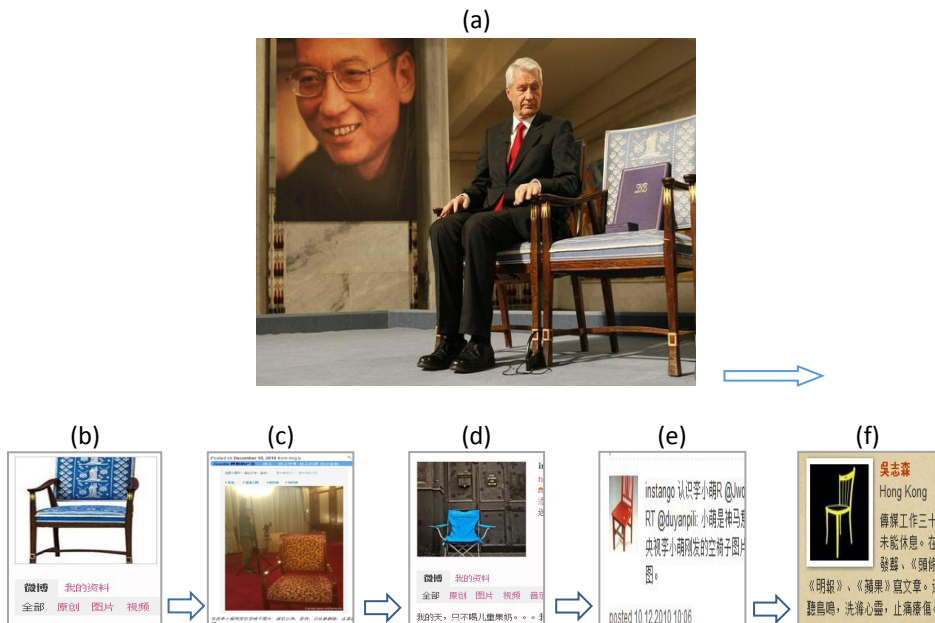


Figure 3.7: Diversified forms of Empty Chair
(source: Sina Weibo and fieldwork notes, retrieved 11 December 2010)⁸⁵

3.3.2 Lightness

According to Shifman (2013: 82) “Simplicity is an important attribute contributing to the creation of user-generated versions of the meme.” As illustrated in the case study of the Grass Mud Horse, the meme as a small vulgar phrase with biting irony has wormed through virtual spaces and even reached the offline sphere. As described by

⁸⁵ The source for image (a) is at http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/11/world/europe/11nobel.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0. The other images (b), (c), (d), (e) and (f) were all retrieved from Sina Weibo by me around the time when Liu Xiaobo was awarded the Nobel Prize. However, due to tight censorship on content concerning Liu Xiaobo at that time, the images about empty chair would be deleted quickly. This is why it is impossible to identify the precise sources for these images now.

Levine (2012: np), “alone, memes are pithy, silly, poignant pieces of online expression – an art form, pixelated.” The lightness is the basic feature of memes that caters for easy digital sharing, as argued by Bozeman (2012: np): “the temptation to share a meme as quickly as possible has diluted the size of the meme.” Therefore, being light becomes the requirement of small screen culture, which emphasizes individuality and briefness. Social media like Twitter and Chinese Weibo all limit the text to 140 characters.

The requirement for lightness of memes makes bricolage necessary and important since the parent culture or original story has to be ‘cut’ into pieces and then ‘pasted’ into new contexts. Bricolage was derived from the French verb ‘bricoler’, referring to the kind of activities that are performed by a handy man, meaning ‘to tinker’ or ‘to fiddle’. It was first coined by Lévi-Strauss (1966: 17) in his book *The Savage Mind*. In the sense of cultural production, bricolage is a technique where works are constructed from various available materials (‘found items’ or mass-produced ‘junk’); it is a mashup or creation from a diverse range of existing items or ideas.⁸⁶

As a highly digitalized way of seeing, showing and transforming existing cultures, the composition of memes requires new sets of compositional skills and sets of rhetorical abilities (cf. Jenkins 2008: 23). According to Hodgson (2010), these new techniques have to be ones that enable netizens to take existing media or cultural products and rework, restyle and re-conceptualize them to express their new thoughts and ideas, or as Benkler (2006: 200) put it: “If we are to make this culture our own, render it legible, and make it into a new platform for our needs and conversations today, we must find a way to cut, paste, and remix present culture.” This makes bricolage the best choice. Memes are characterized by a very high degree of bricolage indeed.

Around the end of November 2009, a news story rocked Chinese social media. Yang Yuanyuan, a 30-year-old postgraduate at Shanghai Maritime University, hanged herself in her bathroom on 25 November 2009. On the day before she committed suicide, she told her mother that knowledge cannot change destiny.⁸⁷ According to the report, Yang came from a single-parent family. She and her brother were brought up by their mother and they worked hard to climb up the social ladder through education – Yang was pursuing her Master’s degree in Shanghai and her brother was pursuing his Doctor’s at Peking University. Ever since Yang’s mother had been laid off from the factory, she stayed with her daughter in the dormitory in the Wuhan University where she had her undergraduate study. Yang worked for two years to pay back all the debts before she decided to continue her post-graduate study in Shanghai. With little savings, she tried to apply for an extra bed for her mother in the school dormitory, but they were insulted for their rural identity. The warden even refused Yang’s mother

⁸⁶ *Dictionary of Postmodern Terms* at: <http://www.onpostmodernism.com/terms>, retrieved 21 May 2015.

⁸⁷ See more about this report at <http://news.163.com/09/12/12/10/5QAUM8A9000120GR.html>, retrieved 6 April 2015.

from entering the dormitory. Yang could not deal with the situation and committed suicide.

When the news of Yang's suicide was released, it went viral on social media. On Tianya Club, one of the most popular Internet forums in China, a post about this event received 899,246 clicks,⁸⁸ and this event was listed as the one of the six tragedies of China in 2009.⁸⁹ However, the circulation of the story was not in the form of a whole story but in fragmented key words, such as 'studying along with mother,' 'ant tribe,'⁹⁰ 'graduation means jobless,' 'education is useless,' 'knowledge can't change fate,' 'MA suicide,' etc. And finally 'Yang Yuanyuan Event' became a hot meme and kept being quoted by netizens. Memes like 'Yang Yuanyuan Event' have to be adapted into light texts in the process of circulation, in the sense that meanings are usually expressed in quite a small and brief text like a word, or at most a phrase, which is usually a subtle detail or element of the original that makes it recognizable.

Among all the well-known memes having emerged recently in China's cyberspace, most are brief words or phrases: e.g. Cao Ni Ma ('Grass Mud Horse') is a three-word phrase; memes such as Bi Ge (逼格), Ku Bi (苦逼), Dou Bi (逗逼), Er Bi (二逼), Zhuang Bi (装逼), all construct their meaning based on one key word Bi (逼) which literally refers to the female reproductive part, but metaphorically indexes the image of a disaffected young precariat. In the 'dress nude' meme, the key element is the dress added to every classic painting; in the meme Biao Shu (biao shu 表叔, literally 'watch uncle'; this meme will be elaborated on later in this chapter), a complicated witch-hunting story of a corrupted official has been distilled into one brief phrase – Biao Shu. But this is lightness in disguise. The light form of memes embodies a powerful core, which keeps the meme alive and dynamic. When the core with its light form is shared instantly and infinitely across social media on platforms like Weibo, the meme can become "a barometer of culture" (Levine 2012: np).

Heath, Bell and Sternberg (2001) include rumors and gossip as subsets of memes, reasoning that there is a cultural analogy between ideas that compete for survival and biological genes. Popular usage defines gossip as 'small talk'; it is small and light in the sense of being less official, less-evidence based, and from informal sources. Many memes started as this type of gossip, conceptualized as one of the verbal (or conversational) strategies people use to influence others in some way (Guerin 2003). For example, netizens' disclosing corrupted officials is usually initiated by some unproved online gossip. Gossiping about officials somehow resembles celebrity gossip, which usually grabs quick attention, because it engages the listeners with scandalous, hilarious, outrageous, or horrific content.

⁸⁸ See <http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-1759204-1.shtml>, retrieved 12 May 2015.

⁸⁹ See <http://blog.ifeng.com/article/4101011.html>, retrieved 23 March 2015.

⁹⁰ 'Ant Tribe' is a neologism used to describe a group of low-income university graduates who settle for a poverty-level existence in the cities of China. Lian Si (2009) coined the term 'Ant Tribe' to draw a comparison between the lives of these college graduates and ants (see Chapter 1).

Memes recognized as small talk come with a social purpose. The communication of such information during the transmission of a meme could provide status, fun, money, social control, or any material or psychological stimulus capable of fulfilling preconditioned needs, wishes, and expectations. Memes, therefore, serve as a strong driver for establishing friendships, exchanging knowledge, and providing mutual entertainment. Thus, memes can remind group members of the importance of the group's norms and values and thus enhance the groupness. In other words, memes facilitate information exchange, provide recreational pastime, and bring groups together through the sharing of norms. In this way, small talk, atomic light memes, can have formidable social influence. I will elaborate this point later when discussing what the memes mean to the precariat's social identity.

To conclude, by bricolage, a piece of a given cultural product is cut down and reworked and re-applied to new contexts and meanings. It can be a piece of discourse, a word or a phrase; it can be a piece of image, part of a picture of an image; it is an atomic entity that worms through the Internet and even the offline space to replicate itself while changing and being changed by its readers and users. Functionally, they are word games, small talk or gossips, but when they reach a large audience, they can formulate formable meanings like social identity and symbolic resistance.

3.3.3 Vulgarly

Another outstanding style of Chinese memes is vulgarity. As recorded by many observers of the Chinese Internet (e.g. Bristow 2009; Chao 2009), in the year 2009, a directive by the Chinese government requires the installation of a specific filtering software product, Green Dam, with the publicly stated intent of protecting young people from harmful Internet content. According to a report of the investigation conducted by Open Net Initiative (2009),⁹¹ the proposed implementation of software as reviewed in this report would in fact have an influence that extends beyond filtering age-inappropriate material. The filtering options include blocking of political and religious content. If implemented as proposed, the effect would be to increase the reach of Internet censorship to the edges of the network, adding a new and powerful control mechanism to the existing filtering system.

Although this Green Dam attempt did not succeed due to bottom-up resistance, it gave birth to the famous meme Grass Mud Horse. The meme first appeared as a subject of online cartoon satire following the announcement of the Green Dam Youth Escort pornography blocking software project (Koman 2009). The irony is: the authorities tried to tighten Internet control in the name of curbing vulgarity, and in return, the netizens fought back with a thunderstorm of vulgarity. After Grass Mud Horse, many memes followed the vulgar style. For example, as the gene of a set of memes illustrating a precariat's life experience like Bi Ge (逼格), Er Bi (二逼), Dou Bi

⁹¹ See more at <https://opennet.net/chinas-green-dam-the-implications-government-control-encroaching-home-pc>, retrieved 21 March 2015.

(逗逼), Ku Bi (苦逼), the Chinese character Bi (逼) originally means ‘vagina’, which rarely appears in mainstream discourses. Another recent hot meme Diaosi (屌丝) which will be discussed in Chapter 5 literally means ‘pubic hair’. Although the meanings of these memes have changed a lot during their evolvement, netizens’ preference of vulgar words, which were abandoned by the mainstream language system, is already a gesture of resistance.

The emergence of vulgar memes is a reaction to China’s peculiar political discursive environment, which was termed as ‘hypernormalization’ by Boyer and Yurchak (2008) who are engaged in studying late Soviet authoritative discourse (a similar political context). Discourses of this type are ‘recursive, formalized and predictable’. Since the establishment of the PRC, China’s official discourses are also typically “state-sponsored political discourses that were saturated with over crafted, repetitive and frequently esoteric formulations that distanced the authoritative discourse of socialism from its desired intimate connection with the language and thinking of its citizen subjects” (Boyer and Yurchak 2008: 181). Since the Chinese Communist Party took the power, Chinese people have been living within the Party’s linguistic and discursive framework. Although the CCP tried many times to change its linguistic style, it repeatedly failed. As Bandurski (2012: np) pointed out:

That failure is not surprising when you understand CCP discourse as core to the way the Party works. Sloganeering is key to the mobilization approach that drives China’s vast bureaucracy. Leaders define priorities, which are then drummed through the bureaucracy, from the top all the way to the bottom, through slogans that encapsulate those priorities.

‘Hypernormalization’ is particularly effective in situations where hegemony is used to maintain the status quo, where the ideological propaganda is disguised, muted and veiled with overcrafted, repetitive and frequently esoteric formulations. Chinese media exhibit several tendencies that are comparable to late socialist hypernormalization.

According to a statistical analysis of the CCP’s flagship media China Central TV (CCTV) news by Shen Xiaojing (2012), the following discursive features are revealed: (1) the macro-topics focus on the CCP’s domestic political and economic achievements; (2) the organization of news is based on its political importance; (3) ideological consensus in political and economic news analysis; (4) abstraction and formalization of text construction: same text structure, high level of repetition of certain sentence structures and vocabulary, and simplified and blurred references (signified content). Shen Xiaojing pointed out that it is understandable that such a fake, grand and empty discursive style is still there in today’s China which has already been so pervasively globalized: if you have to deliver an authoritative message to a target audience in a short time, you have to maintain a highly formalized textual style in order to ensure the efficiency as well as retain the authority of the original message.

The emergence of Internet memes can be understood as a direct reaction to the rigid and inhuman political discourses that Chinese people (including the precariat) have been living with. By creating and using memes, Chinese netizens spontaneously walk to the other side of the spectrum: employing the most vulgar discourses to construct their resistance. So, vulgarity is one of the pragmatic styles of online memes. In contrast with pretentiously serious, rigid, highly formalized official discourses, Internet memes are coarse, playful, spontaneous and critical. The following case study of the meme ‘Dress the Nude’ demonstrates the confrontation between the vulgarity of the memes and pretentiousness of public transcripts.

As recorded by Allen (2012), in a report about the opening of a major Renaissance exhibition in Beijing, editors from China’s CCTV decided to blur-out the private parts of Michelangelo’s ‘David-Apollo’ statue as shown in Figure 3.8.



Figure 3.8: ‘David-Apollo’ statue with ‘blurred-out’ private parts
(source: Screen-shot of CCTV news)

According to a report on *Telegraph* (10 July 2012), Chinese netizens joked about the CCTV broadcast. On the Chinese Internet portal, Netease, one of them, Yiteng Kaisi commented that “Without the mosaic, it is art. With the mosaic, it has become porno.” “The CCTV broadcast is definitely a fake,” joked another user on the Weibo micro-blog under the name SpeechlessPK, “The real David [statue] has a penis.”⁹² What’s more, a series of doctored photographs also circulated online, poking fun at the decision. This quickly became fodder to the Chinese netizen’s creativity, and a new wave of photoshopping – superimposing various items of clothing onto classic artwork to meet the censor’s standards. This led to the formulation of a meme – ‘Dress the Nude’ – as illustrated by the images I collected at image.baidu.com as shown in Figure 3.9.

⁹² The report was written by Tom Phillips, titled ‘Michelangelo Becomes Latest Victim of Chinese Censorship.’ See more about this report at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/9388560/Michelangelo-becomes-latest-victim-of-Chinese-censorship.html>, retrieved 6 August 2014.



Figure 3.9: Dress the Nude examples

(source: <http://image.baidu.com> and fieldwork notes, retrieved 8 December 2015.)



Figure 3.10: Dress the Nude in Chinese style

(source: <http://image.baidu.com>, retrieved 8 December 2015)

During the evolving of this meme, netizens managed to increase the criticism by dressing the figures in classic paintings with Chinese style clothing (Figure 3.10), by which they mock the pretentiousness of the ‘hypernormalization’ of dominant discourses in China as a characteristically Chinese thing.

The State Administration of Radio, Film and Television, or SARFT, as the administrative organization of the Internet in China, issues updated regulations every year to curb the tendency of vulgarity in online discourses, with very detailed mechanisms stipulated.⁹³

However Chinese netizens never stop. Have a look at the popular memes of recent years.⁹⁴ Many of the memes belong to the category of scatology, e.g., Ku Bi (苦逼, ‘a sad vagina’), Diao Si (屌丝, ‘pubic hair’), Ni Mei (你妹, ‘fuck your sister’), Dan Teng (蛋疼, ‘egg hurts’), Bu Er (木耳, ‘fungus’⁹⁵, referring to vagina), Pi Min (屁民, ‘fart citizen’), Dang Zhong Yang Zong Shu Ji (裆中央总竖鸡, ‘cock in the middle of the crotch’, homophone for the general secretary of central committee of CCP) and so on. As observed by Yang Peidong, Tang Lijun and Wang Xuan (2015), these memes all use the metaphor that connects the meaning directly with personal body experiences. Although seemingly vulgar, this kind of rhetoric emphasizes individuality and humanity, constructing an autonomous resistance against official language. Activist artist Ai Weiwei published a series of nude self-portraits with only a Grass Mud Horse hiding his private parts, accompanied by the caption ‘Cao Ni Ma Dang Zhong Yang’ (草泥马挡中央), literally meaning a ‘Grass Mud Horse covering the center’. Another interpretation of the caption is: ‘Screw your mother, Communist Party Central Committee’.

As discussed in Chapter 1, when the Chinese precariat find the norms of the mainstream society do not match theirs, and they are increasingly excluded and marginalized, they would stop trusting the mainstream culture and begin to set up new norms. Vulgarity is a distinguished style they have chosen for their new language – memes.

3.4 What do memes mean to the precariat?

When the precariat is arising in an economically capitalist China, the mainstream norms have not changed for them. An increasingly rigid social structure leaves almost no room for their future. In other words, they remain denizens in various ways. Using memes as their new language, the precariat in China start to perform their frustrations

⁹³ See more at: <http://www.sarft.gov.cn/articles/2006/07/21/20070910200240370285.html>, retrieved 3 March 2015.

⁹⁴ See e.g. http://www.360doc.com/content/11/0904/00/1908926_145610705.shtml, retrieved 23 May 2014.

⁹⁵ 木耳 literally means ‘tree mushroom’. It is an edible mushroom, which is very popular in Chinese cuisine. In English known as fungus or cloud ear or Judas ear. It looks very much like a vagina. For pictures see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Auricularia_auricula-judae, retrieved 23 July 2014.

as consumers, as well as their struggle for political, cultural and other citizen's rights. Memes have become their medium of voice. The following are several case studies that give clues of how they get their voice heard by creating and transmitting memes.

3.4.1 'Kidney trading brothers' – the consumption-frustrated precariat

In September 2015, with the announcement of Apple's new flagship smartphone the iPhone 6s dominating the global headlines, news on a more humorous note also caught on in China. A new Internet phrase 'Xiao Shen Ke' (削肾客, literally 'kidney trading brothers') was trending on Chinese social media. The phrase satirized China's crazy Apple fans, some of whom have expressed a desire to trade one of their kidneys for an iPhone, according to *Guangzhou Daily*.⁹⁶

According to *Modern Express*,⁹⁷ on 12 September 2015, a young man from Yangzhou, surnamed Wu, was determined to sell one of his kidneys in order to be one of the first to pre-order an iPhone 6S online. He bailed out at the last minute and informed the Nanjing police about his kidney dealing contact instead. This was not the first incident of its kind involving the passionate Apple fans of China. In 2011, a 17-year-old high school student sold one of his kidneys for RMB 22,000 (\$3,453), according to Boxun news.⁹⁸ He used the money to buy an iPhone and an iPad 2.

The phenomenon of the 'kidney trading brothers' continues to drive heated discussion on China's largest social network Sina Weibo. Some Weibo users have joked about making a film about China's crazy iPhone fans and their selling of their kidneys to buy iPhones.

Generated from these stories, the iPhone in China has obtained a nickname, 'kidney' (肾, Shen). Whenever a new version of iPhone is released, on the Chinese social media it will be simply called 'Shen 5' or 'Shen 6' instead of 'iPhone 5' or 'iPhone 6'. This nickname indicates that if they want to buy an iPhone, they need to sell one of their kidneys. Such a sarcastic nickname reflects the precariat's anxiety and frustration when facing the dominant consumption norms.

3.4.2 'Tank Man' – Memeing for political rights

As already discussed in Chapter 1, as China is not a democratic country yet, the precariat is forced in the first place to answer to the CCP and be infinitely adaptable. Under political dictatorship and in order to get their voice heard, the disillusioned young express themselves politically through disguised hidden transcripts. The two famous memes that I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, i.e. Cao Ni Ma (草泥,

⁹⁶ See more about this meme at http://news.xinhuanet.com/tech/2014-09/11/c_126973076.htm, retrieved 6 February 2015.

⁹⁷ http://kb.dsqq.cn/html/2015-09/15/content_411794.htm, retrieved 2 March 2015.

⁹⁸ <http://www.boxun.com/news/gb/china/2012/04/201204070017.shtml#Vk3kIPkrLIU>, retrieved 6 April 2015.

literally ‘Grass Mud Horse’) for anti-censorship and Empty Chair (空椅子, kong yi zi) about the Chinese dissident Liu Xiao Bo (and, by extension, about freedom of speech and thought), already provide some clues of what the precariat wants and what they can achieve discursively. In this section, I will further investigate the meaning of political memes by analyzing another famous meme: ‘Tank Man’ (坦克人, tan ke ren), a meme created and transmitted by Chinese netizens to commemorate the Tiananmen Square Event.

Chinese memes are entertaining but simultaneously subversive given their specific political contexts. Especially some political memes are closely connected to the notion of ‘hidden transcripts’ (Scott 1985). Scott defines hidden transcripts as the critique of power that ‘goes on offstage’, which the power elites cannot decode. As ‘hidden transcript’, memes display a concealing tendency in their evolvment. The process of bricolage facilitates the concealing nature of Chinese memes. Through cutting, adapting and restructuring, the form of the meme is always changing, and thus effectively conceals the message or agenda of the original text. The meme Tank Man which went viral on Chinese social media around 4 June 2013 gives a nice account of this point.

The famous photograph – known as Tank Man – of the 1989 protest (see Figure 3.11) has long been banned from Chinese cyberspace. The photo, featuring a man blocking a series of tanks during the Tiananmen Square protest on 4 June 1989, directly points to the dictatorship of the Chinese government and has startled people worldwide.



Figure 3.11: Tank Man

(source: <http://www.anajure.org.br/china-csw-convoca-governo-chines-a-respeitar-os-direitos-de-seus-cidadaos-no-aniversario-do-massacre-da-praca-da-paz-celestial/>, retrieved 8 October 2015)

As also observed by Blagdon (2013), every year before the anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, the Chinese government will engage in what has now become an expected annual crackdown on Internet expression that has any suggestion of the 1989 protests. However, in the year 2013,⁹⁹ Chinese Internet users created

⁹⁹ As mentioned before, many of my data, as they were retrieved from the Chinese Internet, only were there for a short moment due to the Chinese Internet censorship and the clandestine posting of the precariat. But the fact they were there can still be traced as they are written about in articles on foreign (based) websites. In an article titled ‘Chinese Netizens Defiantly Remember Tiananmen Square, Social media brings Chinese public remembrance of the “June 4th Incident” to an unprecedented scale’ (posted on Jun. 4,

multiple variations of the iconic photograph of Tank Man, incorporating images ranging from yellow ducks to Legos. These images began to circulate through social media in China days before the June 4th anniversary as a way to bypass censorship, and gained momentum largely for their humor and brevity.

In Figure 3.12, the four tanks in the original picture were wittily replaced with giant yellow ducks.¹⁰⁰ The meme is based on a 54-foot-tall duck sculpture, created by a Dutch artist.¹⁰¹



Figure 3.12: Yellow-duck version of Tank Man

(source: http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2014/05/29/world/social-issues-world/tiananmen-square-tank-man-anonymous-global-icon/#.Vr_4wzaiG8U, retrieved 13 October 2015)

2013, at 1:51 a.m. by Kevin Tang on BuzzFeed), the following content is included: ‘To celebrate June 1 Children’s Day, Chinese portal site NetEase.com released a slideshow of nostalgic toy cars.’ “Do you remember these sweet toys in your awesome childhood?” the editors asked. From this article, we can get the following information: first, that in the year 2013, social media did bring Chinese public remembrance of the ‘June 4th Incident’ to an unprecedented scale by metaphoric means like parodying the photo Tankman. Second, searching now in NertEase.com, you cannot get the picture anymore, which prove that the censorship machine in China about some taboo topics can be delayed but never gives up. The images I retrieved online can be from a foreign source, but are related to or used by Chinese netizens, although they could be deleted very quickly.

¹⁰⁰ In an article entitled: ‘Censored in China: “Today,” “Tonight” and “Big Yellow Duck”’ by Didi Kirsten Tatlow on 5 June, 2013, we read, “Today is the 24th anniversary of the crushing of democracy demonstrations in Beijing by the army on June 4, and tonight a large demonstration is planned in Hong Kong in memory of the dead, who number in the hundreds, possibly thousands (the government has never given a figure). That explains some of the censored words. But Big Yellow Duck? Here’s why. An image, which apparently was on Weibo and now is on Twitter (which is banned in mainland China), replaces the tanks from the iconic image taken on June 5, 1989, with big yellow ducks.” Here again, the author reports the fact that some images first circulated on Chinese social media, but quickly disappeared due to censorship and started to circulate on some websites abroad. This is why most of my data can now only be found on some foreign websites, although they were once circulating on China social media. Instead of referring to the dead link, I found it more useful for the reader to refer to an active foreign link. <http://cn.nytimes.com/china/20130605/c05censor/en-us/>

¹⁰¹ See Rubber Duck (sculpture) at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rubber_Duck_\(sculpture\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rubber_Duck_(sculpture)), retrieved 4 March 2014.

In Figure 3.13, the four tanks were replaced with four heads of Mao Zedong.



Figure 3.13: Mao Ze Dong version of Tank Man

(source: <http://beijingcream.com/2013/06/meme-thursday-angry-birds-mao-tank-man/>, retrieved 18 October 2015)

In Figure 3.14, The Tank Man picture is photoshopped into a Lego man facing down three green Lego tanks.



Figure 3.14: Lego version of Tank Man

(source: https://www.buzzfeed.com/kevintang/how-the-chinese-internet-remembers-tiananmen-on-its-24th-ann?utm_term=.or1LLJd2j#.ntYNNxn30, retrieved 21 October 2015)

In Figure 3.15, the Tank Man picture is imitating the image of robots programmed to execute orders with no will of their own (white) vs mercenary independent robots in the Hollywood movie Star Wars.



Figure 3.15: The robot version of Tank Man

(source: <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2012/07/star-wars-photos-recreates-iconic-images/>, retrieved 15 October 2015)

In Figure 3.16, the man is replaced by a scarecrow, only used to protect the crop, but cannot defend itself, because it cannot even move.



Figure 3.16: Scarecrow version of Tank Man

(source: <http://forum.worldoftanks.com/index.php?topic/175252-world-of-tanks-famous-scenes-from-history/>, retrieved 5 October 2015)

Another picture showing a cow in front of a line of bulldozers, or maybe agricultural machines, is also getting past Weibo’s censors as in Figure 3.17. Cows produce milk or are slaughtered for their meat. They are peaceful, innocent animals barely able to defend themselves.



Figure 3.17: The cow version of Tank Man

(source: <http://ww2.kqed.org/lowdown/2014/06/04/on-tiananmen-square-anniversary-using-creative-memes-to-circumvent-censorship/>, retrieved 20 October 2015)

Tanks can also be race cars as in Figure 3.18.

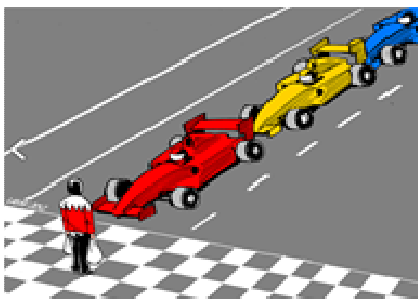


Figure 3.18: Race car version of Tank Man

(source: <https://latuffcartoons.wordpress.com/tag/f1/>, retrieved 23 October 2015)

The Tank Man picture is also photoshopped into a virtual gaming format as in Figure 3.19.

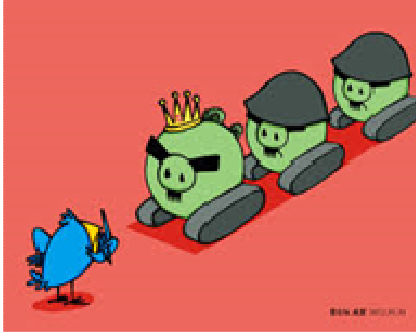


Figure 3.19: Angry Bird version of Tank Man

(source: <http://beijingcream.com/2013/06/meme-thursday-angry-birds-mao-tank-man/>, retrieved 11 October 2015)

Some parodies of the picture try to conceal the agenda of the original picture by restructuring the key elements, i.e. the tanks and the man by changing their position as in Figure 3.20.



Figure 3.20: Man Tank version of Tank Man

(source: <http://maxmagnusnorman.com/cgi-bin/skulpturer2.cgi?epopand9999and99>, retrieved 14 October 2015)

In Figure 3.21, the number of tanks is increased to uncountable, and the man was replaced with a baby, to emphasize the contrast between fragile and powerful.



Figure 3.21: Baby version of Tank Man

(source: <http://www.sappukei.com/blog-entry-817.html?sp>, retrieved 19 October 2015)

The version of Tank Man as shown in Figure 3.22 contains neither tanks nor man; however, the famous road is still there to help deliver the message contained in the original picture, and by this detail, the new version of the picture has obtained the gene of the meme and managed to pass the message.



Figure 3.22: Road version of Tank Man

(source: <http://niemanreports.org/articles/command-and-control/>, retrieved 29 October 2015)

During this anti-censorship discursive performance conducted through memes, each evolution stage retains some recognizable clue of the original picture to facilitate the intertextuality, after cutting and transforming as much as possible other parts of the original to disguise the agenda. As a result, each new parody of the Tank Man picture is a pastiche composed of both residue of the parent picture and new elements from other cultural products. In the disguise of transformation and fusion, the meaning of the original picture is protected and well expressed.

By posting these images instead of using banned sensitive words, Chinese bloggers on Weibo can often escape online policing while articulating their resistance successfully. What's more, the other cultures that the meme uses to disguise itself, i.e. the Yellow Duck, Lego and others, were infected by the meme. For example when online police found out the new form of Tank Man was in the disguise of yellow duck, 'yellow duck' became a new sensitive word to be deleted (Tatlow 2013). As reported by Tatlow, during the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square Event, typing 'Yellow Duck' into Sina Weibo prompted a message saying: "According to relevant laws, statutes and policies, the results of the search cannot be shown" (Tatlow 2013: np). The infectious nature of memes is supported by homology, i.e. the intertextuality between old and new forms connected by the gene of the meme. The Internet memes can be described as the viruses in the virtual cultural world. They leak into the Internet cultural system by concealing themselves, and thus infect and even destroy other parts of the structure in the medium by replicating there.

All of the parodies of Tank Man listed above are hidden transcripts as in James Scott's term. Scott (1990) argues that in public, those who are oppressed accept the domination, but they always question their domination offstage. And their way to resist this domination also tends to be behind the back of the power-holders. Memes provide an ideal form of offstage resistance, a typical example of hidden transcripts, by which overt conflicts and useless sacrifice are avoided while resistance is delivered.

3.4.3 Anti-corruption memes and RRSS

Memes bring to light social problems in China in an unprecedented manner, like the recent viral disclosure of local corruption. Often this sort of memes can actually lead to

positive results. When a meme like this goes viral, the whole corruption story eventually comes out, and it can be flabbergasting enough to lead to the sacking of the corrupt official. In this sense, Chinese netizens are giving meme culture a tinge of the precariat's political agency, pushing the boundaries of the virtual space and the offline world.

For example, nepotism and the abuse of power were immortalized in the name 'Li Gang' after a young man involved in a car accident, for which the other party was at fault, and the man tried to scare off the gathering crowd by shouting "my father is Li Gang." The phrase went viral and became a symbolic expression of the abuse of official power and the growing wealth gap.

In exposing corrupt officials, memes are usually facilitated by another secret weapon created by Chinese netizens – Ren Rou Sou Suo (RRSS, 人肉搜索, 'The Human Flesh Engine'). RRSS – an online search system based on massive human collaboration – is an example of censor-free action, increasingly used as a form of online vigilante justice to hunt down and punish people engaging in 'socially unacceptable' behavior (e.g. political corruption, extramarital affairs). RRSS can be characterized as anonymous crowd-sourced detective work, pursued online with offline results. The reliability of such searches, as well as the authenticity of the information obtained, varies. However, powered by netizens, RRSS is one of the tools empowering Chinese grassroots to assert their new online-acquired citizenship by revealing societal wrongs.

With all its imperfections, RRSS also has democratic potential: as the 'hunters' engaged in RRSS gather and process information, they form a 'knowledge community' (Jenkins 2008), enabling the emergence of 'collective intelligence'. As Lévy (1997, quoted in Jenkins 2008: 29) suggests, "Out of such knowledge communities, new kinds of political power will emerge which will operate alongside and sometimes directly challenge the hegemony of the nation-state or the economic might of corporate capitalism."

Biao Shu (表叔, 'watch uncle') is an Internet catchphrase coined in the year 2013. The word comes from a serious traffic accident that happened in Yan'an City, Shaanxi Province in August 26, 2012. At the scene of the accident, the secretary of the Provincial Safety Supervision Bureau named Yang Dacai looked very relaxed with a satisfied smile in one of the pictures taken by mainstream media. This relaxed smile irritated netizens, who collectively launched a Human Flesh Engine search. The search result is that Yang wore 11 brand watches on different public occasions. Because of the pressure from netizens, Yang was investigated and arrested. On 30th August 2013, no more than one year after he smiled at the scene of the accident, Yang was put to trial and sentenced to 14 years in prison.¹⁰²

¹⁰² The story is a summary of the news report about the Yang Dacai Event by BBC at http://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/china/2013/02/130222_yangdacai_watch_brother.shtml, retrieved 8 July 2015.

Figure 3.23 is the picture of Yang Dacai smiling at the scene of the accident; it is this specific picture that had aroused anger among netizens. And Figure 3.24 illustrates the process of netizens’ online search for watches Yang wore on different occasions.



Figure 3.23: Yang Dacai at the scene of the accident

(source: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/05/china-brother-wristwatch-yang-dacai-sentenced>, retrieved 11 October 2014)



Figure 3.24: RRSS of Biao Shu

(source: <http://image.baidu.com>, retrieved 27 October 2014)

According to a report published on *Procuratorate Daily* (25 September 2012),¹⁰³ netizen @JadeCong first reposted and questioned Yang’s smiling picture on Sina Weibo, netizen Baixingdayuetian (百姓大于天) found out Yang’s real identity, netizen Weizhuang (卫庄) started questioning the watches that Yang wore, and Sun Duofei (孙多菲) and Huazongdiulejingubang (花总丢了金箍棒) gave an expert opinion on the

¹⁰³ This report was written by Hou Wenchang, titled ‘27 Days, the Story of the Smiling “Watch Uncle”.’ See more about this report at http://newspaper.jcrb.com/page/1/2012-09/25/05/2012092505_pdf.pdf, retrieved 2 July 2013.

watches that Yang wore, on Sina Weibo. It was these ordinary netizens who started and maintained the process of this online anti-corruption event.

Actually, Yang was interviewed by Sina Weibo on 29 August 2012, and answered netizens' questions in a seemingly sincere manner (Shi Yingjie 2013). After this interview the online discussion abated somewhat. It was not until 10 September, when three university students requesting Shaanxi government to publicize Yang's income and property were refused their request, that people's attention returned to this event. On that day, about 210,000 people searched for this event on Sina Weibo according to this report. And on 21 August, the Shaanxi Discipline Inspection Commission launched the official investigation of Yang. Until then, during the 27 days, Yang's corruption event online went through ups and downs, and there were about 1.3 million posts on the topic on Sina Weibo.¹⁰⁴ Yang finally was dismissed due to the pressure of online public opinion. What is more, Yang got an Internet nickname Biao Shu (表叔, 'watch uncle'), which literally means an uncle wearing many watches as in Figure 3.25.



Figure 3.25: A cartoon featuring Yang Dacai as a Biao Shu

(source: <http://news.163.com/13/0830/19/9715GR9B00011229.html>, retrieved 25 October 2014)

After Yang's case, netizens continued to RRSS officials wearing brand watches just based on news pictures they found easily on the Internet. In a very short time, several Biao Shu (表叔) had been disclosed, such as Li Dequan, who was a provincial official in Fujiang province.¹⁰⁵ New corrupt officials have been continuously added to the blacklist of netizens' RRSS, including Cai Bin, a local official in Guangzhou, nicknamed Fang Shu (房叔, 'house uncle') because he was proven to possess more than 20 houses

¹⁰⁴ This is only the statistics obtained from Sina Weibo. The discussion on the Yang Dacai event is also very fierce on other social media, e.g. on Tencent Weibo, another leading social media in China, on 27 August, the number of posts reached 35,600, according to a report by CCTV. See more about this report at <http://zhongyang13.com/cctv13/xinwenzhoukan/20130908/2869.html>, retrieved 4 May 2015.

¹⁰⁵ See more at <http://blog.people.com.cn/article/1349846589259.html>, retrieved 3 June 2014.

in October 2012 and finally was sentenced to eleven and a half years in prison.¹⁰⁶ Also Gong Aiai, an official working in a bank, was nicknamed the Fang Jie (房姐, 'house sister' or 'female janitor') because it was discovered that in January 2013 she owned more than 20 houses in Beijing. She was finally sentenced to three years in October 2013.¹⁰⁷

Given the nature of its regime, China's anti-corruption policy is weak in organizational, political and judicial support, due to the absence of an assets declaration system, a clearer and more definite separation of powers and independent anti-corruption agencies. In this context, Zhao Yun (2011) commented: Internet anti-corruption search through RRSS is a have-to option made by Chinese citizens as quoted in Zhang Hongxia (2012).

However, as illustrated by the cases above, the Internet turns out not only to be the platform for a range of new discursively networked communities in China, but is closely connected to the social reality and greatly influences the power relations in offline reality. The online groups, even if ephemeral, have acquired offline agency. The dramatic changes that China has gone through in the past decades have forced the authorities as well as common people to reconsider the relations between them and their position in society, more and more ordinary people have the desire to have a say in policy-making or at least make a difference by getting their voices articulated as illustrated above.

In China, responses to corruption among officials and inactivity among the general populace often receive merciless criticism in the form of memes. By taking advantage of curious mixes of censorship and openness online, everyday net users are able to creatively circumvent official oversight and maintain an occasionally influential online public (Chabanet and Royall 2014: 223).

The relevance of this case study lies in the fact that the Chinese precariat are denizens without voting rights, which means they do not really have a say in policy making. The cases of online anti-corruption in China represented the rare occasions on which informal online networks found access to the public view and achieved concrete goals. The affordances provided by memes and RRSS and the online communities proved to be instrumental and effective in empowering the politically restrained unnamed Chinese precariat to act like citizens who are supposed to be identified with independent political participation.

3.4.4 'Erdai' and 'Da Li Ge' – memeing for community and identity

Observing the social effects of memes, Shifman (2014) writes:

While people are completely free to create almost any form of content, in practice most of them choose to work within the borders of existing meme genres. This ostensive

¹⁰⁶ See more at http://news.xinhuanet.com/photo/2013-09/12/c_125374439.htm, retrieved 27 May 2014.

¹⁰⁷ See more at <http://www.chinanews.com/sh/2013/09-29/5333898.shtml>, retrieved 2 August 2014.

rigidity may in fact have an important social function: following shared pathways for meme production is vital for creating a sense of communality in a fragmented world. (Shifman 2014: np)

The temporary communities formulated during the production and transmission of specific memes are not yet social communities in the Durkheimian tradition: communities bearing ‘thick’ characteristics such as nationality, gender, social class, ethnicity and so forth; nor are they a classic ‘speech community’ with clear and generally shareable rules of the indexical value and function of signs (Agha 2007). Varis and Blommaert (2015) identify this type of social units as ‘light communities’:

In a light community, people converge or coagulate around a shared focus – an object, a shared interest, another person, an event. This focusing is occasioned in the sense that it is triggered by a specific prompt, bound in time and space (even in ‘virtual’ space), and thus not necessarily ‘eternal’ in nature. (Varis and Blommaert 2015: 55)

In this sense, people getting together by participating in the creation and transmission of a meme, have already formed a typical light community. By creating, adapting and transmitting a meme, “people will share an enormous degree of similarity in behavior, will experience a sense of almost intimate closeness and a vast amount of cognitive and emotional sharedness” (Varis and Blommaert 2015: 55).

Varis and Blommaert (2015) invite more academic attention on light communities, because:

It is not likely that we will understand, and be able to realistically generalize, contemporary ‘identity’ unless we take into account these complex, ephemeral, layered, dynamic and unstable patterns of identity construction, identity ratification and group formation. Even more: we risk not understanding it at all when we fail to address patterns of identity processes that dominate enormous segments of our lives and are, empirically, clearly objects of intense concern for enormous numbers of people, who invest amazing amounts of resources and energy into them. Social and cultural phenomena should not be too quickly dismissed as irrelevant because they do not appear on our theoretical and analytical radars at present; if they occur and prove to be of significance in the social and cultural life of people, we at least need to examine them critically. (Varis and Blommaert 2015: 56-57)

However, to admit the ephemeral and dynamic nature of meme communities does not mean that their formation is totally random. For example, given the diversity of forms of various international versions of the global mega-YouTube hit Gangnam Style,¹⁰⁸ large numbers of people who got involved in it in various places on earth, recognized

¹⁰⁸ See e.g. Hou Mingyi (2013), ‘The semiotics of Internet celebrity: Gangnam Style case.’ *Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies*, paper 82.

something in the video although what it is exactly they experienced as recognizable is hard to determine, and this distinguishes them from those not interested in this meme.

This means that meme culture is an ‘our’ culture. Kate Miltner, who prepared a dissertation on the famed Lolcat, said in an email interview with Levine: “The cultural significance of Internet memes is that they allow us to comment on and participate in our own culture, whether that’s by creating or sharing” (Levine 2012: np). Bozeman (2012) also points out that one of the most important things about memes is that they are one of the few elements of pop culture that we are constantly sharing and passing on. Memes are pop culture on the ground, they are the elements we view and share with the click of a button – it is pop culture at its most impulsive (Bozeman 2012: np).

The formation of an ‘our’ culture implies the process of excluding outsiders and including insiders. In this process, “indexical orders need to be built, as a consequence, since they cannot readily be presupposed,” and “virality, as a sociolinguistic phenomenon, might be seen as moments at which such indexical orders – perceived shareability of meaningful signs – are taking shape” (Varis and Blommaert 2015: 6). For example, various versions of Gangnam Style in different cultures display different forms of social and cultural normativity that have been formulated as a result of the world wide virality of Gangnam Style; for example Hou Mingyi (2013) examined globalized language and cultural contacts concerning the video Gangnam Style.

These communities can be diverse in terms of social background because the precariat as a class-in-making in China, as I discussed in Chapter 1, are heterogeneous.

Light communities focused on memes, are important for the identity construction of the Chinese precariat. Although fluid and unstable, these communities provide various platforms where disaffected Chinese youth can recognize each other; on the other hand, the light and ephemeral nature of meme communities also makes the circulation of memes succeed under Internet censorship, so as to facilitate memes as ‘low-profile’ forms of resistance in form of hidden transcripts.

In this section, I will use two case studies to illustrate the groupness, identity and community construction happening in the production of memes. One is the meme Erdai (二代, ‘second generation’); the other is Da Li Ge (大力哥), a meme originated from the story of a miserable and funny robber.

Erdai as a meme is the discursive result of continuous disclosure of wrong doings and crimes committed by the second generation of the people in power. When young netizens get together to RRSS Erdai who have done something wrong or illegal, they regard the participants of RRSS and onlookers cheering for them as their comrades, i.e. members of the same disadvantaged precarious group, while taking Erdai as their opponent, i.e. members of the privileged groups in today’s China.

Returning to an earlier example, perhaps the most representative incident of backlash against Erdai occurred in 2010, when the 22-year-old Li Qimin, intoxicated and speeding in his luxury car, hit a college girl and killed her. When apprehended, he

shouted, “My father is Li Gang!” The phrase quickly went viral, and to this day represents Erdai arrogance.¹⁰⁹

A recent case concerning Erdai phenomena that angered millions of Chinese netizens was that of Li Tianyi.¹¹⁰ Li Tianyi, the 17-year-old son of famous Chinese general and singer Li Shuangjiang, was prosecuted for his involvement in a gang rape. Many Chinese netizens saw Li Tianyi’s crime as proof that their negative feelings about privileged families were right, and vented their worries that the privileged will always be above the law in Chinese society. The case of Li Tianyi and Li Shuangjiang differs from those of other rich and powerful families because Li Shuangjiang’s popular ‘red songs’ from the Cultural Revolution praise the Party’s greatness. In this case, online criticism was directed both at Li Shuangjiang’s wealth and his political privilege. And based on this incident, netizens created a meme Keng Die (坑爹), literally meaning ‘entrapping your father’. It is used by netizens to mock the offspring of those rich and powerful whose misdeeds have tarnished their fathers’ reputations. Among others, this meme is reflecting the social phenomenon Erdai.

Through mocking Erdai by memes, the precariat on the one hand show their awareness of social inequality; on the other hand they also gain a sense of belonging. They gather themselves into the same subordinate group, i.e. those who are on the opposite side of Erdai (who are part of the privileged group).

Another occasion on which the precariat become conscious about its social identity is when they are sympathizing with stories of their peers who share the same precarious situation. The following is an example of how people get together through sympathizing with a precarious thief and participating in the formulation and transmission of a meme Da Li Ge (大力哥).

A Shenyang man surnamed Zhao who was caught in the act while attempting to rob a father and son depositing cash in an ATM, has been described by Chinese media as being the most miserable and funny robber ever.¹¹¹

A surveillance camera shows that on 29 November, 2013, Zhao appeared at an ATM machine located in the Shenhe district, Shenyang. There were two men using the machine, and Zhao pointed a knife at one of the men’s neck, saying, “Give me all your money! Hurry up!”

“Hell no!” the man said. The two apparently weren’t afraid at all, and one of them even pushed the knife away while the other knocked Zhao down. He was arrested by the police very soon.

During an interview conducted in the prison, Zhao narrated the robbery in an extremely funny way with inflated language and dramatic facial expressions.

¹⁰⁹ See more at http://news.ifeng.com/society/wtpa/detail_2010_11/01/2966701_0.shtml, retrieved 24 January 2015.

¹¹⁰ This story is based on a report of this event by Sohu News. See more at <http://star.news.sohu.com/s2013/litianyi/>, retrieved 24 November 2014.

¹¹¹ This story is based on a news report by Xinhua Net. See more at http://news.xinhuanet.com/photo/2013-12/22/c_125897867.htm, retrieved 7 October 2014.

"I did not know they were putting the money away, I thought they were withdrawing the cash," Zhao said, "I didn't get the money, so I thought maybe I could just steal some cigarettes, but that failed as well. The whole robbery was a complete failure," Zhao said.

"I tried to rob for buying Da Li.¹¹² I started drinking Da Li since 2003."

"It is Da Li, Da Li does miracles!"

"I am jobless now. I used to live on the compensation for housing demolition and relocation. But now I haven't a penny left; buying Da Li has cleaned me out completely."

"My dream? Making money is the dreams of others, mine is just to get in here." "The outside world is too dangerous, I have to withdraw," Zhao said.

After this interview was broadcasted on TV, Zhao became well-known overnight as Da Li Ge (Da Li Brother). The video of the interview went viral on the Internet, and his funny facial expressions (Figure 3.26) have been extracted as the gene and adapted into a set of cartoon images particularly used in online chatting (Figure 3.27), and thus a new meme Da Li Ge was born.



Figure 3.26: Facial expressions of Zhao in interview
(source: <http://image.baidu.com>, retrieved 1 May 2015)

¹¹² Da Li is a prescription drug containing codeine. It is a medicine for coughing with a calming effect, and long-term use easily produces dependence.



Figure 3.27: Da Li Ge images used in online chatting

(source: <http://image.baidu.com>, retrieved 15 May 2014)

The context of the usage of these adapted images of expression is basically instant communication platforms such as social media. They are usually not only presented as pure pictures but also mashed up with some brief common phrases favored by online chatters. And the character of Da Li Ge delineated by this image is a low-status disillusioned youth, who is living a miserable life with no future, but full of sense of humor; and he likes to mock himself with vulgar language. The following is the translation of some of those phrases embodied in Da Li Ge images:

What the fuck, you did a good Zhuang Bi job.

It should be exhausting to Zhuang Bi all day like you do. Drink some Da Li.

Back up, I am about to Zhuang Bi.

It is refreshing to have a shower. Anyway, you go on Zhuang Biing. I have been watching all the time.

I am not happy with what you said.

I don't want to make a fuss of it. But who the fuck do you think you are?

I give you 1 yuan, and you get out of this chat-group.

In Da Li Ge discourse, which consists of cartoon images and common phrases, Zhuang Bi is the key word as shown in the above. Zhuang Bi (装逼) is an Internet catch phrase, simply meaning 'playing it cool', or 'assuming superior airs'. Bi (逼) comes from Niu Bi (牛逼), which means 'awesome'. Zhuang (装) means 'pretend' or 'assume'. So Zhuang

Bi means 'pretending to be awesome', 'playing it cool', or 'assuming superior airs'.¹¹³ Obviously, people such as Da Li Ge do not like those who like Zhuang Bi. But what are the implications of Zhuang Bi?

There was a question posted on Zhihu¹¹⁴ on 19 May 2013: why people do not like those who like Zhuang Bi?¹¹⁵ Among 26 answers, the following three are quite representative:

- 1) *Guchedan, Wo Zhishi Luguode Wenmang* (顾扯淡, 我只是路过的文盲。。。, 'I am just chatting for fun, I am an illiterate passing by...'): If you drive a fancy car, live in a big house with a pretty wife, and use an iPhone, or you become famous or an official... then basically you will be mocked at as Zhuang Bi;
- 2) *Ren Kun* (任坤): Those who like Zhuang Bi usually have an elitism complex, and enjoy the feeling of being privileged;
- 3) *Zhihu Yonghu* (知乎用户): The capacity and resources that people who like Zhuang Bi have are usually far less than what they claim to have.

Guchedan, Wo Zhishi Luguode Wenmang argues that, Zhuang Bi is only a tag the disadvantaged put on the privileged groups. If you are rich and powerful, no matter what you do, you will be mocked as Zhuang Bi. The perspective given by *Ren Kun* is to describe the showing-off attitude of the rich and powerful by displaying their high-profile life style. For people like *Zhihu Yonghu*, Zhuang Bi is a pretentious attitude assumed by losers who use pretending to obtain a feeling of satisfaction.

This shows that people who like Zhuang Bi are not a homogeneous group. They can be successful people who assume superior airs but also can be social losers who pretend to be awesome. The point is: no matter who they are, this question per se shows in the first place that netizens do not like the behavior of Zhuang Bi, and this reflects an anti-elite feeling shared by the precarious group in China. However, dislike towards different types of Zhuang Bi reflects different social attitudes.

A Zhihu user – *Archon, never be the best* (Archon, 永远不够好), who also answered the same question mentioned above, says: People do not like Zhuang Bi people, especially those with real power, partly because Zhuang Bi reveals a primitive manner of competition just like peacocks showing off their feathers, gorillas beating their chests, or lions shaking their manes. He argued that, in a civilized society, people should be sharing and exchanging, while Zhuang Bi is anti-exchange and anti-cooperation, which makes ordinary people feel their living space is being threatened and deprived.

¹¹³ See <http://www.quora.com/Why-do-Chinese-people-love-to-zhuangbi-%E8%A3%85%E9%80%BC>, retrieved 2 October 2014.

¹¹⁴ Zhihu is China's biggest question-and-answer style website, and works very similarly to the US-based Quora. For Chinese Internet users who want expert insight into various topics, Zhihu is the place to go.

¹¹⁵ <http://www.zhihu.com/question/20530520>, retrieved 6 May 2014.

However, when the loser who likes to Zhuang Bi is being criticized, the social feeling can be interpreted as a shared waking-up to the senses that as an underclass, they can never be really as awesome as the Erdai, given the ruthless social reality. It is no use to pretend or dream anymore. They remind each other that it is time to redefine and relocate their desires as well as identities. This is the exact social cultural foundation for the emergence of Diao Si subculture in China, to which Chapter 5 will be dedicated.

Coming back to Da Li Ge, the whole set of discourse created by the meme of Da Li Ge holds a position against Zhuang Bi, assuming the pose of a loser of the underclass. By sympathizing with discourses like Da Li Ge, the precariat become conscious and start to align with each other online by creating and transmitting more subcultures of their own, e.g. E'gao and Diaosi, so as to pursue more space for their voice.

3.5 Concluding remarks

As already analyzed in Chapter 1, a collectively felt structure of feeling among the Chinese precariat is the four A's, i.e. anxiety, anomie, alienation and anger. Standing (2011a) warns that when they are increasingly frustrated and dangerous because they have no voice, they are vulnerable to the siren calls of extreme political parties. Given China's strict control of speech and assembly, there are still no visible public political initiatives conducted by the Chinese precariat, but mushrooming suicides prove that they are suffering from Standing's four A's. Being young and mostly educated, if the precariat continues to be ignored and becomes more angry, there will be days of rage to come.

On the Internet, there is no 'revolution' agenda coming from this structure of feeling yet, but there is already effective anger online. Precarious young people are searching for symbols online to express their frustration and construct an alternative identity. They adopt memes as a new language, and have created their own styles as means of expression as well as their way to construct alternative communities and identities. The lightness of memes enables their transmission on social media; super-diversity makes it possible that the precariat obtain sufficient semiotic resources to create their own language and culture to make a voice. Vulgarity is a new discursive style distinguished from the pretentious discourse style of the CCP and thus helps the precariat to pose a rebellious gesture. Playing with as well as taking advantage of the tension between China's online censorship and freedom, the precariat utilize memes as coded, disguised transcripts, and manage to express their frustration in consumption, to call for freedom of speech, to participate in anti-corruption, and to make their own identities and communities.

Memes on the Chinese Internet are usually fragmented pieces of texts, very often originate from online gossip or small talk; RRSS (Human Flesh Engine) participants are frequently troubled by issues such as rumor or privacy invasion. But when memes start

to circulate among the precariat and reach a large audience, they can provide status, fun, friendships, knowledge, and mutual entertainment; they can remind group members of the importance of the group's norms and values and thus enhance the groupness. In this way, 'atomic' light-formed memes can produce robust meaning effects like social identity and symbolic resistance. They help the precariat to achieve some goals that they cannot achieve in offline China.

Varis and Blommaert (2015) argue that memes, typically, display a strong random character of meme origin. This is also true with many Chinese memes, especially memes with a pure entertainment purpose. However, as we have seen here, on the Chinese Internet there are also a large number of more 'focused' memes, which appear to have a non-random origin and are in that sense more 'referential' than the entertainment ones. This is due to the fact that memes are adopted by the Chinese precariat as one of the few means that they can use to express their desires and concerns besides entertainment. In this sense, I call memes a new language adopted by the Chinese precariat online. An emerging and illegitimate community organizes itself by means of 'cryptic' modes of communication; the precariat mark their difference from mainstream culture and power through this semiotic 'trick', enabling them to talk in a cunning way about topics, people and events that are 'off limits' in the 'public transcripts'.

This chapter must be seen as the empirical foundation of Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, because memes will occur in every following chapter. It is by means of this language that the precariat establishes itself as a community and engages in complex cultural and identity practices. I can now turn to the cultural practice.

CHAPTER 4

E'gao, their culture

The previous chapter on the 'language' of the precariat shapes the preconditions for the present one: an analysis of the 'culture' of the precariat. Returning to aspects of the discussion in earlier chapters, the emerging precariat escapes more 'traditional' Marxist class analyses: its economic position is unclear and might differ strongly between its individual members. Their *experience* of social reality, however, is similar, and is expressed through shared (and emerging, developing) social and cultural practices performed in a new, and relatively open, public sphere: the Internet. We have seen in the previous chapter how memic communication emerges as a 'language' by means of which a relatively uninhibited medium of communication can be shaped among precariat members. We now turn to an equally new and emerging cultural phenomenon, called E'gao. I see E'gao as the 'culture' of the precariat: a set of collectively transparent semiotic practices drawing on the resources I described in the previous chapter.

In today's China, the Marx-Lenin-Mao line of communist ideology is being replaced by a combination of materialism and assertive nationalism (Link, Madsen and Pickowicz 2013: 86). Since the early 1990s, the Chinese government has emphasized that China, the party-state, is 'rising'; it can project power in its region, exert influence at the United Nations, host a spectacular Olympics, and so on (Link, Madsen and Pickowicz 2013: 4). A recent endeavor made by the Chinese government to support this nationalist ideology is the propaganda for the China Dream discourse as I already reviewed in Chapter 1. However, the most famous symbolic demonstration of this nationalist sentiment is the spectacular Olympics opening ceremony held in Beijing in 2008. This big event was directed by the Chinese filmmaker Zhang Yimou. It featured 15,000 performers, lasted over four hours and was reported to have cost over \$100 million to produce. It was lauded by spectators and various international presses as spectacular and spellbinding and by many accounts 'the greatest ever'.¹¹⁶

China understands the power of the spectacle, as evidenced by its grand displays and its willingness to spend twice as much on the Olympics than any other host nation. In comments following their successful bid for the 2008 games, China's government officials declared: "The cultural industry is a key rising industry that should obviously become stronger and more competitive by taking advantage of the business opportunities spawned by the Olympics. It should become a force to be reckoned with

¹¹⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2008_Summer_Olympics_opening_ceremony, retrieved 17 August 2014.

on the International market.”¹¹⁷ As observed by Jensen and Hesford (2012), China’s desire to cultivate an Olympic spectacle and the corporate endorsement of this spectacle corroborates China’s emphasis on the intersecting discourse of Chinese nationalism, Olympic humanism, and neoliberal internationalism (Jensen and Hesford 2012: 121). The Chinese regime deploys the spectacle to advance both its nationalist political agenda and neoliberal capitalist imperatives (Jensen and Hesford 2012: 122).

In the context of the national cultivation of nationalism and neoliberalism, Chinese films are increasingly characterized by expensive productions and the emulation of Hollywood styles that indicate their loss of roots with ordinary Chinese audiences (Li Hongmei 2011). These films are called Dapian (大片–, literally, ‘big films’). Dapian are characterized by big investments, mega stars, rapid action, fast pace, and pure entertainment. Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige and Feng Xiaogang – the ‘big three’ of contemporary Chinese film directors – have all been focusing on films with high production values. Zhang Yi Mou’s *Hero* (2002), Chen Kaige’s *The Promise* (2005), and Feng’s *New Year’s Films* have all displayed the symptoms of Hollywood blockbusters: as already summarized by Zhang Yingjin: shallow plots, porous details, poor performances, and cultural homogenization (Zhang Yingjin 2004: 465).

In the last few decades, Dapian directors also have become interested in winning awards in the Western world and selling their films on the international market. Many of the movies directed by ‘fifth-generation directors’ represented by Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige have been produced with Western audiences in mind. They usually launch advertising campaigns throughout the world, indicating that they are targeting the global middle class, with whom many Chinese netizens, especially the precariat, might not be able to identify. The fact that tickets sold in China are usually very expensive is just one indicator how ordinary people are excluded (Li Hongmei 2011).

According to Zhang Xudong (2001), directors of Dapian in China to some extent, represent the hegemonic commercial culture in China, where money plays a primary role in determining one’s social status and success. Indeed, since the 1990s, Chinese cultural elites who can marketize their knowledge and skills have increasingly acquired political and economic power in the Chinese market. Cultural elites employ cultural capital to make money, and to convert money into future cultural capital.

The Promise, as a big-budget film directed by Chen Kaige, started its advertisement and release on Mainland China at the end of the year 2005. As the most expensive film that was ever made in China, Chen’s extravaganza employed production members from China, the US, Japan and Korea. However, it failed to win over Chinese audiences, and instead attracted overwhelming amounts of criticism. Hu Ge, a freelance media professional and blogger in Shanghai felt that the film was all appearance with no substance. He then produced a spoof version using images from a pirated copy of *The Promise*. He used images and sounds from *The Promise*, the Legal Channel of CCTV, and a few popular Chinese songs, and turned *The Promise* from a love story into a crime drama. His film centered on a poker-faced TV host who uses conventional

¹¹⁷ BOCOG, ‘Beijing Olympic Action Plan’, 58.

communist terminology in his tongue-in-cheek report on the murder case surrounding a stolen bun. Hu Ge finished the clip on New Year's Eve, shared it with several friends and also posted the video on his own blog. Hu Ge's spoof film titled *A Bloody Case that Started from a Steamed Bun* (hereafter shortened as *The Bloody Case*) attracted huge attention and became a big hit within days on the Chinese Internet.

The Bloody Case became popular immediately and millions viewed this spoof within days. Chen Kaige threatened to sue Hu Ge, but large numbers of netizens showed support for Hu. Hu was called a 'big master of steamed buns' and 'father of steamed buns'. Facing huge amounts of criticism, Chen Kaige later dropped the lawsuit (Li Hongmei 2011: 75).

The Bloody Case spawned a flood of similar online spoofs. With its rapid spread, a special subculture, coined E'gao (恶搞, 'Chinese parody'), emerged, and began to reshape the ecology of the Internet landscape. Since 2006, E'gao has enjoyed an unprecedented popularity and following in China, especially among online youths. Although it has also received uneasy responses from the government, commercial establishments, and cultural elites, there is no sign that E'gao will fade away any time soon, and it has already become a regular feature of Chinese cyberspace. Till today, few followers of the Chinese Internet could have failed to notice the prominence of the phenomenon of E'gao in Chinese cyberspace. E'gao is one of the most often mentioned words in the Chinese popular culture scene in the last years. A keyword search for 'E'gao' on Baidu (China's largest search engine) led to 1 billion hits on 5 July 2015.

4.1 Defining E'gao

E'gao literally could be translated as 'wicked fun' (Voci 2010: 5) or 'evil joking' (Huang Qing 2006: np), but figuratively refers to messages that include elements of parody or spoof: 'e' (恶) meaning 'loathing' and 'gao' (搞) meaning 'poke fun' (Voci 2010: 5) or 'work' (Huang Qing 2006: np). E'gao researchers (e.g. Huang Qing 2006; Voci 2010) have reached consensus that E'gao originates from Japanese Kuso culture: a type of video-gaming practice that revolves around making and playing flawed, low-quality games. Kuso literally means 'shit', and is a curse used in net games and animations, as well as a mantra to vent emotions. For example, if the animation of a game is terrible, and it is very difficult to play, the players will play it while screaming "Kuso!" Fans of Kuso appreciate the high degree of transparency offered by low-quality Kuso games and regard it as mark of originality, and lack of constraints (Seven 2009).

Compared to the Kuso culture in Japan, E'gao as a subculture has its own characteristics based on China's unique historical and social context. Defining E'gao in China is already political. The official definition of E'gao comes as a consensus of an expert-discussion on E'gao organized by www.guang-ming.net¹¹⁸ in 2007 when E'gao

¹¹⁸ Guangming Net is the official website of a state media *Guangming Daily*.

just emerged. This official definition is: E'gao is a popular way of online individual expression by means of words, images and flashes, which attempts to deconstruct the normal – in totally subversive, hilarious and nonsense style. To be understandable, it tries to be nonsensical; it is a new form of historical nihilism and cultural nihilism.¹¹⁹

This definition given by official media has illustrated some defining semiotic features of E'gao, but it also makes a crude ideological judgment as argued by Gong Haomin and Yang Xin (2010). According to these authors, it also demonstrates certain ideological ambiguities and uneasiness, for instance, in interpreting E'gao as something critical of the establishment.

There are also many researchers defining E'gao as a subculture. For example, Huang Qing (2006) defines E'gao as a pastiche containing a spirit of humor, revelry, subversion, grass-root spontaneity, defiance of authority, mass participation and multimedia high-tech, a subculture characterized by the satire of mainstream cultural products through grassroots spontaneity. Zhang Lin (2008: 4) defined E'gao as a form of parody culture that uses the methods of pastiche and bricolage, which is characterized by the appropriation and resignification of existing cultural signs, achieved with the help of multimedia technologies, including digital images and video editing; it is usually disseminated through the Internet.

I try to define E'gao in the same vein as Huang Qing (2006) and Zhang Lin (2008), but from the perspective of the producers of E'gao – the precariat. I define E'gao as a subculture that the precarious youngsters use online to critically deconstruct mainstream culture and construct new cultures, identities and communities by pastiche and bricolage. The reason that E'gao should be defined as precariat subculture lies in the fact that the creation and circulation of E'gao works is closely related with a particular social group – the educated young precariat. Many Chinese E'gao researchers have noticed this fact. For example, He Aijun observes:

The authors and audience of E'gao works are basically ordinary people, who usually suffer in life but cannot find a solution. Therefore, they resolve to the Internet to express their frustration and to pursue a spiritual relief and sustenance. (He Aijun 2009: 41)

In an interview conducted by people.net.cn, Internet researcher Cai Qi commented on E'gao as follows: “Generally speaking, the producers of E'gao belong to the young generation who were born after 1970s. So E'gao should be called a youth subculture” (Cai Qi 2007: np).¹²⁰

According to Vivixiaoyu (2012: np), “Those spoofed are usually established elites, and the spoofsters are usually disaffected young who strive for attention by destructing the elites.”¹²¹ Gong Haomin and Yang Xin (2010) shared the same

¹¹⁹ See http://www.gmw.cn/02sz/2007-04/01/content_619725.htm, retrieved 28 June 2014.

¹²⁰ See more about this interview at <http://media.people.com.cn/GB/22114/42328/78153/5378774.html>, retrieved 4 July 2014.

¹²¹ <http://xinli.vivijk.com/hlxl/201201/182316.html>, retrieved 19 October 2014.

observation: "These spoofsters share many characteristics in terms of demography and social behavior. A predominant portion of the spoofsters, as well as other E'gao participants, are young netizens, most of whom live in urban areas" (Gong Haomin and Yang Xin 2010: 6). From these observations, we can infer that the social group behind E'gao basically is the frustrated youth in today's China, i.e. the precariat – in other words, E'gao is a precariat subculture. The precariat attempts to resolve collectively experienced problems arising from contradictions in China's social structure by online symbolic actions. The online repertoire of symbolic actions for the precariat can take numerous forms. First, they adopt memes as the new language as discussed in Chapter 1. Most E'gao works also contain elements of memes, and they also transform and circulate among E'gao fans like memes. For example after Hu Ge's *The Bloody Case*, many other netizens imitated Hu Ge and made their own spoof version of *The Promise*. However, what distinguishes E'gao from memes, which basically function as an expressive tool or a language is that it already is a subculture with distinctive styles and particular online communities. It provides imaginative solutions to the socio-economic problems confronting the precariat; it offers alternative cultural norms to resist the hegemony of the mainstream culture, thus gaining space for alternative identity construction.

E'gao is a subculture because E'gao belongs to "interests that operate within the confines of the existing social order" (Melucci 1996: 28). It is 'sufficiently legal' to avoid censorship, and has "a tendency to be unorganized, spontaneous, and largely symbolic in opposing the status quo" (Melucci 1996: 28).

For the emergence of E'gao in China, one crucial social determinant was individual access to new digital technologies and the Internet in the past two decades. Through these technologies, which were "previously only available to a small group" (Gong Haomin and Yang Xin 2010: 6), the Chinese precariat, as the main force of the e-generation in China, has acquired knowledge of and skills in textual, audio, and video editing that are prerequisites for the bricolage in E'gao culture. What is more important, the availability of digital technology applications on the Internet did not only make individual creations in the field of audio-visual processing possible, but also "brings grass-roots street wisdom and popular voices into an area hitherto the exclusive province of specialists and elitists" (Gong Haomin and Yang Xin 2010: 6). The Internet offers an alternative space for the precariat to express themselves, which is "marked by a rising level of social tolerance and freedom and, simultaneously, an increasing level of constraint" (Gong Haomin and Yang Xin 2010: 6), and E'gao "provides an imagined empowerment for netizens, who can, for the first time, intervene in the formation of an institutionalized narrative" (Gong Haomin and Yang Xin 2010: 6).

E'gao, as an online precariat subculture, reveals the tendency of the precariat to take subculturalization as the strategy to deal with their lack of legitimized access to means for achieving hegemonic goals and mainstream signifiers of high status. Through subculturalization – participation in E'gao culture – the Chinese precariat

reject the mainstream culture and try to construct new norms for their own cultures. E'gao thus becomes the new 'hegemony' within a new stratum of Chinese society. E'gao also shows the development of a multilayered system of 'audiences' for cultural consumption, one very large and targeted by high-budget movies, another smaller, in the margins and operating on a no-budget basis (E'gao). So, here again is an argument for my main point about the emergence of a precariat: we can see this emergence through the differentiation of 'publics' or audiences for consumption. E'gao demonstrates this.

This chapter analyzes the compositional mechanism, styles and the meaning that E'gao has for the Chinese precariat.

4.2 E'gao vs Zheng Gao – Hu Ge's defense for E'gao

Since Roland Barthes (1967) declared the death of the author, the digital technology has been busy providing updated and enhanced arguments and evidence. Poster (1998: 7) argues that:

[d]igital writing may function to extract the author from the text, to remove from its obvious meaning his or her intentions, style, concepts, rhetoric, mind – in short, to disrupt the analogue circuit through which the author makes the text his or her own, through which the mechanisms of property solidify a link between creator and object.

The difference may be one of degree, in which the "digital author connotes a greater alterity between the text and the author," suggesting rather than absolutely determining a separation between the two. The enlarged gap between author and text also leaves more and more room for the reader to fill in, to participate in, reworking and redefining the original text. In this sense, a feature of the relationship between the text, the author and the reader is: the author is dead, and is replaced by more readers who are simultaneously also new authors of the text.

E'gao on various video websites and social media in China is like a carnival for readers, or more precisely viewers or spectators. By E'gao, people are playing with and celebrating the separation between the text and the author, enjoying the pleasures of a degree of empowerment. An E'gao author's authorship comes from his or her unique way of editing and also self-added materials to the new product. For example, no one on the Chinese Internet would deny Hu Ge is the author of *The Bloody Case*.

However, it is dangerous to get lost in the 'post-author utopia' if looking back at the threat made by Chen Kaige to Hu Ge, i.e. a conflict between the 'author' and the 'reader', as warned by Foucault (1969). In today's China, the power relations that E'gao is facing are complicated. The E'gao authors are also in the first place readers of the original texts before they start to appropriate them. What's more, there are also the allure and incorporation from commercialism; there is also hegemonic oppression

from the dominant ideology. All of this will exert constraints on the autonomy and spontaneity of the E'gao authors.

The oil painting *The Founding Ceremony of the PRC* by Dong Xiwen (1953) (see Figure 4.1) is hailed as one of the most important artworks in China's contemporary history. It illustrates the moment when Mao Zedong, the first president of the PRC declared: "PRC is founded!" and "The Chinese people stand up!" Painting this picture was assigned to the author as a political task. With its success, both the painting and the author Dong Xiwen were highly praised by mainstream culture and dominant ideology. Dong was even called in to meet Mao Zedong. All of this endorsed this painting as a classic of significant cultural and political value. For this reason, it has been kept in the National Museum as a national treasure since it was created.



Figure 4.1: Oil painting: *The Founding Ceremony of the People's Republic of China* (Dong Xiwen 1953) (source: http://news.ifeng.com/history/zhongguoxiandaishi/detail_2011_01/04/3933709_0.shtml, retrieved 15 July 2015)

However, according to a report by Xinhua Net¹²² on 23 August 2006, a restaurant in Changsha made a parody of the famous oil painting *The Founding Ceremony of the PRC*, and put it on the main wall of the dining room of the restaurant (cf. Figure 4.2). The parody work dimmed the color of the original painting, and set the original scene of the ceremony as the background of the dining tables which by color draw our attention. A slogan was added to the top right corner of the painting, stating: "Comrades, Da Fan Guo ('large cooking pot') is founded!" 'Da Fan Guo' is the name of the restaurant.

¹²² See more details at http://news.xinhuanet.com/society/2006-08/23/content_4995701.htm, retrieved 19 March 2015.



Figure 4.2: E'gao version - "Comrades, Da Fan Guo ('large cooking pot') is founded!"

(source: http://news.xinhuanet.com/society/2006-08/23/content_4995701.htm, retrieved 15 July 2015)

On 23 August 2006, Xinhua Net.com, run by Xinhua Agency – the 'eyes and tongue' (Malek and Kavoori 2000) of the Communist Party of China, publicized a commentary on this E'gao version of The Founding Ceremony of the PRC, deprecating E'gao as follows:¹²³

Spooing like this is really exasperating! This is a desecration of history, an insult to the great founders of China, and an intentional undermining of socialist civilization. Recently there has emerged an E'gao phenomenon – E'gao of commercials, of Chinese language and characters, traditional classic works, historical figures and events, and so on. It seems everything can be e'gaoed, and E'gao is everywhere. This so-called E'gao invasion demonstrates the loss of spirit of some people, as well as disrespect towards intellectual property. E'gao might provide people some stupid amusement, but what it has destroyed is the soul and spirit of our country, our society and our people. E'gao may be some smug commercial creation, but it has undermined the normal innovation and progress of knowledge and civilization. Over the years, our economy has been developed, and our mind had been opened, and the Internet has also been popularized. However, the construction of our civilization has lagged behind, and this is why E'gao phenomena emerge and run wild. This is scary, because E'gao has not only destroyed the classic but also our modern civilization, the national spirit, and the soul of China. E'gao will disrupt our development, make us lose our direction and make us fall into the abyss. Relevant laws should be introduced and hold the one responsible for spoofs accountable. It is time for us to wake up, to eradicate the phenomenon of E'gao! Relevant laws should be issued and E'gaoers should be brought to justice, because E'gao will affect our spiritual

¹²³ See more details at <http://news.xinhuanet.com/>, retrieved 8 September 2015.

happiness and our potential momentum of development, and will determine whether we can have a bright future.¹²⁴

Because of *The Bloody Case*, Hu Ge embodies the hero in E'gao's mythology. He appropriates what is supposed to be only legally marketed, frees it from its copyrighted bounds and turns it into a technological gift (Voci 2010). He can be seen as an unselfish Robin Hood who literally steals from those unjust fortune holders. However, Hu Ge has done more than making E'gao videos: he has been attempting to define E'gao on behalf of an E'gao group that includes both authors and fans, and has been striving to contribute to the construction of a collective identity for the young netizens like him.

To fight back at the negative comments made by the Xin Hua Net and the "thunderous complaints" towards E'gao from other mainstream media as Netease put it,¹²⁵ Hu Ge wrote an article titled *E'gao is less socially harmful compared to Zheng Gao*.¹²⁶ In this article, Hu Ge used the painting, *The Founding Ceremony of the PRC*, as an example, to analyze two types of parody: One is E'gao (恶搞, 'loathing spoofing') represented by his own E'gao movies; the other is Zheng Gao (正搞, 'official serious distortion') illustrated by the four adaptations made to The Founding Ceremony painting at the instigation of CCP.

In this article, Hu Ge first describes the four adaptations the painting *The Founding Ceremony* went through. The first change happened in 1954, when one person disappeared from the painting as shown in Figure 4.3. This person is Gao Gang, who was the vice-chairman when the PRC was founded, but who fell out of grace in 1954. He was punished and committed suicide in August 1954. Dong Xiwen made the change at the request of the National Museum.



Figure 4.3: The first adaptation of The Founding Ceremony

(source: <http://history.people.com.cn/GB/205396/15260678.html>, retrieved 15 July 2015)

¹²⁴ See http://news.xinhuanet.com/society/2006-08/23/content_4995701.htm, retrieved 18 February 2014.

¹²⁵ <http://culture.163.com/06/0825/17/2PCVQS4T00280004.html>, retrieved 29 October 2014.

¹²⁶ See more about this article at <http://blog.sina.com.cn/huge>, retrieved 24 August 2014.

In the year 1968, a second figure in the original work, Liu Shaoqi was deleted because of inside-factional struggle in the Cultural Revolution and was replaced by another person, as shown in Figure 4.4. Although the adaption work was a big challenge, it was done in a perfect way by a group of skillful artists led by Dong Xiwen.



Figure 4.4: The second adaptation of The Founding Ceremony
(source: <http://history.people.com.cn/GB/205396/15260680.html>, retrieved 15 July 2015)

In 1970, another person in the painting, Lin Boqu (who was said to be negative about Mao Zedong marrying Jiangqing back in the Yanan period) was ordered to be erased and replaced by another one as shown in Figure 4.5. However, due to the damage that the previous changes had made, it was too difficult to revise the original painting any further. As a compromise, the students of the artist who originally created the work made a copy of the original painting without the person who was supposed to be deleted. Very soon after the new copy was finished though, the Cultural Revolution was over. The new copy did not even have the chance to be exhibited.



Figure 4.5: The third adaptation of The Founding Ceremony
(source: http://www.360doc.com/content/13/1004/00/6558757_318869255.shtml, retrieved 15 July 2015)

In the year 1979, this painting was ordered to be changed again for the fourth time: to resume the original painting. At that time, the original artist had already passed away, and his relatives did not want the original painting to be ruined. Therefore again a new copy was made as shown in Figure 4.6. As a result, what people can see in the National Museum now are two paintings of The Founding Ceremony.



Figure 4.6: The fourth adaptation of The Founding Ceremony

(source: <http://www.qb5200.com/content/2015-12-11/35277.html>, retrieved 15 July 2015)

According to the information from both Baidu Baike¹²⁷ and Wiki encyclopedia, all these four adaptations were conducted in a serious manner and extremely demanding in terms of artistic techniques; they were all executed by professional artists who worked in government-affiliated institutions; they were done as top-down political tasks rather than bottom-up spontaneous individual creations by grassroots artists; and more importantly, for each appropriation, the author(s) tried their best to make the new painting as real as possible. This is why Hu Ge doubts the originality and honesty of this kind of political appropriation of classic paintings in his article:

I don't think it is appropriate to call this kind of adaption E'gao (恶搞, 'loathing reworking'), but it also should never be called Shan Gao (善搞, 'kind reworking'), since they delete people from where they should have been and mean to deceive and mislead the audience. Rather I would call them Zheng Gao (正搞, 'official or institutional reworking') – an antonym to E'gao. I invented this term by myself. (Hu Ge 2006: np)

¹²⁷ Baidu Baike is a Chinese language collaborative Web-based encyclopaedia provided by the Chinese search engine Baidu.

Hu Ge went on to discuss the difference between Zheng Gao and E'gao, and their different social effects:

Zheng Gao is to adapt the original in a serious, secret, pretentious and careful manner for the purpose of misleading. In the process of Zheng Gao, any trace of adaptation will be avoided, because the aim of Zheng Gao is to make people believe the adapted version as the original one, so as to hide and make people forget the real contexts and history. This in contrast to E'gao, in which people make adaptations with an apparently playful attitude, usually in a dramatic non-refined manner, which tells you clearly that this is just an unserious parody rather than the original. The author will not only let you know that he is parodying but also try to make clear what he is parodying.

Some people say that E'gao is socially harmful, and is a distortion of history, culture and values. But in my opinion this is too naive a logic. As far as I understand, Zheng Gao is socially harmful, maybe even more harmful than E'gao. In the parody painting of The Founding Ceremony made by the restaurant, the saying 'Da Fan Guo is founded', it is very obvious it's a parody, since it is known to all Chinese people that in the real event, Mao could not and did not say this at all. Even those who have never seen the original painting would not regard the saying in the parody as real, because the saying is ridiculous and the characters of this sentence are obviously printed by computer, which could not happen in China in the 1950s. Thus, since all people can recognize this as a parody without referring to the real historical event, no harm can be done to people's knowledge of this part of history.

However, in the four secret adaptations made to The Founding Ceremony painting, the situation is quite different. At the actual historical event, some people did stand in a certain position at that founding ceremony as they did in the original painting. But in the adaptations, they were erased from the painting with the intentional purpose to erase them from history. When viewers see the painting after those distortions, they could be confused about their knowledge of history and misled, and thus create a false image of the real facts of history. In this sense, Zheng Gao is more harmful than E'gao. Therefore, due to its serious and pretentious attitude as well as its 'leaving-no-trace' characteristics, Zheng Gao will distort people's knowledge of history and culture, and is much more socially harmful than E'gao. (Hu Ge 2006; np)

Hu Ge's delineation of the difference between E'gao and Zheng Gao focuses primarily on the role that the author or the cultural authority plays in the meaning-making of a cultural product. The four adapted versions of The Founding Ceremony are all fake and false presentations of the historical scene they are supposed to present; however, due to the great institutional power that controlled the whole adaptation process, the adapted versions were all read as the original painting, or in other words, they were all applied with authentic historical meanings, while at the same time, the real meaning and historical context of the four adaptations were covered and hidden intentionally from the audience.

New adaptation forms like the E'gao work 'Da Fan Guo' suggest an attempt of the creators and readers to get away from the control of the author of the original painting and its meaning and context in an authoritarian regime for commercial purposes. The grassroots attempted to take advantage of E'gao for commercial purposes, but did not succeed due to its violation of the rules of the politically powerful.

Hu Ge's defense for E'gao asserts the subversive stance of E'gao from the time it was born. The consequential pervasive popularity of E'gao among the Chinese precariat indicates, at least on the Internet, at least in the case of E'gao, that the power of meaning making is shifting from the elite author(s), or the authorities that have always been run top down, hoarding information at the top, telling people how to run their lives, to a new paradigm of power that is democratically distributed and shared by all of the ordinary people (Trippi 2004: 4). Although the autonomy and purpose of E'gao creators could be questioned, E'gao is a way for ordinary people (if maybe middle-class with Internet access rather than the rural poor) to mock the worthy and powerful; it is a punch from below. Because of this bottom-up way of meaning making, E'gao is inherently subversive and full of spirit of resistance, which I will elaborate on in the following sections.

4.3 The composition of E'gao: Pastiche and bricolage

E'gao as a bottom-up way of meaning making supplies the resources that are available to the precariat. The producers of E'gao creatively reorganize and reorder these resources through two modes of practice: pastiche and bricolage. Let us have a closer look at both.

4.3.1 Pastiche

Dentith (2000) proposes that parody is more likely to flourish in "open" societies or social situations than in "closed" ones. By "open" societies, Dentith means societies characterized by "a sense of cultural belatedness" rather than by "cultural confidence." For him, the various "post-" societies belong to this category, because in them "there is pervasive consciousness of a past which is still strongly present, though the value of that inheritance is deeply contested" (Dentith 2000: 28-32).

According to Gong Haomin and Yang Xin (2010: 7), contemporary Chinese society falls in several 'post'-coinages: "postmodern, post-New Era, post-revolutionary, post-Reform, and post-socialist. To varying degrees, these terms indicate a sense of complicated linkage to their predecessors and therefore a lack of affirmativeness of their own cultures" (Gong Haomin and Yang Xin 2010: 7). These terms on the other hand also predict the great influence that the existing cultures have on the potential new ones. This explains why Fredric Jameson (1984: 59-92) views pastiche as a dominant cultural form of postmodernism, and why Hutcheon (1989: 93) maintains

that parody is usually considered central to postmodernism, both by its detractors and its defenders. Therefore, it is also understandable that the Chinese precariat in post-socialist China also choose parody as their representative cultural form.

The linkage between the existing culture and new culture is quite clearly demonstrated in E'gao works. As found out by Voci (2010), while E'gao movies can be very perceptively and imaginatively produced, they present themselves as commentaries of the source product. "E'gao movies openly declare their intent to be commentaries on the archetypes (whether political or commercial ones) they are making fun of, and they depend on the assumed shared knowledge of the famous originals to be effective" (Voci 2010: 120).

The understanding of a parodic remake has to be based on the shared knowledge of an original source: the popularity of *The Bloody Case* is directly linked to the canonized fame of Chen Kaige's film. E'gao always presupposes the existence of a canon or an archetype that anchors the lightness of the spoof on solid ground. Without this implied and evoked reference, the spoof simply vanishes.

4.3.2 Bricolage

The basic compositional technique of E'gao is bricolage. Benkler (2006: 200) argued: "If we are to make this culture our own, render it legible, and make it into a new platform for our needs and conversations today, we must find a way to cut, paste, and remix present culture." As defined already in the previous chapter, bricolage is a cultural composition technique by which works are constructed from various available materials in a mashup or creation from a diverse range of existing items or ideas. It is the process where elements of other cultures, including dominant or mainstream cultures, are fragmented, adopted and reorganized into a new culture. Bricolage has been adopted as the basic technique for E'gao, and provides E'gao the capability to parody existing cultures and construct new cultures. E'gao is characterized by a very high degree of bricolage indeed – a reflection of the semiotic chaos and inheritance of post-socialist Chinese society.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, bricolage was derived from the French verb 'bricoler', referring to the kind of activities that are performed by a handy-man, meaning 'to tinker' or 'to fiddle' (in this sense, 'DIY' – 'do it yourself' comes closer). As mentioned earlier, it was first coined by Lévi-Strauss (1966: 17) in his book *The Savage Mind* to describe the process where

(...) using a heterogeneous repertoire which, even if extensive, is nevertheless limited. It has to use this repertoire, however, whatever the task in hand because it has nothing else at its disposal.

In the sense of cultural production, bricolage is a technique where works are constructed from various available materials ('found items' or mass-produced 'junk'); it

is a mashup or creation from a diverse range of existing items or ideas.¹²⁸ Clarke borrowed Lévi Strauss' notion of 'bricolage' to refer to youth subcultural style. He believes that bricolage in Lévi Strauss' sense is "the symbolic re-ordering and recontextualization of objects and their meanings to communicate a fresh meaning, within a total system of meanings" (Clarke 1976: 177). And Epstein also argues that in the field of youth subculture, bricolage is an important way to "establish a unique identity and subcultural style and to set the subculture apart from the parent culture" (Epstein 1998: 13).

Examples of bricolage in subculture are all around us. Hip Hop musicians routinely sample from 1970s soul hits and 1950s bop. Hollywood directors such as Quentin Tarantino construct their storylines out of recycled B-movie plots. And tens of thousands of teenagers from around the world piece together YouTube video montages out of television clips and radio hits.

E'gao movies made by Hu Ge, for example, are characterized by their blending, hybrid nature as the result of a pastiche-editing configuration. The main body of the video of *The Bloody Case* is taken from *The Promise*. The video of *The Promise*, in Hu Ge's hands, was fragmented, and then reorganized into a new product. Moreover, *The Bloody Case* also includes fragments adopted from other mainstream cultural products, e.g. the story-telling is following the report format of *Law Online*, an authoritative program at CCTV; the background music is from the US blockbuster *The Matrix*; the court debate is presented in a Hip Hop style with lyrics from classic Chinese revolutionary songs. By cutting and pasting clips, E'gao manages to appropriate cultural products that are mass-produced, mass-replicated, and mass-marketed, and proceeds to remake and comment upon the parent cultures. This cultural reproduction process is typical bricolage.

However, bricolage does not copy for the sake of copying, but has poured in its own agency and meaning. It is "re-entextualizations of existing signs, i.e. meaningful communicative operations that demand different levels of agency and creativity of the user" (Varis and Blommaert 2015: 16). Brent Luvaas (2012: 108) suggests bricolage is not just cultural production as usual; it is a particular moment in cultural production, a moment where producers expose, and indeed glory, in their products' assembled quality.

This brings the agent of bricolage, the 'bricoleur' into the picture. As a derived word of bricolage, 'bricoleur' refers to a person like a craftsman, who performs his tasks with materials and tools that are at hand, from odds and ends. The bricoleur creates new things, signs, or rituals out of these existent materials at hand to meet new demands (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 22). According to Lévi-Strauss (1966), a bricoleur is the opposite of an engineer. The engineer employs specialized tools to conduct a project for specialized purposes. The bricoleur is an amateur 'jack-of-all-trades', who uses few, non-specialized tools for a wide variety of purposes. When bricolage becomes the main composing technique for online subcultures, the agency of the bricoleur cannot be

¹²⁸ *Dictionary of Postmodern Terms* at <http://www.onpostmodernism.com/terms>, retrieved 18 June 2014.

ignored. In the case of E'gao, netizens like Hu Ge are just like bricoleurs. They are not professional movie makers, but ordinary netizens who make parody videos for fun, for venting anger, and for expression. They make their choice from massive available resources online and restructure what they have chosen in their own way, so as to make their own meanings. As bricoleurs, they complete different tasks that interest them by bricolage and make various new parody products of different styles and meanings.

In E'gao, the bricoleur puts existing things to new purposes. The bricoleur speaks through the medium of things (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 21), and makes meaning out of assemblage (Luvaas 2012). First of all, it is the bricoleur who decides which semiotic resources are to be adopted and how they are reorganized and reworked. Secondly, the bricoleur's agency displays itself also in the new styles constructed out of bricolage. This point is crucial because these styles distinguish E'gao from the parent cultures they parody and other sibling online subcultures. I will discuss the styles of E'gao in the following section. Style is a new system of meanings for a collection of diverse elements brought together from a variety of sources through the re-appropriation and re-contextualization of signs to produce new significations (Hebdige 1979: 103). This, in the case of E'gao, also involves what is now known as 'crowdsourced' resources: stuff that floats around on the web and which can be appropriated and deployed freely by netizens. This, of course, has a community-forming effect: the resources float around in existing networks, and using them strengthens the levels of interaction within this network.

4.4 E'gao as a light culture

Free access to new digital technologies and the Internet has enabled the Chinese precariat to obtain knowledge of, and skills that are prerequisites for the bricolage in E'gao culture (Gong Haomin and Yang Xin 2010). In other words, the Chinese precariat can obtain the necessary tools and materials for their new cultural production for free on the Internet. In addition, the Internet offers an extensive platform for exchanging their do-it-yourself E'gao products where they enjoy more social tolerance and freedom compared with the offline space. This context of cultural production has endowed E'gao with "some unique features and styles rarely seen previously" (Gong Haomin and Yang Xin 2010: 6). Out of the bricolage process by amateur authors, the most outstanding feature of E'gao is its lightness. E'gao is a light subculture: a subculture that does not require access to highly valued (and costly) resources, but uses whatever is freely or cheaply available online, both in the way of resources and in the way of audiences, producing small bits of 'culture'.

This 'light' style of E'gao creates boundaries which distance E'gao from the 'heavier' – more expensively resourced and more exclusive – source cultures and other peer subcultures, and gain an independent identity as a critically new subculture. This is just

like what the style of physical appearance – clothing, posture, speech patterns and slang, argot, musical preferences and other things – means to participants of traditional contemporary subcultures. This style is appropriated from an existing market of cultural artifacts and used in a form of collage which recreates group identity and promotes mutual recognition for members (Brake 1980: 15). However, the style is expressed in the relationship between various cultural elements of a subculture (Epstein 1998: 11), and it is illustrated by various sub-styles of E'gao works, which I will discuss in detail in what follows.

4.4.1 A small screen culture

Virilio (1991: 16) perceives the screen as the locus of lost dimensions of space and technological transformations of time. It modifies our relation to space, is a surface-mount for its 'accelerated virtualization'.

An important way in which the rise of computing technology changed the media landscape is that media content could now be created in a digital form, stored in the 1's and 0's of computer code. This meant that traditionally distinct forms of media – text, image, audio, and video – now converged (Dominguez 2014: 13). These media forms can be played on various small screen devices with appropriate software: desktop computer, MP3 player, cell phone, and the like. We are being converted into screen-viewers, as observed by Moura (2011: 38): "Individuals are being converted into screen-viewers – books, music, videos, movies, documents and so on; screen-dealers – books, films, official documents, as well as banking, government, and many other services are increasingly being mediated through screens."

Actually, more recently there has emerged another even smaller 'third screen', i.e., Internet-connected cell phones according to Caumont (2005, as quoted in Hodgson 2010: np). Hodgson (2010) gave an inspiring discussion of small screen culture:

No longer exclusive to the industry, now residing at the fingertips of the masses, our media and media production landscapes are changing. We are moving out of the longstanding, industrial-based consumerist culture and into a culture that is increasingly one of digital consumer-producers, or what we might view as an emerging culture industry by the masses for the masses. And as we both consume and produce in this new landscape, and do so at rates and degrees never seen before, we find ourselves in the midst of a radical reculturalization: we are moving away from the blinding spectacle of the big screen, i.e., cinema and television (Virilio 1989), and moving toward more participatory logics and rhetorics of the small screen, which refers to the computer screen supported by the Internet, a new breed of interactive spectacle. (Hodgson 2010: np)

In this 'small screen' shift, we have stopped being passive consumers and instead have come to demand participation. (...) Small screen culture has come to expect customization, on-demand access, social connectivity, and the ability (even if only illusory) to shape and/or influence content. (...) What is needed, then, as we try to come to understand our current cultural transformation, is not simply to continue lines of reductive or restrictive placement

of ideas and ideologies (i.e., the revolutionary discourses commonly connected to digital technologies), but rather, as Jenkins (2008) has argued, ‘to find ways to negotiate the changes taking place’— changes affecting culture, industry, institutions, epistemology, ideology, and the like. (Hodgson 2010: np)

Clearly small screens have been changing and transforming our sensory experience of ourselves and of social space. In our contemporary social and cultural space, we relentlessly see smaller-screen realities, we are getting used to them, starting to use them for entertainment, socialization, work, and life. There are researchers who describe this culture in different terms. For example, Moura (2011) finds that small screen media gave birth to ‘snack culture’. He argues that

thanks to the Internet, instantaneous entertainment comes from the proliferation of small doses of amusement and information called snacks. Media snacking is a new and fast mode of cultural and media consumption in the form of ‘bites’. The term snack culture came into existence at the moment that the microblogs and smartphones with their personalized ring tunes were proliferating. (Moura 2011: 38)

From the aspect of the formulation process of small screen realities, Jenkins (2008) has labeled this as ‘convergence culture’, which is basically located in the ‘small screen’; more precisely, it occurs in, on, and through the ‘small screen’. The reason for this conceptualization is that in spite of what the digital revolutionaries may suggest,

what is occurring is not part of any economy of eradication, nor is it simply a game of replacement. Rather, it is a matter of convergence, where old and new media industries, practices, and ideologies come into contact in mutually transformative ways. (Hodgson 2010: np)

To conclude, each of the three concepts, i.e. small screen culture, snack culture and convergence culture, define some aspects of China’s online sub-cultures that E’gao represents: the media on which they circulate are small screens, the amusement they offer are small doses which they enjoy like snacks, the mechanism through which they work is convergence by cheap copying and editing, or more simply cut and paste. As observed by Voci (2010: 1), E’gao is a typical small screen culture. Instead of bigger screens such as cinema and television, E’gao is mainly created and transmitted via smaller screens, mainly the computer monitor – and, within it, the Internet window – and the cell phone display screen. These created new public spaces where many long-standing divisions between high-brow and low-brow, mainstream and counter culture, conventional and experimental are dissolving and being reinvented.

The features of small screen cultures immediately deliver an intrinsic message: the lightness of cultural being. I follow Voci (2010) regarding E’gao as a light culture. More frequently, we notice some extraordinary coincidences between light cultures circulating on small screens such as E’gao and other realities, but we do not really pay

attention to them, as we do not recognize their meaningful attractiveness. However, they are realities that are in fact more significant and noteworthy enough. The purpose of my efforts in this chapter is to add substance to the comparative weakness of research on the social meaning of light cultures created on small screens. By analyzing E'gao as a light culture, I want to point to their 'insignificant' weight in terms of social status of the authors, production costs, distribution size, profit gains, intellectual or artistic ambitions, etc., but also their importance in defining an alternative way of seeing and understanding the mainstream cultures, and more importantly defining a bottom-up way of constructing and participating in new cultures.

4.4.2 Cheapness

E'gao is cheap. This is due to its low-quality production, small-scale production and zero distribution costs. E'gao's cheapness can be well illustrated by the comparison between the cost of *The Bloody Case* and its source movie *The Promise*. With a budget of about 282-340 million yuan, *The Promise* set a new record for Chinese movie making. It was directed by the most privileged director in mainland China, Chen Kaige, starring the most famous actors and actresses of Asia including Jang Dong-Gun, Hiroyuki Sanada, Cecilia Cheung and Nicholas Tse. Moreover, *The Promise* employed professionals from Hollywood to handle the special effect techniques. In contrast, the resources that Hu Ge employed were quite limited and cheap, as he admitted in his blog:¹²⁹

Financed by my mother and my brother (I am the poorest in my family), my family bought a computer in February 1998. My brother basically used it to play games, but I used it to pursue my artistic creativity. After severe self-teaching and working, I finally mastered the technique to compose music by using a mouse and a wave table (due to my limited financial situation, I could only afford basic life expenses without money to buy any hardware). Later, I learned to use a pile of other multi-track audio software, which made my music compositions more mature. My social resources include the following: in the first place there is my mother, who granted me a musical talent and taught me how to play the piano; further, my peers in the band I was member of at university; also, the members of muslab.com (yes, most of my colleagues now are all virtual on the Internet); the computer and a large amount of software are also part of my working team or colleagues; finally, some senior predecessors, such as the musical composer of 'zhiqu weihu shan', Yingwei Malmsteen, Beethoven (of course I know them, but they don't know me). (Hu Ge 2006: np)

To summarize, Hu Ge's E'gao repertoire as he announced is composed of the art talent inherited from his mother, a computer, some video-making software, some self-taught video-editing techniques, volunteer support and help from family and friends, and last but not least, the source cultural products that he parodies. Given Hu's social

¹²⁹ See more at <http://blog.sina.com.cn/huge>, retrieved 23 September 2014.

background, this is all that he could get access to for making a video at that time. *The Bloody Case* is a very small production. It took Hu Ge only seven days to complete it on his own computer, while *The Promise* needed three years to complete its production. Promotion wise, *The Promise* launched a large-scale promotion campaign before its official release both in Mainland China and on the international market through mass media as well as prominent film festivals. *The Promise* was one of two Chinese movies in 2006 to be nominated for the Golden Globes Best Foreign Language Film at the 63rd Golden Globe Awards. In contrast, *The Bloody Case* was released on Hu Ge's personal blog; netizens can just download and transmit it for free, online as a gift. Thus, compared with *The Promise's* large-scale promotion and grand box-office success, *The Bloody Case* is really cheap.

4.4.3 Lightness

E'gao creates light texts and provides 'small doses of amusement' (Moura 2011) E'gao products are light texts. Just like memes, E'gao products are usually brief texts designed for quick and volatile circulation that can be adapted and forwarded readily. For example, *The Bloody Case* video is very brief, running only for 20 minutes and *The Promise* runs for more than two hours. E'gao texts are light also in the sense of quality. The lightness of E'gao comes from the lightness of resources. E'gao authors are not critical with their resources. They trust and rely on whatever is at their disposal, and manage to go beyond the limitation of the 'usage' of 'odds and ends' imposed by the mainstream culture. In *The Bloody Case*, Chinese red classics, pop music, a Hollywood blockbuster, and even Hu Ge's own voice, all become the materials. All these materials are artifacts that can be easily obtained from the Internet, and therefore mass reproduced and cheap for the E'gao author, except for Hu Ge's own voice, which is even easier to get. E'gao authors are not interested in getting more money or more resources to make their E'gao movies technically better; they only employ things at hand. The secret for them to make the limited resources sufficient for their bricolage is to break some rules and change some norms. They often take in elements and materials not designed for their purpose, and make them work for them in a way not reckoned with or even allowed by the mainstream culture. This explains why *The Bloody Case* became a controversial event and why Chen Kaige got so irritated by Hu Ge and planned to sue him. By breaking the norms of the source products, their original significance is emptied.

The weight of the original movie was built on the pursuit of artistic perfection. This is evidenced by the original story's attempt to tell a grand story of love and eternal humanity. What's more, in order to achieve artistic perfection, a luxury cast was employed in *The Promise* such as a privileged director, famous actors and actresses, a large budget, etc. This pursuit of perfection in the original movie was destroyed by the low-quality production of *The Bloody Case*. For example, Hu Ge does the dubbing himself in a heavy accented voice; the subtitling is sloppy, the cast and crew listed are

obviously fake; and there is obvious copying from the original movie by using simple computer editing techniques. With all these obvious flaws intentionally shown in *The Bloody Case*, it is fair to say that the author's artistic ambition and the artistic value as a result, are much lighter than elite director Chen Kaige and the original movie *The Promise*.

From the perspective of the audience, when watching *The Bloody Case*, viewers were distracted by a new heavily flawed and funny content filled into video clips of the original movie; the audience is pushed out of the absorption routinely found in watching a cinema movie. In this way, some message contained in the original movie *The Promise* has failed to pass onto the audience. As a result, the audiences do not get those sophisticated meanings implied in the original; instead, they are only amused by the new ridiculous story in the new low-quality format. In other words, instead of being inspired, enlightened or educated, like the Chinese cinema audience are supposed to be, the viewers of *The Bloody Case* are only being entertained. The authors of E'gao do not tinker for money or direct social or political effect: Hu Ge simply published *The Bloody Case* in his own blog, and netizens can download and watch it for free. Indeed, most E'gao works are circulating online free of charge, and authors mostly do their E'gao work for fun. This is why E'gao works are always funny and full of hilarious humor. Joyfulness becomes a defining feature of E'gao.

Arguing that *The Bloody Case* is entertaining is based on the fact that while destroying the perfection, grandness and seriousness of the original movie, a lot of self-made material is added and remixed by means of bricolage, including nonsensical parody, cliché image spoofing, social satire, sophisticated commentary, vulgar comedy, slapstick humor, and conventional jokes. It provides only small doses of amusement or entertainment. It only arouses some light laughter as Voci put it: "It is precisely because of its non-verbal expressivity (when one laughs in fact one can hardly speak) that laughter is a particularly light human practice that cannot be fully contained and restrained by any ideologically driven system" (Voci 2010: 122). With humble artistic ambitions, and little direct economic and political impact, what E'gao pursues on the surface indeed is only to make one laugh. "While laughter for laughter's sake seems to be the imperative, E'gao's playful format can have a strong involvement with both the social and political hegemony of mainstream culture" (Voci 2010: 120-121). Consequently as a cultural practice aiming at inducing laughter, E'gao does not need to be monitored, regulated and, if need be, repressed. I will pick up this argument in the following section.

4.4.4 Circulating in peripheral and marginalized space

E'gao is located in the peripheral and unregulated space compared to mainstream culture (Voci 2010). E'gao works are usually produced by individual amateurs, and circulate outside official media online – outside the 'public transcripts', thus. E'gao as a subculture is peripheral. As the products by amateur bricoleurs, E'gao works are mostly

individual and accidental. They are particularly made and transmitted on the Internet and excluded from the traditional mainstream media such as the cinema or TV. Most E'gao works are not censored yet, and are in fact ignored by online policing; being unharnessed by the state-promoted legitimate Internet culture and unexplored by Chinese culture study intellectuals, E'gao is dancing alone but comparably freely in a peripheral corner of the Chinese cultural arena.

The fact that E'gao is considered a marginalized culture is mostly due to the fact that E'gao authors are basically disaffected youth from the underclass, who like to call themselves Diaosi (another online subculture that I will discuss in the following chapter). Let's take Hu Ge again as an example. Hu Ge's social and cultural status, as the status of his *The Bloody Case*, is very 'light' compared with Chen Kaige's, the director of *The Promise*. Chen Kaige is one of the most privileged and renowned directors in contemporary mainland China, and very powerful in the cultural arena, while Hu Ge was an unknown netizen when he made *The Bloody Case* and was later found to be a young guy living in precarious working conditions, without a formal job, in Shanghai. It is quite fair that when Chen threatened to sue Hu for infringement, the media described this case as a battle between 'elephant and ant'. As 'the ant', Hu Ge is obviously 'light' compared to 'the elephant' Chen Kaige.

To be recognized as having any social (here including political and economic), cultural, and historical relevance, any mainstream or legitimate cultural product needs to gain recognition from an accepted endorsement-giving entity. Endorsement-giving entities include economically, politically, or culturally driven organizations, intellectual elites, as well as online networks or leading blogs. The resources that *The Promise* has include the endorsement coming from the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television,¹³⁰ the astronomical amount of money spent on the making and promotion, academic publications, expert comments, as well as the reputation of the director and the actors and fandom networks of the actors. None of these resources is within reach of young precariat netizens like Hu Ge. E'gao productions do not intersect with, or circulate in, mainstream media. As a semi-professional, amateur online video maker and an ordinary netizen, Hu Ge contributed accidentally. *The Bloody Case* had not been endorsed by the official culture. In other words, E'gao belongs to an 'other' culture in China (Voci 2010).

To recap what has been discussed above, being light, cheap, 'small-screen' catered, and mainly circulating in peripheral social spaces, E'gao reveals the tendency of the formation of non-mainstream, non-elite 'publics' for cultural consumption in China; in the case of E'gao, the public is the precariat. The precariat is not targeted by high-budget movies; it is a much smaller consuming public, making their parody movies in the margins and operating on a no-budget basis. With E'gao we see the emergence of the precariat through the differentiation of publics for consumption.

¹³⁰ The State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT), is an executive branch under the State Council of the People's Republic of China. Its main task is the administration and supervision of state-owned enterprises engaged in the television, radio, and film industries.

4.5 E'gao is subversive

Briefly, according to Guo Yuxiu and Zhao Baofeng (2011: 226), E'gao could be described as a subversive, comical but subtle way to break down structures and norms in society. Hall and Jefferson (1976) explained how hegemony works by framing all competing definitions within their range and making relationships of domination and subordination appear natural and transparent by controlling the means of cultural production and reproduction. Their analysis of the British working class subculture is worth extensive quoting:

Commodities are, also, cultural signs. They have already been invested, by the dominant culture, with meanings, associations, and social connotations. Many of these meanings seem fixed and natural. But this is only because the dominant culture has so fully appropriated them to its use that the meanings, which it attributes to the commodities, have come to appear as the only meaning that they can express. In fact, in cultural systems, there is no natural meaning as such... This trivial example shows that it is possible to expropriate, as well as to appropriate, the social meanings which they seem naturally to have: or, by combining them with something else, to change or inflect their meaning. Because the meanings which commodities express are socially given – Marx called commodities 'social hieroglyphs' – their meaning can also be socially altered or reconstructed. (Hall and Jefferson 1976: 55)

Like in most authoritarian or totalitarian countries where there are perceived gaps between the official ideology and everyday life, E'gao culture targeting the excessive and hollow official ideologies proliferates in post-socialist China. If we consider Gramsci's idea of hegemony, we can argue that E'gao offers important opportunities to erode hegemony through its destructive and sometimes revolutionary nature. To go by George Orwell's famous words: "Every joke is a tiny revolution. (...) Whatever destroys dignity, and brings down the mighty from their seats, preferably with a bump, is funny. And the bigger the fall, the bigger the joke" (Orwell 1945: np).

If anything, the history of Chinese (post) socialism parallels with the evolution of the Chinese parody culture. Contrary to the conventional view, parody culture is more than just a safety valve for social tensions. The rise and fall of different parody forms has punctuated major social and political changes in post-socialist China, of which E'gao is the latest and most exciting version (Zhang Lin 2008).

However, the resistance embodied in E'gao is not homogeneous, but is of various degrees in different forms. Political E'gao is usually more sensitive and runs more risk of being deleted; a remake of a popular product for entertainment purposes is the most innocent type, totally free of censorship; while E'gao works made by Hu Ge's are something in-between – they spoof established popular cultural products or elites, and the destructive effect to the hypo-text is impressive. In addition, social reality is frequently reflected by the author's intentional bricolage of texts from various

resources. I will provide a more explicit explanation of the resistance embodied in E'gao from three perspectives.

4.5.1 Overtly political E'gao

While E'gao can, in principle, be applied to almost any product and thus maintain a suggestion of innocence, some instances of it are overtly political satire. E'gao then becomes manifestly subversive, even if it remains within the space of 'hidden transcripts'. This is obvious when the source of an E'gao product is, for example, one of the 'Red Classics', the propaganda hits of the CCP.

Thus, for instance, a ten-minute Internet satire appropriated images of a 1974 film entitled the *Sparkling Red Star* (Shanshan de Hongxing) and turns a very popular revolutionary film about the growth of a brave child soldier in the 1930s into a story of a pop star longing for his fame and fortune in a TV singing contest. The landlord who virtually exploited peasants and tenants in the original movie is made into a contest judge who takes bribes. The parody turns the protagonist's mother into a fan of the CCTV host and his father into a Beijing real-estate tycoon. The movie further 'downgrades' the revolutionary zeal expressed and extolled in the original movie by changing the villagers into the protagonist's fans and cheerleaders. According to Xinhuanet, the satire was widely criticized, with some commentators stating that such a distortion of China's revolutionary history was "immoral and unacceptable".¹³¹

Liu Xiaobo (2012) also commented on the political irony embodied in 'E'gao' humor. He thought that E'gao uses parody, 'twisted meanings', and 'odd juxtapositions' to generate an 'air of absurdity'. E'gao undermines the monopoly on 'public expression' once enjoyed by intellectuals and political elites. In short, there is a democratic quality to it (Liu Xiaobo 2012).

Politically, E'gao is something like what James Scott called 'weapons of the weak', that is, forms that snipe at authority from the periphery of the society but remain marginalized nonetheless and have little ability to generate substantive change. E'gao can also be perceived in a way as carnivalesque, since in a carnival, "the people at the grassroots, accustomed to their place at the receiving end of scoldings, suddenly become 'fearless.'" They use "parody, mockery, ridicule, and insolence" to "vent their sentiments." E'gao helps people to express "authentic feeling" and feed "real creativity." (Liu Xiaobo 2012: 185)

4.5.2 E'gao to criticize social problems

Given the strict online policing and self-censorship, politically-themed E'gao works are rare in Chinese cyberspace. A more popular form of E'gao is what Hu Ge has made – parodying cultural classics or elites, and mocking social realities. They do not touch

¹³¹ http://news.xinhuanet.com/video/2006-09/01/content_5036168.htm

political taboos, but they are corrosive enough to be called subversive, in the sense that this type of E'gao undermines the meanings and contexts of the source object.

As the leading figure of Chinese contemporary directors, and a member of the well-established cultural elite, Chen Kaige's movie *Hung Tu Di* in the 1980s was regarded as the milestone of contemporary Chinese film industry, and his *Farewell My Concubine* is regarded as the best movie in contemporary Chinese film history. He was praised as the only director who can stay true to the Chinese filmmaking art (Rao Shuguang 2014). However, *The Promise*, as Chen Kaige's first Da Pian (literally 'big movie'), is the evidence that even Chen Kaige is swallowed by the Hollywood style, an example of 'style over substance'. In China today, Da Pian refers to blockbuster, or big budget movie as already mentioned earlier in this chapter. China imports 20 American films every year, mostly from Hollywood, which represents about 50% of the Chinese domestic film market. Facing this invasion from Hollywood, China starts to try a Da Pian strategy, with *The Warrior* by Zhang Yimou in the year 2002 as the page-opener, and *The Promise* as a sequel. Chinese Da Pian, as a localization of as well as collaboration with Hollywood-style film marketization or commercialization, enjoys a privileged status and advantageous resources in the Chinese cultural sphere in the context of neo-liberalism, and representatives of this genre (or something like that) have been put forward as new cultural classics.

As a Da Pian, *The Promise* was praised by mainstream media and elite film critics as 'a new milestone in Chinese film history'. For example, the famous youth critic Chen Xiaoyun made the following statement in an interview when talking about *The Promise*:

The Promise opened the new century for Chinese film making. (...) Chen Kaige's films always bring people surprise and shock, and in some sense, only Chen Kaige has the potential to become a true master of film in China, and Chinese audience expects much more of him than any other Chinese director. (...) Only through *The Promise*, the digitization process of Chinese film has upgraded to a new historic stage, and this can only be accomplished by Chen Kaige. (...) The problems and contradictions revealed in *The Promise* are the problems and contradictions of the Chinese contemporary film industry. (...) The story in *The Promise* is undoubtedly the most imaginative story. (Chen Xiaoyun 2005: np)

Chen Kaige is very conscious about his position and strives to resist any negative comments. In a TV promotional interview, when the hostess asked Chen Kaige what if *The Promise* is not a success, Chen got hugely irritated by this question and responded: "how come you ask such a question? (...) This is not friendly. (...) I am not happy with your question."¹³² After the release, a newspaper in Shanghai published a negative comment, and Chen Kaige requested this newspaper to apologize to him.¹³³

¹³² See more at <http://www.xici.net/d37968137.htm>, retrieved 27 October 2014.

¹³³ See more at <http://ent.qq.com/zt/2006/mantouwj/>, retrieved 9 October 2014.

Thus, *The Promise* belongs to cultural commodities that circulate as dominant cultural signs in post-socialist China. Hu Ge, however, through his own E'gao of *The Promise* refuses to passively accept its 'authorized' connotations. By appropriating the dominant cultural signs to accommodate alternative interpretations, he has inflected the cultural meanings or ideologies embedded in those signs. If the words and tone of the host from CCTV signify authority and absolute truth, by hijacking his words and adopting his tone to tell something that is completely out of context, Hu Ge has ridded him off his authority and has rendered his words meaningless or even hilarious (Zhang Lin 2008: 53). Through the intertextual reconfiguration of images and texts, he has disrupted the smooth transmission of a series of dominant cultural codes so as to destroy the official or authoritative aura around the original texts (Zhang Lin 2008: 54).

In *The Bloody Case*, the video clips adopted from *The Promise* are given totally new and subversive meanings and contexts. In line with the Kuso culture, Hu Ge expects the wicked fun in his spoofing to crack the code and make the original movie do something it was not meant to do. E'gao of this type has the potential to dislodge the meaning of the original culture from which it comes. E'gao may most often start from deconstructing the form of the original, but its significance lies in its potential effects on reworking and redefining the existing dominant cultures. These derisory commentaries produce subversive pleasure.

Traditionally, however, mainstream commentaries show great reverence for the authority inherent in the original text. In Hu Ge's parodic commentaries, it is precisely the original text's authority that is under attack. When debunking the original text and questioning the elitism and commercialism of the original text, Hu Ge is calling for movies that express the sentiments of the grassroots. Hu Ge's E'gao is a cultural practice that challenges the supposedly untouched nature of professionally and industrially produced movies that have gained either official endorsement or commercial success. Hu Ge is less interested in the self-expressive or artistic potential of his E'gao video; instead, he mostly engages in critical commentary on contemporary social and cultural events by hilariously parodying the hypo-text.

The purposefully flawed E'gao products poke fun at their flawless or serious mainstream counterparts. Hu Ge's E'gao video-making, whether dealing with famous pop singers or contemporary blockbusters, invariably uses bricolage to destroy the form and take away the content and meaning, so as to empty the hypo-texts of their original weight and make them derisory and light. Hu Ge also often inserts his own content and blends it into the hypo-text. In *The Bloody Case*, for example, Hu Ge added several Chinese folk songs and pop songs in the video, and he even used his own voice in the video. In a piece of E'gao work, the original text is no longer discernible as a unit. The first meaning that E'gao movies convey to the audience is the power of deconstruction. Rather than simply appending comments, it re-creates a reality radically questioning the one that is the target of critique and reversing the political, social and moral directions of actions and their actors in a kind of Bakhtinian 'carnival'.

Resistance in Hu Ge's E'gao is also expressed in his frequent description of social problems in today's China. In Hu Ge's E'gao series of works, some crucial social problems are frequently described and criticized. For instance in *The Bloody Case*, one character is named Sanado, which is a Japanese name. Sanado's job title is the captain of Cheng Guan (城管), which refers to The Urban Administrative and Law Enforcement Bureau, commonly shortened to Cheng Guan. The agency is in charge of the enforcement of urban management of the city. This includes local bylaws, city appearance bylaws, environment, sanitation, work safety, pollution control, health, and can involve enforcement of planning, greening, industry and commerce, environment protection, and municipal affairs in large cities. In general, the Cheng Guan serves as an official agency employed by cities across China 'to tackle low-level crime'. However, the agency is widely disliked by the Chinese due to their abuses of power. Cheng Guan has been involved in several high-profile cases that highlighted public discontent towards their perceived abuse of power.

In *The Bloody Case*, another target of criticism is CCTV. CCTV as the center of Chinese official discourses is devoted to promoting the policies of the CCP and educating people in socialist ideology, along with other mass media (Brady 2008). The ideological nature of CCTV automatically endows its discourses with authority. Political news represented by CCTV news programs illustrates well the mainstream media mode: Being politically oriented towards the 'center' and emphasizing indoctrination are important principles. Leaders at all levels of the party and the state, and elites in economic and other fields, play the leading roles in the news. However, since the reform started in the late 1970s, with the advent of the information age and accelerated globalization, especially the emergence of the Internet, new content and communication means have appeared on CCTV. However, it is still going through a transient stage and its function as CCP's political tool has not really changed. In *The Bloody Case*, the stony-faced CCTV anchor is transplanted to introduce the case, through which, the hypernormalization and pretentiousness of the CCTV are being revealed.

In his 2006 E'gao work *Suppressing Bandits of Niaolong Mountain*, a parodic video of a well-known Chinese TV series "Suppressing Bandits of Wulong Mountain", Hu Ge implied the existence of dictatorship in China as analyzed by Banyelaishuoshi (2007). The story is about a terrorist leader Shadamu, hiding in a place called Niaolong Mountain. The rumour goes that he is producing some kind of mass killing weapon, so police chief Bushi sends his fat secret agent Shadamu to find evidence, in order to fulfill his own more ambitious plans.¹³⁴ Bushi is a homophonic imitation of George W. Bush, the President of the US at that time, and the story line of *Suppressing Bandits of Niaolong Mountain* is constructed based on "the War on Terror" launched by Bush in Afghanistan in 2001 and in Iraq in 2003. As Banyelaishuoshi (2007) pointed out: this parodic video is seemingly mocking the US, but in fact it is mocking the authoritarian regime of China.

¹³⁴ See more at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rxjUBw7HWSs>, retrieved 12 June 2014.

Most of Hu Ge's E'gao works point at the crisis caused by globalized neo-liberalism, reminding people to be alert to the consequences of cultural commercialism. For example, in both *The Bloody Case* and *Suppressing Bandits of Niaolong Mountain*, low-quality popular cultural forms driven by commercialism are parodied in a derisory and funny way.

In the video *Suppressing Bandits of Niaolong Mountain*, besides mocking some low-quality popular cultural forms that the Bushi's fat secret agent performs, Hu Ge also criticized the environmental impact of Da Pian-making in China. To conclude, the over-exploitation of natural resources, the loss of human spirit resulting from growing materialism, and social problems due to the authoritarian regime of China, constitute the main targets for Hu Ge's E'gao.

4.5.3 E'gao to have a say in consumption

In 2014, The Walt Disney Studios released *Let It Go* – the theme song of Disney's film *Frozen* in 25 languages. When these sing-along versions of *Let It Go* became very popular worldwide, talented Chinese netizens made a new version of *Let It Go* in different Chinese dialects, turning it into what is known in the world of Internet culture as a 'Buffalaxed' version of the original (Leppänen and Elo 2016). This fan-made version is titled *Let It Go 26-Chinese-dialect mix version*, compiled by Kuo Hao Jun (designer), Shou Yin Yi Yin (sound mixing), San Pi (image), and Chi Su De Shi Zi (post effects) from netizens singing in a small sample of 26 dialects, all loosely falling under Chinese. The dialects include Mandarin, Shaanxi, Dalian, Shanghai, Shantou, Jinhua, Shanxi, Sichuan, Dongbei, Taizhou, Taiyuan, Beijing, Suzhou, Hefei, Hangzhou, Meizhou Hakka, Southern Fujian, Tianjin, Wenzhou, Nanchang, Wuxi, Fuzhou, Changsha, Guiliu, Wuhan, and Cantonese.¹³⁵

The authors of this E'gao copied the music video of the English version *Let It Go*, made some changes to the source video and image, and added some new self-produced materials, e.g. the singing in 26 dialects and Chinese subtitles, to produce a funny effect. Netizen Misa Amane commented on YouTube: "This is so funny it should get more views." The singing of this version of *Let It Go* is not professional, but has a sincere and beautiful quality. "It is notable that, although none of these singers are professional, many of them do have a wonderful voice" (Vincent 2014: np).¹³⁶ "Does anyone have the link to the Teochew Version? It's so beautiful!" (Elsa of Arendelle 2015: np).¹³⁷ As a native Chinese who also understands English, when I try to interpret the dialects according to the original English lyrics or their Mandarin subtitles, I find the translation quite over the top and hilarious. For example, in the part of Changsha dialect, the original lyrics "Let it go, let it go! You'll never see me cry" is translated as

¹³⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uaz1rEoJTtk>, retrieved 21 July 2015.

¹³⁶ <http://lang-8.com/23959/journals/131496075835069379995972692956700188260>, retrieved 24 July 2014.

¹³⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uaz1rEoJTtk>, retrieved 28 June 2014.

“让他去， 让他去！ 让我就像吃了范灵得乐” (literally: ‘Let it go, let it go! Let me look like I just had some drugs’). Netizen *aqsandy* (2015)¹³⁸ commented, “The translation is very good. Even some dialects I never heard before (...).” This makes this parody work entertaining both in terms of music appreciation and the fun of dialectal carnivalesque.

E'gao works like this *Let It Go 26-Chinese-Dialect Version* are not as corrosive as the two types of E'gao mentioned above. They look more like DIY only for fun and at most showing off talent. But the authors do assert a kind of ownership over it, appropriating commercial imaginary in efforts to reproduce themselves as active global citizens.

Let It Go is another successful product by an international tycoon of cultural production, in this case Walt Disney Animation Studios. On December 6, 2013, Disney released a video of the entire sequence as seen in the movie, which has over 490 million views as of November 2015 on YouTube.¹³⁹ On January 30, 2014, a sing-along version of the sequence was released and has amassed over 610 million views on YouTube as of December 2015.¹⁴⁰

Let It Go reached the top five on the Billboard Hot-100 chart, and won both the Academy Award for Best Original Song in 2014 and the Grammy Award for Best Song Written for Visual Media in 2015.¹⁴¹ The song gained international recognition, becoming one of the most globally recorded Disney songs, with numerous covers being recorded in different languages.¹⁴²

According to the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI), *Let It Go* sold 10.9 million copies in 2014, becoming the fifth best-selling song of that year and one of the best-selling singles of all time.¹⁴³

While numerous young children were becoming unusually obsessed with *Let It Go*,¹⁴⁴ which is like ‘musical crack’ which ‘sends kids into altered states’,¹⁴⁵ the 26 dialects E'gao version of *Let It Go* can be understood as a resistance in some sense.

In Disney's giant promotion project, besides the original English version, on April 15, 2014, Walt Disney Records released a compilation album titled *Let It Go: The Complete Set*, with all the 42 foreign-language film versions of *Let It Go*, including the Chinese one.¹⁴⁶ In the case of China, there is more than one Chinese language in the first place, so when Disney used Mandarin as the language for *Let It Go*, this is not satisfying to Chinese youths whose everyday spoken language is not Mandarin but another Chinese

¹³⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uaz1rEoJTtk>, retrieved 8 May 2014.

¹³⁹ Disney's Frozen 'Let It Go' Sequence Performed by Idina Menzel on YouTube.

¹⁴⁰ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L0MK7qz13bU>, retrieved 24 April 2014.

¹⁴¹ 'SHOW BITS: "Frozen" Soundtrack Fires up With 2 Grammy Wins.' ABC News. Retrieved February 9, 2015.

¹⁴² West, Kelly (January 22, 2014). 'Hear Frozen's *Let It Go* Sung In 25 Different Languages'. CinemaBlend. Retrieved February 1, 2015.

¹⁴³ 'IFPI publishes Digital Music Report 2015'. International Federation of the Phonographic Industry. 14 April 2015. p. 12. Retrieved 15 April 2015.

¹⁴⁴ Cohen, Joanna (May 16, 2014). 'Kids Are Icebound by "Frozen" Fervor: Disney's Animated Film "Frozen" Has Some Children Obsessed'. *The New York Times*. Retrieved May 17, 2014.

¹⁴⁵ Abraham, Yvonne (May 25, 2014). 'Let Me Go. Please'. *The Boston Globe*. Retrieved May 29, 2014.

¹⁴⁶ '*Let It Go: The Complete Set*'. Amazon.com. April 8, 2014. Retrieved April 9, 2014.

dialect. Mandarin is an officially stipulated language without being anyone's spoken Chinese dialect.

The second point to be considered is that in recent years, Chinese youths have consumed many Western cultural products, which all use a foreign language, English, and convey Western values and ideas. Most of the time, they only accept such messages passively without many reactions, often due to a lack of proficiency in English, which functions as an obstacle to voicing their concerns. While the Western pop cultural products seek to demonstrate and confirm the superiority of their liberal values and consumption styles over Chinese youths with their gigantic promotion projects, commercial success, or artistic distinction, the 26 dialects version of *Let It Go* can be interpreted as an attempt towards resistance. The way it expresses the resistance is that it re-positions individuals in asserting authority over cultural forms produced by more powerful social actors in other places and at other times (Chinese spoofsters vs US cultural production company). Their attempt to have a say in cultural production and consumption is facilitated by the digital technology as well as the Internet. What it produces is not only a new set of meanings in association with a borrowed image or idea, video or music, but a new relationship between that product and its consumer who wants to have a say in the production of the product. In this sense, E'gao works like *Let It Go* have achieved their rebellious nature by intervening in the production process through pastiche and bricolage.

When we see E'gao in this light, with Luvaas (2012), as a production practice that maintains the activity of production indefinitely, that instills it with a vital sociality, and a continual cultural revision, it becomes fairly easy to understand why cultural forms that privilege pastiche and bricolage have become so widespread in our global capitalist era. It is not simply that borrowing from other sources makes capitalism more efficient or provides ready-made models for greedy manufacturers. Rather, pastiche and bricolage have become so widespread because it empowers consumers – the driving force of late capitalism – to be more than simply consumers. It leads them into a massive web of dynamic producer/consumers, cultural remixers, and DIYs, and furthers a fundamentally inclusive process of production. Technologies like Corel Draw, or mash-up programs on the Internet give consumers a means of asserting more direct control over what they consume: to affect it and to own it.

The phenomenon of *The Promise* and *The Bloody Case* can also be interpreted from a consumption perspective. Despite big investments and grand promotion campaign, *The Promise* did not deliver satisfaction to grassroots viewers as expected. After its release, countless viewers expressed their disappointment, saying that the movie does not live up to the ticket price of 50 yuan they had to spend, with a sturdy boring story and laugh lines, and Chen Kaige, according to the netizens, was helplessly surrendering to the market. A famous blogger Wang Xiaofeng wrote on his blog:¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ See <http://ent.sina.com.cn/r/m/2005-12-29/0620944179.html>, retrieved 28 June 2015.

For common Chinese people, the reason for them to pay a high price to go to the cinema is very simple: to have a bit of fun. If they find the movie not interesting at all, it is understandable that they become disappointed and complain. After all, Chinese audiences don't have many choices due to the limited number of movies issued in China every year. So, Hu Ge's E'gao behavior is a natural response. (Wang Xiaofeng 2005: np)

Hu Ge also admitted in my online interview with him that one of the reasons for his making *The Bloody Case* is to express his disappointment (Fieldwork November 2014). So it is fair to say that the primary targets of Hu's E'gao video are Chen's elitism and the Da Pian trend in contemporary China shown in the film's grand narrative and style. Hu mostly targets famous people and pokes fun at their public personae. By appropriating media images and the sounds that fashioned their fame, Hu Ge's E'gao works mock the glamour, attack the status, and challenge the power of those who enjoy a privileged position in society. "This is clearly exhibited in Hu's overall high-profile-debunking fashion in which he restructures the plot and in the allegory-turned-triviality that populates the video" (Gong Haomin and Yang Xin 2010).

"Whenever the resources people possess don't match the functions they are supposed to accomplish, they risk being attributed other functions than the ones projected, intended, or necessary" (Blommaert 2005: 77). In *The Bloody Case*, the video clips adopted from *The Promise* are given new, often subversive meanings and contexts.

4.6 E'gao is constructive

Liu Xiaobo (2012: np) pointed out that some researchers of E'gao argue that while humor of this sort destabilizes the "pretentious Communist jargon" and "subverts official ideology," it also deepens mass cynicism. "They are afraid," Liu said, "that something that debunks the sacred and subverts authority, but does nothing more, is only destructive, not constructive. If such a trend spreads out of control, the price of sweeping out the pompous authority will be the creation of a moral wasteland." Liu acknowledges that there is some validity to this perspective. In a place like post-socialist China, E'gao humor "is a symptom of spiritual hunger and intellectual poverty." "People can get drunk laughing at one political joke after another that talk about suffering, darkness, and unhappiness," Liu suggests. "One could even say that the laughter E'gao induces is a heartless kind, something that buries people's sense for justice and their normal human sympathies." However, Liu Xiaobo also saw the humor in E'gao 'as an important and widespread form of popular resistance in post-totalitarian society.' Most important of all, Liu Xiaobo reminded people that 'satire of what is wrong implies that something else is right; it tears things down for the sake of rebirth.' He concludes that the benefits of dark humor 'outweigh the costs.' In other words, E'gao as a light culture carries significant meanings.

While I also agree with Liu Xiaobo on staying optimistic about the political potential of E'gao humor, another more striking constructive function of E'gao presents itself in identity and community construction.

Although a deeply individualized cultural practice, E'gao is never only kept in individualistic or isolated cultural spaces. "While individually created, E'gao works are not individually owned or claimed. They are exclusively disseminated as online digital gifts and, via their rapid circulation and subsequent transformation they also quickly become a communally made and owned cultural product" (Voci 2010: np). During this sharing process, many temporary online communities centering on a certain E'gao video are formed, including all the authors and viewers. They participate in this temporary community by creating, viewing, commenting on or even editing the related video. These temporal groupings of people are heterogeneous and short-lived. These communities belong to the 'light communities' we discussed in Chapter 3.

Take people watching Hu Ge's video *The Bloody Case* on his blog for example. They were basically first-time anonymous visitors to Hu's blog and didn't know each other at all; most of them had never heard of Hu Ge before, but they converged on a shared focus, the E'gao video *The Bloody Case*. They displayed as robust group with their comments, reposts and interaction. During their interaction, "these people shared an enormous degree of similarity in behavior, and experienced a sense of almost intimate closeness and a vast amount of cognitive and emotional sharedness" (Varis and Blommaert 2015: 55). As their watching or commenting was over, or as Varis and Blommaert (2015: 55) put it "the moment of focusing" was over, people left and went back to their diverse-styled lives, and the uniformity displayed during their watching and communicating on Hu Ge's blog vanished. However, as argued by Varis and Blommaert (2015: 55), "The participants in such focused practices do display, enact and embody a strong sense of group membership." Through constructing this groupness, they express their appreciation and love for this new subculture, and became aware of the existence of their peers. This 'focusing' experience also became part of their identity repertoires and laid a foundation for the formation of more solid or thick identities and communities. For example, in various online forums devoted to E'gao set up by Hu Ge, from 'Hu Ge Nao Yi Ci Dao Kang Mu' (胡戈闹一次稻糠亩, a Chinese phonemic translation of 'huge.com') to 'Hu Ge De Di Xia Hei Wo' (胡戈的地下黑窝, Hu Ge's underground network) to today's 'Yin Pin Xiao Ying' (音频应用, literal translation 'How to make audios') and to his Sina Weibo, most of the participants are his fans who watched his E'gao products and then became his permanent followers.

These forums and social media accounts are not as fluid and ephemeral as light communities formed around a piece of E'gao work. But still, they are virtual and anonymous. In a more profound social context, the social group behind the E'gao culture is a large population of the Chinese young precariat, who adopt E'gao as their discourse style, and identify collectively with another prominent online sub-culture, the Diaosi culture, which I will discuss in detail in Chapter 5.

In his book *Discourse*, Blommaert (2005) discusses the indexical organization of discourse – ordered connections between linguistic signs and contexts. Indexicals, he argues, are not random attributions, but closely related to other social and cultural features of social groups. Thus, discourses always involve identity work, and an orientation towards specific orders of indexicality is the grassroots display of 'groupness'. For example, young Chinese netizens who like E'gao communicate through orientations toward particular norms when making E'gao, which leads to the construction of group identity. In order to socialize in an E'gao circle, E'gao participants have to orient to those indexicalities that suggest the central values of E'gao as a subculture, e.g. to 'copy' and 'paste', to be funny, to be creative in bricolage, to be cheap, to be critical, to be light. These norms account for the difference between an E'gao group and other subcultural groups.

Coming back to some forgotten contexts of discourse listed by Blommaert (2005: 56), there is one context with regard to E'gao that cannot be overlooked, i.e. the bricoleurs, or the creators of an E'gao discourse. E'gao is a highly individualized cultural practice, shared as a gift online, and offering its makers and viewers visibility and scrutiny (Voci 2010). Behind E'gao's dramatic form of presentation, is a group of young netizens, who are striving to react to their problems with discourses online when they cannot handle them in the offline reality. For E'gao, all its significance lies in the agency exerted by precarious youngsters who feel impeded both by commercialism and other dominant ideologies.

4.7 What does E'gao mean to the precariat?

As already discussed in the section on defining E'gao, E'gao is basically a precariat culture. Its authors and fans are basically ordinary disaffected youths who share similar characteristics in terms of demography and social behavior. They suffer in life but cannot find a solution. Therefore, they resort to the Internet to express their frustration and to pursue spiritual relief and sustenance (see e.g. Cai Qi 2007; He Aijun 2009; Gong Haomin and Yang Xin 2010). E'gao, as a subculture, is an attempt by the precariat to find symbolic solutions to their social and identity problems. This is illustrated in Sections 4.7.1-4.7.5, where the functions are discussed that E'gao has for the precariat.

4.7.1 Providing magical solutions to structural socio-economic problems

E'gao addresses 'a common class problematic', i.e. the emergence of the precariat as a class in the making, with its members being increasingly marginalized as denizens. They lack an identity, legitimate communities, matching norms and other citizens' rights, they are supposed to have, including cultural rights. When they cannot transcend the "real relations" otherwise, the precariat attempts to resolve ideologically, by means of

an “imaginary relation” (Hall and Jefferson 1976: 33), or by subculturalization. Cai Qi (2007) defines E’gao as a subculture of young people born during and after the 1970s and claims that E’gao videos are to their makers and viewers what marijuana was to the hippies – they serve as bridges to an imaginary world where minds are freed from the constraints of reality. The ‘problems’ that E’gao intends to address were vaguely described as ‘culture hegemony’ exerted by China’s mainstream culture or lack of their own cultures. With E’gao, the precariat set up their own cultural norms, for example, the styles of E’gao. To distinguish from the grandness, expensiveness and seriousness of the mainstream culture as represented by the Opening Ceremony of 2008 Beijing Olympics, the precariat chooses alternatively ‘being small, cheap and light’ as the new styles for E’gao. Instead of using professional and institutional resources, E’gao authors as amateurs, take advantage of free ‘crowdsources’ floating online for their production, make their works by copying and editing, and produce various types of pastiche through bricolage. They E’gao for fun, for venting anger, for identity construction and voice articulation; they share their E’gao works with other netizens as gifts. By participating in E’gao and communicating with E’gao, the precariat gradually develops E’gao into a new hegemonic culture for themselves. This new hegemonic culture expresses their values and ideas, becomes their new mode of cultural production.

4.7.2 Offering a form of collective identity different from that of mainstream society

As already mentioned above, E’gao as a participatory culture has given birth to many temporary online communities. The authors, viewers and fans of a popular piece of E’gao work gather around in E’gao forums or social media, viewing, discussing or even adapting the E’gao work. These communities can be heterogeneous and short-lived; they are ‘light communities’ (Blommaert and Varis 2015).

This type of light communities is different from what a community means in the traditional sense. However, the precariat also starts to pursue a clearer identity and maybe a more tangible community. This is evidenced by Hu Ge’s efforts in disclosing the precarious life experiences of the precariat in his E’gao movies, and uniting the precariat to something good to the society. Examples for this are given in the following two case studies.

In one of Hu Ge’s follow-up E’gao products *Updates For A Share-renting Apartment*,¹⁴⁸ Hu Ge zooms exactly into the precarious life of Chinese educated poor in China. Wearing a dirty suit and tie in a weird manner, Hu Ge appeared in the video as a news anchor, and started his report assuming a serious voice resembling that of the hosts on CCTV: “Good evening ladies and gentlemen, this is XX share-renting apartment, welcome to this edition of updates...” During seven minutes, Hu Ge in the video comments on some hotly debated current issues in China, including economy, environment, youth Internet addiction, and especially employment for new graduates.

¹⁴⁸ Watch the video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U2Vvk6Gi5QM>, retrieved 28 May 2014.

As a suggestion to solve the employment problem for new graduates, in the video Hu Ge gives his tip:

the undergraduates (学士, xue shi) should be enrolled as post graduates (硕士, shuo shi) automatically right after graduation since there are no jobs for the undergraduates at all; two years later after getting their master degree, they should be promoted to the PhD studies (博士, bo shi) directly because there are still no jobs available for masters either; and after this, they will be enrolled automatically as Heroes (壮士, Zhuang shi); then after four years of study, they should be directly upgraded as Warriors (勇士, yong shi) to escape the job market; if the economy is still not good enough for a Warrior graduate to find a job, the warriors should be directly promoted as Saint (圣斗士, sheng dou shi), and so on and so forth.

Hero, Warrior, and Saint are not real degrees in China, but invented by Hu Ge to mock China's blind expansion of high elite education without really improving its quality, which is one of the problems that has contributed to the precarious situation of Chinese graduates.¹⁴⁹

Young Chinese netizens are enthusiastic about communicating online and identifying with E'gao; at the same time, they are also trying to go beyond the limit of the Internet and present a positive collective identity to the mainstream world. For example Hu Ge, dubbed as the E'gao God, is always trying to mobilize more online youth to get together to get their voice heard. One of his initiatives was, in 2008, when the disastrous earthquake happened in Sichuan Province, to produce two music videos in support of the victims of the earthquake. In *Jiu* 救 (rescue), he edited a collage of images from news reports of the earthquake as a visual background for a song written by Gong Ge'er.¹⁵⁰ The video voices the overwhelming feeling of national mourning that was evident in all Chinese media. An even better example of Hu Ge's prominent position in the Chinese Internet is his other music video, 'La Zhu Wo De Shou' (拉住我的手, 'Holding my hand'), written by Wang Bei and sung by almost a hundred volunteering netizens. In this video, celebrities are replaced with unknown netizens; Hu Ge and the E'gao culture he represents, is trying to unite a community that consists of unknown Chinese youth. Hu Ge's video evokes a format that was first used by the 1984 Band Aid video 'Do they know it's Christmas?' by Bob Geldof and Midge Ure and the 1985 USA for Africa's video 'We are the world' by Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie in support of victims of the famine in Ethiopia. Hu Ge assumes the position of spokesperson for the whole Chinese Internet community in a similar call for human solidarity. By substituting unknown young netizens for the famous singers of well-known philanthropic music videos, Hu Ge turns the anonymous and supposedly individualistic Internet users into a collective of visible and compassionate citizens.

¹⁴⁹ See more about this video at http://ent.ifeng.com/movie/news/mainland/200812/1222_1845_932697.shtml, retrieved 28 May 2014.

¹⁵⁰ See http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XMzAxNTU3NTI=.html, retrieved 3 March 2015.

Hu Ge's commitment to the Sichuan earthquake relief effort, his leadership role in gathering other bloggers, as well as his care for the fate of Chinese disaffected youth is providing more evidence that E'gao culture, while emphasizing individual creativity and pleasure, does not necessarily promote social isolation or disengagement, but instead has the potential to strive for a better world for the grassroots young. This is also a positive challenge to the negative image of E'gao as a harmful culture delineated by mainstream media.

4.7.3 Creating space for alternative experiences and scripts of social reality

E'gao creates and shapes a space for alternative scripts of a social reality presented by the parodied cultural products. While E'gao can be very perceptively and imaginatively produced, its products present themselves as commentaries of the source product (Voci 2010), as a reflection on and critical way of thinking about the hypo-text. Taking a subversive stance, E'gao provides various alternative scripts of the hypo-text. For example, in the E'gao version of *The Sparkling Red Star* (Shanshan de Hongxing), a revolutionary story about the growth of a CCP child soldier in the 1930s is transformed into a story of a pop star longing for his fame and fortune in a TV singing contest. The E'gao movie cheapens and vilifies the revolutionary zeal expressed in the original movie; the reflection and interpretation is dramatic and ironic, making the E'gao movie a negative presentation of the hypo-text.

In the 26-Chinese-dialects version of *Let It Go*, the adaptation made by Chinese E'gao authors is a localization of a globalized cultural product. The meaning and the video of the original song were further localized with local Chinese cultural elements and resources, especially 26 dialects, with some even unrecognizable by a Chinese viewer. The E'gao version is still beautiful and the theme remains the same, but the difference is that now it is localized and viewed and transferred among Chinese netizens. So, the Chinese version of *Let It Go* provides a local version of a globalized cultural product.

E'gao also creates space for realities that remain hidden in today's China. For example in Hu Ge's E'gao videos, Cheng Guan, environmental issues, housing, and unemployment all appeared. Through parody and bricolage, Hu Ge managed to identify, describe and criticize various social problems in today's China. These social problems reveal trends of inequality that are producing growing popular anger in China (see He 2003, as quoted in Whyte 2010).

E'gao is also providing life experiences and scripts for another even more important social reality in today's China, i.e. the emergence of the precariat as a class in the making. When the precariat is marginalized in the mainstream and precariat discourse is erased from the offline public space in China, E'gao provides a platform where the precariat members can present and narrate their life experiences and construct alternative identities and communities. Although the online performance of the

precariat's life experiences is limited, coded, dramatic, sometimes even twisted, it is their way of speaking and expressing.

4.7.4 Supplying non-mainstream meaningful leisure activities

According to the homology argument, social stratification and cultural stratification may closely map onto each other; status is to be regarded according to Bourdieu (1984) as the symbolic aspect or dimension of the class structure, although it is not itself reducible to economic relations alone. Individuals in higher social strata or of higher social status are those who prefer and predominantly consume 'high' or 'elite' culture, and individuals in lower social strata or of lower social status are those who prefer and predominantly consume 'popular' or 'mass' culture – with, usually, various intermediate situations also being recognized (Bourdieu 1984). When E'gao and elite culture confront one another, their battle reveals the development of a multilayered system of 'audiences' for cultural consumption in contemporary China, one very large and targeted by high-budget movies, another smaller, in the margins and operating on a no-budget basis. So here again is an argument for my main point about the emergence of a precariat: we can see this emergence through the differentiation of 'publics' or audiences for consumption. E'gao demonstrates this.

The economic reform since the late 1970s brought many changes to the film industry, including the revival of social stratification among the general population. The increasing gap between the rich and the poor is once again reflected in a divided film audience. The first class movie theatres are frequented by the economically better-off urban dwellers, whereas the second- and third-class theatres become the reserves for the less affluent (Zhang Yingjin and Xiao Zhiwei 1998: 84). However, the gap between movie audiences is not only an economic one, but also a gap concerning taste and genres. In *The Promise*, the most expensive film that has ever been made in China, Chen Kaige's extravaganza employed production members from China, the US, Japan and Korea. However, it failed to win over Chinese precariat audiences, and instead attracted overwhelming amounts of criticism. In contrast, Hu Ge's spoof version of *The Promise*, *The Bloody Case*, attracted huge attention and became a big hit within days on the Chinese Internet. Small screen, cheap and light E'gao videos have won the battle with Da Pian and became the favorite leisure activity for the precariat. A flood of similar online spoofs have been spawned all over Chinese video sharing websites and social media. This particular type of online leisure activity constitutes part of the 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1984) of the precariat as a class in the making, indicating the emergence of precariat communities online.

4.7.5 Suggesting solutions to the existential dilemmas of identity

Another urgent problem for the precariat is identity frustration. While the precariat is emerging along with China's rise to the world's superpower standard, they face an

identity frustration: as a new class with bourgeoisie aspirations, they do not fit the Chinese political hegemony of 'peasants and workers'. They belong neither to the rural agricultural working class, nor to the urban industrial proletariat. They remain therefore problematic as a social formation in the political and ideological self-imagination of China. They can even be labeled as class enemy, and their lifestyle and ambitions can be dismissed as politically undesirable. They don't identify with "a young generation with firm will, strong sense of responsibility and great professional competence," as expected by the CCP hoping they would strive "to achieve the 'Chinese dream',"¹⁵¹ and they also do not identify with the Erdai (the second generation) who lead a luxury life because of their powerful parents. They are also reluctant to be in line with peasants or traditional workers, because most of them have received higher education and have bourgeois aspirations. They are longing for the life of a real middle class, but they just wake up to find they do not have the rights a normal citizen in their situation is supposed to have. They try to make a breakthrough by working hard, but only find out that there is no ladder for upward mobility at all. Though the reality of the educated precariat in China is that of a community arising in an economically capitalist China, the mainstream norms have not changed for them. An increasingly rigid social structure leaves almost no room for them.

This identity embarrassment leads to a collectively felt structure of feeling among the precariat, i.e. anomie. Anomie is the breakdown of social bonds between an individual and the community (as cited in Schreude 2014: 521). Despite its subversiveness, E'gao involves a strong sense of playfulness and thus anger-venting is one of its important functions. As Lagerkvist (2010: 158) puts it, E'gao can lead to "letting off steam while safely avoiding being steamrolled by the authorities." A blog post cited by Tu Gang (2007: 26) further elaborates on this function exercised by E'gao:

Once you have watched it, your bellyaches from laughter and you can't refrain from letting out an evil laugh. It is a little like why putting thumbtacks on the chair of that ideological education teacher that would never stop talking feels so good.

When E'gao functions as a vent for pent-up emotions, it serves as a channel for both spoofsters and audiences to vent their disappointments, express their dissatisfactions, and ease their anxieties. In creating and consuming E'gao texts, audiences find playful relief in the virtual world. This is obviously helpful when they are suffering in the dilemmas of identity.

E'gao can help the precariat survive in the dilemmas of identity also because the online communities formed around the production and transmission of E'gao works provide the groupness and the sense of belonging, which the precariat cannot achieve in their offline life. By participating in E'gao, the precariat identify with similar styles

¹⁵¹ See more at <http://news.sina.cn/?sa=t124d8578132v71andfrom=mbaiduandstun=20007andvt=4>, retrieved 2 December 2014.

and genres, so as to build up their own cultural norms. In this sense, E'gao provides a solution to the identity frustration suffered by the precariat.

4.8 Concluding remarks

In the more orthodox school of Marxist analysis, social class is defined in 'objective' terms, in relation to specific positions taken by people within the economic system. One is 'objectively' middle- or working class, therefore, and consciousness, self-imagination or social practices do not really matter much. In the introductory chapter, I already pointed towards the difficulties encountered when we apply this type of analysis to the emerging precariat in China, and chose a 'cultural' approach. The preceding chapter on the 'language' of the precariat and this chapter on E'gao have, I believe, added substance to this choice.

As a "cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice" (Dentith 2000: 9), E'gao is pastiche as well as bricolage, a manifestation of the increasing configurability in cultural practices that is enabled by new media and communication technologies. E'gao is deeply rooted in post-socialist Chinese society, therefore presenting a rare opportunity not only to understand the promises of an emerging technological trend, but more importantly, to witness the confrontation and negotiations between old and new social classes and cultural forces, so as to size up the transformations brought about by new technologies in a society experiencing a protracted post-socialist period.

It is important to note that because of its low social status and lack of access to cultural production (in the pre-Internet era), cultural groups such as the precariat who are ranked at the lower part of the cultural power scale are not able to and cannot risk a head-on crash with the dominant power. Therefore, their cultural struggles are characterized by "tactics" of "textual poaching" (De Certeau 1984: 37); very often in form of 'hidden transcripts' (Scott 1985), or taking the form of youth subcultures which hijack mainstream cultural commodities to construct resistant and alternative cultural identities (Hall and Jefferson 1976). In this light, E'gao comes to the fore in the cultural struggles between the precariat as a newly emerged class and the dominant social classes. Disguised in jokes and laughter as entertainment, E'gao culture derives its materials from within the boundaries of the dominant culture, either by making dominant cultural signs targets of ridicule or by appropriating mainstream cultural signs for its own purposes. E'gao is safe yet dangerous, and popular yet subversive. Relying on satire and humor, E'gao attempts to 'speak truth to power' by exposing the lies and contradictions in the official or dominant cultural discourse for the sake of the public. E'gao represents the "average citizens in broadcasting their views" in a time when there is a "widely-shared frustration and perception that the news media is failing democracy" (Zhang Lin 2008: 388).

E'gao represents more than just entertainment. It is a virtual game for the suppressed and a spiritual feast for the disillusioned Chinese precariat; to some degree, it challenges the established order of meaning making and the legitimacy of mainstream culture. By spoofing mainstream ideologies, the Chinese precariat indulge in a festive celebration of E'gao culture, by which they achieve a temporary escape from the cruelties of reality and the hegemony of official culture. In this chapter I have portrayed the resistance spirit of E'gao as "emancipation through laughter," "rebellion in parody and exaggeration" (Cui 2008: 142), and "subversion by degradation" (Liu 2008: 117) as quoted in Zhang Lin (2008).

However, E'gao is also constructive in the sense that it facilitates alternative identity and community construction. E'gao supplies a new type of meaningful online leisure activity in which ordinary young people can all participate since E'gao only requires very simple editing techniques. As a consequence, a large part of the precariat have formulated a new cultural consumption public or audience, which is small, circulating in the margins and operating on a no-budget basis, and which is different from the dominant cultural consumption public – large and targeted by high-budget movies.

In contrast with the mainstream culture's grandness, pretentiousness, and high cost, the styles of E'gao are small, cheap and light. By creating, transmitting and consuming E'gao works, participants of E'gao have built up new cultural norms and formulated many temporary online communities centering on a specific E'gao work, or following a popular E'gao author, and thus offer a form of collective identity different from that of mainstream society.

E'gao, I would suggest, is the cultural expression of a shared precariat class experience. Remember the powerful argument made by the British Marxist historian (and one of the 'founding fathers' of cultural studies) E.P. Thompson against the more traditional Marxist analysis in which 'class' was an objective determinant. In *The Poverty of Theory*, Thompson (1978) attacked the "objective" base-superstructure relationship in which classes were defined on the basis of their economic position only, by referring to "a missing term: 'human experience'" (Thompson 1978: 164). Thompson explained:

Men and women also return as subjects, within this term (...), as persons experiencing their determinate productive situations and relationships, as needs and interests and as antagonisms, and then handling this experience within their *consciousness* and their *culture* (...) in the most complex (...) ways, and then (often but not always through the ensuing structures of class) acting upon their determinate situation in their turn. (Thompson 1978: 164)

This means that 'class', in order to become an *active* sociopolitical collective, requires *class-forming experiences turned into socially and culturally meaningful practices* defining a community of people as a class. Even more so, it might *not* be the objective determination of people as, for instance, 'white collar' or 'working class' that turns

them into a socio-politically identifiable collective, but their 'soft' cultural activities. I believe we have seen two such sets of activities – a 'language' and a 'culture' – constituting a precariat. In the next chapter, we shall see that a third 'soft' element can be added: a shared class label called 'Diaosi' rapidly gaining a foothold among the precariat community I investigate here. The community, we shall see, has developed a language, a culture, and a name for itself.

CHAPTER 5

Diaosi, a bottom-up call to identity

I have established, so far, that the precariat community constitutes and indexically identifies its members by means of a language of their own making, which is then deployed in complex cultural practices that, again, constitute and define them as a separate and identifiable community. The connection between these linguistic and cultural practices, until now, was implicit: we inferred the emerging of a social community on the basis of such practices because they are distinct from other, mainstream, practices. The precariat, however, also self-define explicitly, by means of a conscious, elaborate and widespread identity discourse which is the topic of this chapter.

Since early 2012, the term ‘Diaosi’ (屌丝) flooded the Chinese-language Internet. It ranked as the most popular Chinese Internet term of 2012 and stays popular today. Broken into its component parts, the Chinese word Diao (屌) is a particularly crude term used to describe the male genitalia. Si (丝) is literally translated as ‘hair’, or ‘string’. So, literally Diaosi means ‘pubic hair’. Diaosi is used by disaffected young people online to describe themselves in a self-deprecating manner to suggest their lack of good looks, wealth and social resources to survive in society. It easily brings to mind a young graduate working in a dead-end job, with little prospect of saving enough to buy a house and a car – basic trappings of a middle-class life that are widely seen as essential prerequisites to get married in today’s China.¹⁵² It may be like a Chinese version of underprivileged loser but without the derogatory tone. As such, Szablewicz (2014) suggests, a more appropriate translation might be the English slang term ‘tool’, which retains the derogatory reference to the male genitalia that is contained in the Chinese term; Karoline Kan (2013) compares it to the American term ‘redneck’ whose poverty and unrefined behavior is not only a source of pride, but a culture in and of itself.

The term first appeared on the Baidu Tieba,¹⁵³ on a sub-forum dedicated to former soccer player Li Yi, a ridiculously narcissistic and yet mediocre Chinese soccer player. Li’s critical and pretentious off-field comments often overshadow his soccer skills. Some unconfirmed comments on the Internet about Li such as saying his ball shielding is similar and comparable to Thierry Henry, makes him a target for much teasing from

¹⁵² There should be homosexuals in Diaosi cohort for sure, but the Diaosi ‘norm’ for sexual conduct, as expressed in Diaosi discourses, appears to be heterosexuals.

¹⁵³ 百度贴吧; bai du tie ba, literally ‘Baidu Post Bar’, which is the largest Chinese communication platform provided by the Chinese search engine company, Baidu, and is the birthplace of Chinese fan culture.

home fans. He earned a nickname 'Imperator Li Yi the Great' (Li Yi Da Di). Although Li is considered a mediocre player at best, with over 6.8 million members and nearly 266 million posts, his Baidu forum Li Yi Bar holds the record as Baidu's largest to date. This is because Li Yi Bar is regarded as the birthplace as well as headquarter for the Diaosi phenomenon. Li Yi Bar was at the beginning called Emperor Bar, or D Bar (the first phonetic letter of emperor in Chinese is D, referring to Li Yi's nickname Li Yi Da Di). Therefore, as Li Yi's fans, the netizens who always come to D Bar call themselves D Si, Si being the Chinese phoneme for fans.

Based on D Si, members of a rival forum based themselves on the D to phonetically expand the word, cynically called members of Li Yi Bar Diaosi, which means pubic hair in Chinese (see above). But rather than taking offence, Li Yi's fans accepted it as an honor. The young Diaosi seized hold of the nickname and self-mockingly adopted the label from then on. They incorporated it into a chant: "We are Diaosi, so what? We are losers. If you want to kick us, please bring it on!"¹⁵⁴ Thus, Diaosi started being used by members of Li Yi Bar as the label to distinguish insiders and outsiders, to distinguish themselves from fans of other Bars and those who looked down upon them, thereby pursuing a collective identity. Very soon, the term popped up in numerous online contexts. From Post Bar to Weibo, from social networking sites to online literature and movies, the term Diaosi quickly spread to every corner of the Chinese Internet, and an increasing number of people declared identifying themselves with Diaosi.

The popularity of the term among Chinese netizens is proved by the fact that just two months after it was first coined in 2011, it already generated 41.1 million search results and 2.2 million blog posts on Google and China's Twitter-like Weibo respectively (Jaycee Lui 2015). To echo with this bottom-up formulated new Internet phenomenon, the leading portals and other online media all published special analysis about Diaosi, which symbolizes the emergence of Diaosi as a culture. As observed by Cao Yifan (2013), Diaosi could be called the cultural campus of the year 2012 for Chinese Internet (Cao Yifan 2013).

The Diaosi even made headlines for 'occupying' President Obama's Google+ page in February 2012. Having discovered that Google+ was not blocked in mainland China, Chinese netizens swarmed President Obama's Google+ page. In the comments left on his page, some suggested that Obama should 'free' China the way that America had 'freed' Iraq and Libya. Some claimed that Obama would process a green card for anyone leaving a message on his page; others simply made their presence known by typing a few characters.

Some experts summed up this Internet subculture phenomenon as 'a language carnival' (e.g. Wu Xiaobo 2015). Diaosi started as a coarse word used in online quarrels, and then it started to worm as a meme through various forums and social media, such as Douban, Baidu Tiebar and Weibo, gaining admiration or acquiring a cult following amongst a large grassroots young population. Young people may call themselves or use the word to diminish others; or use it for fun. As described by Cao

¹⁵⁴ See more at <http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kw=%E6%9D%8E%E6%AF%85>, retrieved 12 January 2015.

Yifan (2013: np): “Starting as a vulgar term, it sends out its special fragrance like a durian does. It has attracted so many underclass youths. It is like a small candle light, alluring disaffected young online to come and stick together for warmth.”

As former Li Yi Bar administrator, Da Li Zi stated: “I felt it was too insulting – it’s a slang word to do with penises. But after it went viral, it was out of my control – and now it’s something else entirely” (2014: np). Da Li Zi’s comments reflect the evolvement of Diaosi from a meme to a cultural phenomenon, during which the meaning of Diaosi changes along with its interaction with new contexts and finally it became a particular term for the virtual image of the Chinese precariat. Diaosi thus has become a fashionable, unique, cultural phenomenon in vogue among the disaffected youths.

5.1 Diaosi image and Diaosi discourses

Call them delinquents; call them losers – or worse. Whatever label is thrown at them, this group of Chinese youths is immune to further stigmatization, for they already have a stigma of their own – Diaosi, although it is situated only online.

When Diaosi went viral online as a cultural phenomenon, Diaosi-ness has gradually become important enough to netizens to generate concern about posers – so much that they are creating very specific requirements that one must meet to qualify as a Diaosi. There are also websites like Renren¹⁵⁵ that give users ‘Diaosi scores’ and fierce debates about whether owning an iPhone makes you a fake Diaosi. Thus, Diaosi have delineated a vague but quite recognizable Diaosi image for themselves as a virtual being.

Diaosi’s image has been demarcated as an ambiguously defined loser. Summarized, a Diaosi is a person who is perceived as being unattractive, unsociable, having achieved limited success (in the eyes of the popular rhetoric) and has limited scope for future socio-economic mobility. He/she falls outside the stereotype of the desirable man ‘Gao Fu Shuai’ (高富帅, ‘tall, rich and handsome’) or woman ‘Bai Fu Mei’ (白富美, ‘white, rich and beautiful’) as illustrated by a widely-circulated cartoon as in Figure 5.1: unattractive appearance, no girlfriend, low salary, cheap clothes, copycat mobile phone, etc.

¹⁵⁵ The Renren Network, literally: Everyone’s Website, is a Chinese social networking service. It is popular among college students.



Figure 5.1: Image of Diaosi

(source: <http://www.civilchina.org/2013/07/diaosi-evolution-of-a-chinese-meme/>, retrieved 18 November 2014)

Searching by key word ‘the criteria for Diaosi’ on China’s leading searching engine Baidu.com, 6.290.000 results were given on 5 June 2015. This indicates the formulation of a fixed poser for online Diaosi discourses. These criteria for Diaosi are basically summarized by netizens themselves and have been changing every year with some basic characteristics left unchanged.



Figure 5.2: Criteria for Diaosi

(source: <http://news.qq.com/a/20130227/001310.htm>, retrieved 17 March 2014)

As illustrated by Figure 5.2, a Diaosi is a young person with the following features:

Features of a male Diaosi:

- 1) Most of the time with no more than 1,000 yuan at hand;
- 2) Wearing fake brand shoes costing less than 800 yuan; wearing counterfeit brands.
- 3) Dating no more than three girlfriends before getting married;
- 4) Having cigarettes cheaper than 20 yuan (\$3.6);
- 5) Usually drinking beer and alcohol; Kangshifu Green tea;
- 6) No car, or having a car cheaper than 100,000 yuan (\$15,000);
- 7) Yearly bonus less than 10,000 yuan (\$1,500) ;
- 8) No long distance travel in 5-6 years;
- 9) No influential people in their social network;
- 10) Enthusiastic about playing games, and updating social media with a cheap cellphone with an IOS or android system.

Features of a female Diaosi:

- 1) Has never bought a bikini;
- 2) Does not wear brightly colored nail polish;
- 3) Has never worn heels higher than 5 cm;
- 4) Does not have matching sets of lingerie;
- 5) Spends five or more months dieting in one year;
- 6) Does not dare to show her teeth when she laughs or smiles in public;
- 7) Likes to walk behind men;
- 8) Does not like to look in the mirror or looks in the mirror frequently;
- 9) Has not changed her hairstyle in more than six months.

These criteria usually contain a level-check list for netizens' reference, saying that: whoever meets two characteristics of the ones listed above is a Diaosi-to-be; meeting three characteristics is a standard Diaosi; five characteristics means one is an authentic Diaosi; eight characteristics equals a super Diaosi; if someone has met all characteristics, he/she is for sure a Diaosi God. These criteria are cited and translated from baike.baidu.com/.¹⁵⁶

The Diaosi image is dynamic and the criteria for being a Diaosi continue to evolve along with social development. For example, compared with the criteria of Diaosi in 2013, they did change a little bit by 2015 as shown in the following list of male characteristics:

- 1) Not handsome, not sporty, no muscles, no taste;
- 2) Most of the time with no more than 1,000 yuan at hand, and yearly bonus less than 2,000 yuan;

¹⁵⁶ See more at <http://baike.baidu.com/view/10150291.htm>, retrieved 6 March 2014.

- 3) Having cigarettes cheaper than 10 yuan;
- 4) Wearing sportswear when going out;
- 5) Diaosi are increasingly Internet addicted, using a lot of tissues and instant noodles. More desperate about being in a relationship, more frustrated of deprivation and marginalization;
- 6) Transportation, no car, always public bus or subway. Chinese fever for fancy cars and the traffic problem in big cities;
- 7) Seldom going out, addicted to instant noodles and tissues;
- 8) Quite low sense of existence, seldom receiving gifts or special attention;
- 9) Never shopping outside, addicted to online shopping. The prosperity of online shopping;
- 10) Dating no more than three girlfriends before getting married.

Compared with Diaosi in 2013, Diaosi in 2015 earn a higher pay, but they seem even more frustrated, because the consumer culture is upgraded. For example, now a successful person is supposed to be sporty and frequent the gym to have beautiful muscles. This may explain why with a higher salary they unexpectedly buy much cheaper cigarettes. Another change is the Diaosi's obsession with online shopping. But despite these changes, the defining features of a Diaosi remain: a disaffected young person working in a dead-end job, lacking good looks, wealth and social resources, with little prospect of saving enough to buy a house and a car so as to find a girlfriend; middle-class life is only a dream for him; what he can do is only to stay in all day, playing games and watching porn from Japan.

As an online subcultural phenomenon, "Diaosi does not exist without Diaosi discourses" (Tong Ming 2013: np). "Diaosi is the result of imagination, and is a constructed image." (Cao Yifan 2013: np).

Tong Ming, in his article *Diaosi used to be in Saint Petersburg* (2013), describes the image of Diaosi online as the prototype of a literature figure: "Diaosi used to be totally unknown, but obtained existence through various online autobiographical Diaosi discourses and stories, by which, a Diaosi image gradually has been delineated" (Tong Ming 2013: np).

Tong Ming summarized some characteristics of the image of Diaosi online: First, Diaosi are mostly educated youths, many of them are even university graduates. However, 'born with nothing', they lose the game to Gao Fu Shuai, who are 'born with everything'. They are suffering from their low social status. On the other hand, humble background does not mean being unenlightened. When discussing social events online, Diaosi can be very insightful, focusing their curses and denigrating vocabulary on themselves instead of others, helplessly holding back the anger that is already burning inside, resulting in a self-critical bitterness. Second, Diaosi are mainly young male (female Diaosi are only a funny extension and intervention, but remain peripheral), who have a tendency towards both masochism and sadism. Having tagged themselves as Ai Cuo Qiong (矮矬穷, 'short, ugly and poor') or Tu Fei Yuan (土肥圆, 'rustic and

fat'), employing their sexual fantasies and sexual helplessness as the main plots, they start to narrate their virtual relationship with the so-called Bai Fu Mei ('white, rich and beautiful'), Nv Shen (女神, 'The Goddess', synonym for Bai Fu Mei), and Nv Diaosi (女屌丝, 'female Diaosi'), with Lu (撸, Chinese slang for 'masturbation') as the key word of every story. Gao Yifan (2013) pointed out another feature of the Diaosi image, i.e. Diaosi are used to self-belittling and tend to resign themselves to adversity in their imagined relationships.

As the carriers of the image of Diaosi, Diaosi discourses appeared simultaneously along with the emergence of Diaosi as a subculture. Thanks to the virtual anonymity of cyberspace, Diaosi safely express their innermost needs and desires, no matter how ugly and unspeakable these desires are. Diaosi discourses have special discursive styles, illustrating the defining features of Diaosi as an online discursive subculture.

5.1.1 A combination of documentary and literary genres

As shown above, Diaosi started circulating the Internet as a meme. According to Li Mingjie (2013), memes have two social functions, i.e. cognition and affection. With these two functions, memes reflect social reality to various degrees. As the most popular meme of the year 2012, cognitively, Diaosi mirrors the perceived emergence of the precariat as a new social fact; affectively, it also suggests the formulation of a structure of feeling among the precariat, which I will elaborate on later in this chapter. Diaosi as a meme first documents the emergence of the Chinese precariat and a shared structure of feeling among them. What is being described in the Diaosi discourses is based on the precariat's real life experiences. In this sense, Diaosi discourses are documentary, recording the emergence and the life of the Chinese precariat. On the other hand, Diaosi is an imagined image created in the Chinese virtual space by discourses. It is a cultural product rather than a real human existence. Therefore, Diaosi also demonstrates the potential as a form of literature creation. Tong Ming argues that Diaosi in Chinese Internet discourses is a to-be literature archetype with an unpredictable fate. Because of the combination of its documentary and literary nature, the Chinese precariat online, as the authors of Diaosi discourses based on their own stories, have to adopt resources from both their 'real' and 'virtual' repertoire, so as to provide the real life an imagined abstract through well-organized online metaphoric narration (Tong Ming 2013).

5.1.2 Comparative narration

Another distinctive discursive style of Diaosi discourses is that Diaosi are always presented as the oppositional counterpart of Gao Fu Shuai (高富帅, the 'tall, rich and handsome'). When people ask what the term Diaosi refers to, the online response will be: no matter what it is, it is not Gao Fu Shuai – another online discursive image presented as successful youngsters with a bright future. Googling "the difference

between Diaosi and Gao Fu Shuai” on 4 April 2015, the result was 12,900,000 items, which indicates a well-formulated contradictory narration style of Diaosi discourses online.

Specifically, in Diaosi discourses, there is a unique Diaosi vocabulary, of which, the words basically come in countering pairs: for example, Diaosi is not Gao Fu Shuai (‘tall, rich and handsome’), but Ai Cuo Qiong (‘short, ugly and poor’); a female Diaosi is not Bai Fu Mei (‘white, rich and pretty’) or Nv Shen (女神, ‘Goddess’), but Tu Fei Yuan (‘unfashionable, fat and ugly’). The girls that a Diaosi dates are not Fen Mu Er (粉木耳, ‘pink fungus’¹⁵⁷, referring to young beautiful girls), but Hei Mu Er (黑木耳, ‘black fungus’, referring to old ugly female). With Diaosi as the key word, such a series of semantically related terms are adopted by the Diaosi discourses and have constructed a particular Diaosi lexical system

Above the lexical level, at the discourse level, the description of Diaosi life is always compared with Gao Fu Shuai’s in almost all the Diaosi discourses online. For example, in a post about Diaosi’s holiday,¹⁵⁸ from early morning to late night, what a Diaosi does is described vividly by comparing with what a Gao Fu Shuai will do: a Diaosi has instant noodles as his breakfast, while a Gao Fu Shuai has milk, eggs and fruit instead; a Diaosi goes to his destination by a crowded bus or train, while a Gao Fu Shuai goes there in his fancy car; a Diaosi goes to a free beach, which is very crowded with millions of tourists, alone without a girlfriend, while a Gao Fu Shuai goes to the sea to try his new yurt with his beautiful rich girlfriend; a Diaosi goes to a cheap local snack for dinner, while a Gao Fu Shuai goes to a fancy restaurant; after dinner, the Diaosi goes back to his rented shared room and starts to play online games, while the Gao Fu Shuai goes to the gym or a bar; at midnight, the Diaosi is watching porn films downloaded from the Internet for free and masturbates, while the Gao Fu Shuai is spending time with a Bai Fu Mei, or a ‘Goddess’. This kind of description of a Diaosi and a Gao Fu Shuai’s life usually comes with pictures as in Figure 5.4:



What a Gao Fu Shuai looks like



What a Diaosi looks like

¹⁵⁷ See footnote 95.

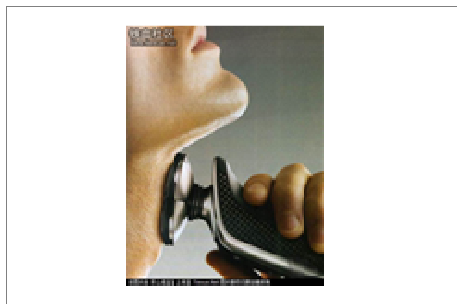
¹⁵⁸ See more about this post at <http://tieba.baidu.com/p/2653074448>, retrieved 21 March 2015.



A Gao Fu Shuai at 8:15 in the morning



A Diaosi at 8:15 in the morning



A Gao Fu Shuai at 8:30



A Diaosi at 8:30



A Gao Fu Shuai at 8:45



A Diaosi at 8:45



A Gao Fu Shuai at 9:00



A Diaosi at 9:00



A Gao Fu Shuai at 9:10, saying good morning to all his girlfriends



A Diaosi at 9:10, getting up



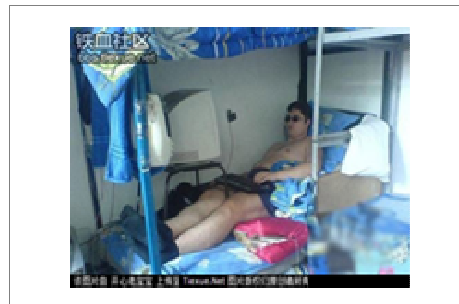
A Gao Fu Shuai at 9:20, driving to work



A Diaosi at 9:20, having breakfast



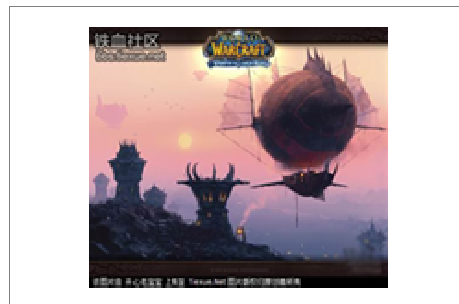
A Gao Fu Shuai at 10:00, having breakfast



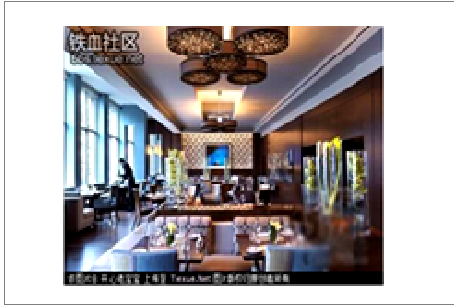
A Diaosi at 10:00, starting surfing online



A Gao Fu Shuai at 11:00, shopping in brand stores



A Diaosi at 11:00, starting playing games



A Gao Fu Shuai at 12:00, self-service lunch



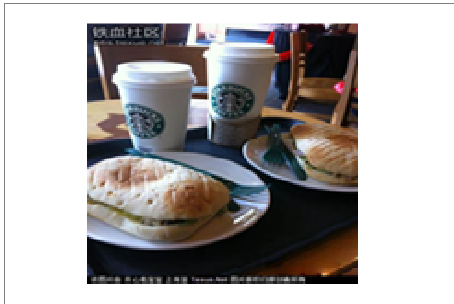
A Diaosi at 12:00, lunch



A Gao Fu Shuai at 13:00, watching a Hollywood movie in his office



A Diaosi at 13:00, watching a Chinese heart-breaking movie



A Gao Fu Shuai at 14:30, afternoon tea



A Diaosi at 14:30, green tea



A Gao Fu Shuai at 18:00, dinner



A Diaosi at 18:00, dinner



Figure 5.3: A day for a Gao Fu Shuai and a Diaosi

(source: <http://bbs.tiexue.net/bbs268-0-1.html>, retrieved 23 March 2014)

As illustrated above, in Diaosi discourses, what Diaosi have adopted to describe their consumption style are things that Gao Fu Shuai would never choose. This indicates a ‘self-othering’ conducted by Diaosi when confronting Gao Fu Shuai in terms of consumption and life style. This is interpreted by Tong Ming as follows: “The low-status responding to the high-status, the weak resisting the powerful; using shadow’s language to mock the grandness and brightness of sunlight, to vent resentment through vulgar complaints” (Tong Ming 2013: np).

Although to some degree, Diaosi’s ‘self-othering’ is a have-to choice; it is already an articulation of protest against the social class inequality. Diaosi attempt to distinguish themselves from the higher class where Gao Fu Shuai come and achieve self-marginalization. In an interview with me, a netizen who identifies with Diaosi described the style of Diaosi discourses as “showing by emphasizing the antonym of the language used to describe high status youth that you don’t agree with what’s going on right now” (Fieldwork notes, 2 May 2014).

5.1.3 Consumption-oriented

In Diaosi discourse, when taking Gao Fu Shuai as the opponent of Diaosi, the three defining adjectives, i.e. 'gao', 'fu' and 'shuai' – literally 'tall', 'rich' and 'handsome', are not equal in a semantic sense. As interpreted by Cao Yifan (2013), 'tall' and 'handsome' are in fact the exhibition or semantic extension of 'rich', and 'being rich' is the basic condition for being a Gao Fu Shuai. According to the same logic, 'being poor' is the real reason for the Diaosi's miserable life and emotional frustration, at least as indicated in Diaosi discourses. In all online Diaosi stories, because they are poor, they are not charming, and not attractive to beautiful girls. In a word, being poor is the root of their position in life as a loser. They see their embarrassing consumption position as an inherited defect. Because of their felt economic humbleness, they despise themselves and describe and exaggerate their feeling of inferiority through Diaosi discourses.

As already illustrated by Figure 5.3, Diaosi discourses are basically a remix of fragmented pictures that are cut conveniently from various corners of the Internet, which in total presents a bricolage of products that are flooding in today's Chinese market – clothing, drinks, meals, means of transportation, movies, pop music, pastimes and so on. They are appropriated from "an existing market of artifacts" and used "in a form of collage which recreates group identity and promotes mutual recognition for members" (Brake 1980: 15) as well as recognition of those not involved in the subculture in question.

Chinese youth have a very good knowledge of consuming due to the viral development of commercialism since the beginning of the period of reform, which started in 1978. In the past two decades, the consumption structure in China has undergone great changes. With Chinese society becoming increasingly commercialized and the social population being more stratified, multi-layered consumption publics have been formulated whose demand for consumption is becoming increasingly diversified. There are luxury consumption styles, exemplified by the upper class showing off their wealth and social status through the luxury consumption of items beyond practical use. There is also a tendency of the formation of non-mainstream, non-elite consumption 'publics', who can only afford to purchase copycat brands or cheap products. The Diaosi are one of these non-elite consumption publics.

When the vast and increasingly globalized Chinese market has provided the possibility and resources for Diaosi to construct alternative consumption norms to distinguish themselves from other classes, especially the upper-class youths, i.e. Gao Fu Shuai, what Diaosi choose to employ in their discourses is the opposite of what the Gao Fu Shuai may choose, although sometimes they might even be able to afford some real luxury brands. Diaosi manage to build up their consumption norms out of the cheap brands. In Diaosi discourses, electronic fragments of these products have helped them to compose their own style as well as a symbolic distance from, boundary with and even resistance to Gao Fu Shuai by choosing whatever Gao Fu Shuai would not regard as meaningful and worthy.

5.1.4 Self-belittling erotica

Diaosi discourses are also characterized by their erotic content. In their stories containing females, Diaosi always display a self-belittling attitude and resign themselves to adversity in their imagined relationships.

Online Diaosi discourses usually end with the Diaosi's baffled sexual illusion. The vocabulary of Diaosi includes a series of words relating to sex. The term Diaosi per se, as explained at the beginning of this chapter, literally means 'pubic hair'. Also already mentioned earlier is the term Mu Er (木耳, 'cloud ear fungus'¹⁵⁹), more specifically, Fen Mu Er (粉木耳, 'pink fungus') referring to young beautiful girls, and Hei Mu Er (黑木耳, 'black fungus') referring to old ugly females. There are also two verbs which are frequently used in Diaosi discourses to describe sexual activity, i.e. Papapa (啪啪啪, 'imitating the sound of love-making') and Lu (撸, 'masturbate'). Papapa in Diaosi discourse means having real sex with a girl, and Lu refers to having sex alone. Papapa is regarded as an accidental bonus, but Lu is thought as the routine and normal sex life for a Diaosi. Sometimes they call themselves Lu Se Er (撸瑟儿), a Chinese homophone for English word 'loser', which indicates the sexual anxiety and desperation that Diaosi have been suffering. In the ten criteria of Diaosi as listed at the beginning of this chapter, there is an item saying that they seldom go out, but stay at home and 'use a lot of tissues'. This implies that most Diaosi depend on masturbation rather than dating to release their sexual desire.

According to a discussion in zhidao.baidu.com, when Diaosi get together online, the way they talk about women is quite different from the Gao Fu Shuai. Gao Fu Shuai talk about how many women they have slept with, while Diaosi always talk about women they meet on the Internet. The following conversation is quite typical in Diaosi discourses:

Diaosi A: I managed to download a movie of Sora Aoi (a Japanese porn star), haha~

Diaosi B: Really?! Send me the link, and I will Lu (masturbate) tonight.¹⁶⁰

During this online conversation, a favorite bar of Diaosi, Hei Si Bar (黑丝吧, 'black lace bar'¹⁶¹) is mentioned, confirming the idea that Diaosi are single, and like masturbating while looking at the pictures in this bar. The Japanese pornographic actress and model Sora Aoi as mentioned in the above conversation between Diaosi A and Diaosi B, is also closely connected with China's Diaosi culture. Sora Aoi is said to be the most famous Japanese person in China which indicates her popularity among a large young population in China. She has over 16 million followers on China's Sina Weibo until 24 September 2014.

¹⁵⁹ See footnote 95.

¹⁶⁰ http://zhidao.baidu.com/link?url=HfSKvMzsS7eGYjUax2EMeK2gN9Nc6MyQynomKfdxjwLMEw7WKbkTOWKeyHZstbGcKKLPiOGTw9vFPpPJM9tRABsJhMcVaFMO_eRbEt0JOqK, retrieved 22 February 2014.

¹⁶¹ http://zhidao.baidu.com/link?url=HfSKvMzsS7eGYjUax2EMeK2gN9Nc6MyQynomKfdxjwLMEw7WKbkTOWKeyHZstbGcKKLPiOGTw9vFPpPJM9tRABsJhMcVaFMO_eRbEt0JOqK, retrieved 8 January 2014.

Sora Aoi's big international breakthrough came in 2010 when she began connecting with Chinese fans through Twitter and Sina Weibo with the help of translation software. Despite porn being illegal in Mainland China, she quickly found that she had millions of fans in the country, who knew of her through the Internet or under-the-table DVD sales. Most of her followers are young precariat, Diaosi (Jingdidashi 2013). They do not just remain there silently but have a very positive interaction with Sora Aoi. As a token of gratitude, Sora Aoi pays great attention and sympathizes a lot with her Diaosi fans. For example when college Diaosi were facing exams, she wrote a calligraphy 'no fail' (不挂科), or 'success with the postgraduate exam' as shown in Figure 5.4:



Figure 5.4: Sora Aoi wishing her fans success in exams on Sina Weibo
(source: <http://www.weibo.com/u/1739928273>, retrieved 1 March 2014)

When many netizens complained to her about their frustration, to comfort and encourage them, she wrote a famous piece of calligraphy work: 'Don't cry, Diaosi, you can just stand up and jerk off while looking at me' (屌丝不哭，看着我撸) (see Figure 5.5).



Figure 5.5: Sora Aoi encouraging her fans with calligraphy on Sina Weibo
(source: <http://www.weibo.com/u/1739928273>, retrieved 28 October 2014)

In Diaosi discourses, Diaosi hardly have the opportunity to date a Bai Fu Mei, a Nv Shen, or a Fen Mu Er, and are always been humiliated by Gao Fu Shuai who can easily date and dump Bai Fu Mei. These beautiful girls, while trying their best to please Gao Fu Shuai,

always order Diaosi around at will, disrespectfully requesting them to do anything for them. For example, in a piece of Diaosi discourse, a Diaosi narrates the following:

When I chatted with this Goddess online, she usually brushed me off by saying ‘Oh,’ or ‘I am gonna take a bath.’ But one day, the Goddess surprisingly took the initiative to speak with me and requested me to accompany her the next day to the hospital to have an abortion. She said, ‘I’m pregnant and you accompany me to the hospital tomorrow. After that, maybe I will consider accepting you as my boyfriend.’ I spent about five minutes constructing various sentences to refuse her. But at the last moment, I deleted all these sentences and only said: ‘Well, I will go with you tomorrow.’¹⁶²

In Diaosi discourses, a typical Diaosi is assumed to be single and will date no more than three girlfriends before getting married. They are in an inherently disadvantageous position in a relationship. The following is a quote from a conversation between a Fen Mu Er (‘a young beautiful girl’) and a Gao Fu Shuai, followed by a conversation of the same girl with a Diaosi.¹⁶³

The conversation between a Gao Fu Shuai and a Fen Mu Er:

Fen Mu Er: Hi.
Gao Fu Shuai: Go ahead.
Fen Mu Er: You have not called me for almost two weeks. How about having dinner together?
Gao Fu Shuai: We will see.
Fen Mu Er: I am in safe period now, and I can stay at your place tonight.
GaoFuShuai: Ok. Take a shower and I will pick you up soon.
Fen Mu Er: Ok. Kiss.

The conversation between Diaosi and Hei Mu Er:

Diaosi: Hi.
Fen Mu Er: What’s up?
Diaosi: How about having dinner together?
Fen Mu Er: What kind of dinner?
Diaosi: There is a new rice noodle restaurant around my place. And it is good.
Fen Mu Er: (No response)
Diaosi: ?

¹⁶² <http://tieba.baidu.com/p/2061277977>, retrieved 16 April 2014.

¹⁶³ Translated from http://www.kaixin001.com/repaste/2418343_6954017017.html, retrieved 28 June 2014.

10 minutes later...

- Diaosi:* Or maybe we go to Hanfutai (a restaurant of South Korean style, 98 yuan for a dish)?
- Fen Mu Er:* Sorry, I got logged off just now. What time is ok with you?
- Diaosi:* What time is ok with you?
- Fen Mu Er:* I have no idea. Or maybe I can call you later.
- Diaosi:* Of course.
- Fen Mu Er:* I am going for a shower. Talk to you later.

Half an hour later...

- Diaosi:* Not finished yet?
- Fen Mu Er:* I am done (Actually, she did not take the shower at all).
- Diaosi:* Is it possible that you don't go back home after dinner?
- Fen Mu Er:* No way. I am always under my mum's eyes.

In the Diaosi's mind, the Goddess is unapproachable, and he will never have her. The only possible way to have a connection with her is to be her punching bag and the emotional healer. This is exemplified in Diaosi discourses by plots such as 'being forced to accompany her for abortion' as illustrated above and possibly becoming someone else's kid's father.

When Diaosi are frustrated in their relationship with a Goddess, the only way they vent their sexual frustration is self-indulgence through porn and masturbation when they are alone. Diaosi continuously demonstrate and emphasize their sympathetic and tragic position by narrating and displaying their emotional injuries. In their discourse, impotence is a physical reflection of their frustrating emotional experiences. In Diaosi discourses, Diaosi are not shy in describing themselves as impotent. This seems to be an attempt to set up a homology between impotence and their low social status and humble economic condition. The former dispels masculinity, and helps Diaosi to achieve the physical confirmation for being a loser, while the latter is usually seen by Diaosi as the real reason for their position as losers. Obviously, in Diaosi discourses, the authors are used to attributing the loss of masculinity to their disadvantageous economic conditions. In fact, the disadvantageous position of Diaosi in an imagined relationship in online Diaosi discourses is an imaginary representation of Diaosi's situation of being underclass and poor. By connecting their situation of being poor and their frustration in dealing with the pressure of achieving a possible relationship with a Goddess, Diaosi seem to argue that their striving for genuine love is much more reliable compared to Gao Fu Shuai's, who, in Diaosi discourses, always play with girls. So, it is a complicated picture within the Diaosi's emotional world, which is full of contradiction. On the one hand, Diaosi are tender, tolerant and compromising to the girls they like; on the other hand, they also hate the girls whose love is motivated by money. At the same time, they also

point a moral sword towards Gao Fu Shuai, which is quite offensive and critical. The following are some Diaosi discourses that can explain the mindset of Diaosi in a relationship.

Discourse 1

When we had dinner together, we liked to watch those well-dressed and heavily made-up girls, and discussed how many times they had been raped and then dumped by those rich people. No one can imagine our pleasure doing this.¹⁶⁴

Discourse 2

This normal-looking woman did not bother to look at me, but she could not wait to throw herself into a Gao Fu Shuai's arms when he gave her a call. Finally, he got tired of her and dumped her like worn clothes. And then she came to me. Did she think that I would accept her? No, I would only spend one night with her.¹⁶⁵

It is clear as illustrated above, in Diaosi discourses, the female are all presented as superficial and materialistic. Diaosi are so eager to have them but also hate them. In Diaosi discourses involving relationships, money and sex are the only two key words. Diaosi mock the relationship motivated by money and desire, indulging themselves into imaginary online sex illusion and masturbation due to their inherited disadvantageous economic situation, which they find will never allow them to have satisfying relationships.

5.1.5 Nixi, the illusion of Diaosi's counterattack

When Diaosi are narrating their miserable life in a self-deprecating manner, they never give up the hope of remodeling their life and becoming a winner, even if only by imagination. Therefore, in Diaosi discourses, besides complaints and self-deprecating, there are also discourses reflecting their hopes and dreams. On a website particularly catering for Diaosi (<http://www.diaosigu.com/>), the homepage logo states: "we reticulate ourselves and are reticulated... but we always trust our ability and sincerity."¹⁶⁶

This helps us to understand the phenomenon that Diaosi are attracted to stories of society's underclass achieving success against the odds, and explains why Han Han, a well-known writer and blogger, is accepted and adored as the role model for Diaosi. This also explains why Nixi, the Diaosi's counterattack, becomes a heroic term in Diaosi discourses. Diaosi are often mocked by others or by themselves for being daydreamers with poor social skills and an obsession with porn and online gaming. However, it is exactly from this online gaming, that Diaosi obtained the inspiration to settle problems they encounter in reality by imagining plots of successful Nixi (counterattacks).

¹⁶⁴ <http://www.douban.com/group/topic/33780863/>, retrieved 18 August 2014.

¹⁶⁵ <http://www.douban.com/group/topic/33780863/>, retrieved 6 September 2014.

¹⁶⁶ See more about this website at <http://www.diaosigu.com/>, retrieved 17 September 2014.

Nixi (逆袭) is the Chinese pronunciation of the Japanese word 逆袭 (gyakushuu), which means ‘counterattack’. Initially, it is used in gaming and refers to unusual offensive behavior or successful counterattacking during adversity. This kind of counterattack is different from the normal attacks in online gaming. In normal attacks, the game players launch attacks on an NPC (Non Player Character); but in a counterattack, it is the NPC launching attacks on communities where human players get together. This type of attack is usually given as a bonus to players on some holiday promotion by the gaming company.

Since the popularity of Diaosi and the introduction of Nixi into Diaosi discourses, the meaning of Nixi has also changed. It refers to hard-won success of Diaosi, which means people who were previously poor, ugly and foolish becoming the winners – after fighting, a nobody who becomes a somebody. It means a successful counterattack in adversity, turning negative into positive and changing one’s fate through efforts. However, it wasn’t until China’s young men were divided into the Diaosi and their natural enemies Gao Fu Shuai that Nixi went nation-wide, with many Diaosi being eager to sign up to what they called Diaosi Nixi campaigns. This brave attempt to fight back lists the typical merits of a Diaosi (loyalty, honesty, diligence), and gives pointers for conquering a Bai Fu Mei.

Online Nixi stories are heterogeneous in terms of genres. There are invented Nixi novels or movies circulating on the Internet. The story line of Nixi novels and movies is characterized by Diaosi fighting back successfully despite their disadvantages. In particular, they identify the Hollywood movie *Titanic* as an allegory for young Chinese men who are locked out of suitable opportunities due to their birth status. They identify with Jack¹⁶⁷ as a Diaosi who becomes a heroic figure.

A famous example of Diaosi Nixi discourse is an online micro-movie titled *Diaoxi Nixi*, launched by Li Yi (see above), the former Chinese national soccer-team player, who is also regarded as the founder of Diaosi culture, whose Baidu Li Yi Bar is the place where Diaosi as a meme started. *Diaoxi Nixi* tells a story about a low status young man without a car or house, who finally manages to win the love of a Bai Fu Mei after his indomitable efforts.¹⁶⁸

There are also Nixi stories based on real social events. For example, the protagonist of a recent Diaosi Nixi story inspired the entire community: a driver working for a billionaire in Zhejiang Province married his boss’ widow, whose inheritance was valued at 1.9 billion yuan.¹⁶⁹ Although one must admit, this story demonstrates an abnormal way of Diaosi’s counterattack.

Some opportunities for Diaosi Nixi sound more like bitter jokes, as for instance this post that went viral on the Internet.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁷ Jack is the main character of the movie *Titanic*. He is a poor artist, lower class but romantic, honest and bright. Which is why a rich, beautiful young woman, Rose falls in love with him despite his background.

¹⁶⁸ See more at <http://baike.baidu.com/subview/8546771/11101548.htm>, retrieved 14 January 2015.

¹⁶⁹ <http://www.aiweibang.com/yuedu/yule/22973816.html>, retrieved 17 July 2015.

¹⁷⁰ <http://www.baike.com/wiki/%E6%8D%90%E7%B2%BE%E8%B4%AD%E6%88%BF>, retrieved 19 June 2015.

In Beijing, donating sperm 208 times can make enough money for the down payment of a new house in the second most expensive city in the nation. Sperm banks in all the cities report an emergency! It is the time for Diaosi to counterattack! An iPhone is not a big deal anymore! If a man donates sperm 208 times, he can get 620 thousand Yuan, which is enough for the down payment of a 100 square meter house of average price in Beijing! In such situation, buying a house is not that difficult for a man!

Another type of popular posts describes a Diaosi's real story of Nixi. On 11 June 2012 a man spent 100 thousand yuan on ads on the homepage of Mop¹⁷¹ with the message "Wu Qian, now I have what you wanted before!" just to show off his recently attained richness to his ex-girlfriend. He said that he still had another 200 thousand. It illustrates that losers can finally have their day.¹⁷²

A similar story is about a middle-school graduate, who did not pass the national exam and had to work in a factory due to the poverty of his family. He started as apprentice and never stopped learning no matter how difficult the working situation was. And finally he became a manager in a world-top 500-company.¹⁷³

A Weibo celebrity as well as a pop icon, Feng Xiao Gang once criticized the usage of Diaosi in public discourses by saying that those who call themselves Diaosi are the 'brain-damaged' group. This offended many Diaosi. A member refuted Feng with various arguments, one of which was, as quoted by Linda Chen (2013): Diaosi has a positive and upbeat meaning, which gave rise to the phrase Diaosi Nixi. Only those who want to counterattack are true Diaosi. In this sense, the heroes of the last two stories of Diaosi Nixi I described above can be called true Diaosi because they are ambitious enough to make amazing progress in their careers through their own efforts. However, the question is: have they really completed the counterattack successfully? The young man who spent 100 thousand on ads at Mop said that he had another 200,000 yuan, which means that at that time he had earned about 300,000 yuan in total. According to Baike.Baidu.com, the average house price of the 20 leading cities in China in the year 2012 was 8500 yuan (about \$1267) per square meter; therefore this young man's savings were only enough for him to pay the down payment for the loan, i.e. 30% of the total cost of the house, if he wanted to buy an apartment of 100 square meters in a middle-level city. As for the young guy who finally worked himself up a big international company, if his high pay has to cover the mortgage on his house, his car, his children's education, and also his parents' medical care, just like many so-called middle-class people in China, as described in the first chapter, he cannot say with utmost certainty that he made it at all.

To summarize, if identifying with Diaosi collectively is the way to construct and enhance their group solidarity, counterattacks can be regarded as the virtual rehearsal of their attempt to make a change. No matter what stories they have gone through, Nixi

¹⁷¹ mop.com is the name of a Chinese bulletin board system (BBS), retrieved 2 June 2015.

¹⁷² http://www.33lc.com/content_183-3062-1_1.html, retrieved 15 September 2014.

¹⁷³ <http://www.e521.com/zcqp/zcgs/278682.shtml>, retrieved 1 October 2014.

have not really changed the Diaosi's fate yet and all may remain a daydream and wishful thinking for quite a long time given the harsh reality of today's China.

5.2 Getting Diaosi offline

To recap what has been discussed so far, the term Diaosi originated as an insult for a poor, unattractive young person who stayed at home all day playing video games, with dim prospects for the future – in other words, an image of a loser. As the term went viral on the Internet, Chinese youth from all backgrounds began to embrace it. It has become a self-deprecating countering to the young people with high social status, success, and bright futures. The number of people who refer to themselves as Diaosi has continued to grow, and it is slowly transforming into an online subculture. Is Diaosi a totally virtual phenomenon and an imagined image without connection with offline China? Or is it a reflection of the new development of China's social reality? If so, who are the people identifying with Diaosi? And what are their offline experiences?

According to a comprehensive report jointly compiled by an online gaming project, *youxiashijie*, and a survey company *Yi Guan Today*, in April 2013, some 526 million young people across the country openly considered themselves to be 'losers' or Diaosi.¹⁷⁴

All this indicates that the emergence of Diaosi on the Internet has a profound social class origin in Chinese society. Only by exploring the social context of this online phenomenon, the meaning of Diaosi can be fully interpreted.

When studying Diaosi offline it is crucial that we first define who identifies with the term in the first place. On a social level, experts see that many low-status, disaffected Chinese youths who face the same struggles, hardships and problems are attracted and feel related to the term Diaosi. As observed by Florcruz (2014), in reality, Diaosi are China's millennials. They are young, they are plugged into the online Diaosi culture, and they are a growing population. Even though they are employed, they are feeling left behind in capitalist China.

The Chinese precariat are the social group behind the online Diaosi phenomenon. And Diaosi can be a joint call for identity articulated by the Chinese precariat on the Internet. This connection between Diaosi and the precariat is also supported by statistical data reported in a study titled *Report on Diaosi's life 2014*¹⁷⁵ by Peking University's Market and Media Research Center. This was the first study of the term that delves into the actual conditions of life of Diaosi. This report depicts a profile of this young Chinese precariat group as 'self-aware, self-deprecating loser'. The survey that this report is based on was done in one month from September 1 to October 1, 2013, using a collection of 213,795 questionnaires with the respondents mainly being real users registered at ganji.com, a Craigslist-like top online and mobile-based information portal in China, covering more than 50 large, medium and small cities.

¹⁷⁴ <http://chanye.uuu9.com/2013/201304/284263.shtml>, retrieved 5 November 2014.

¹⁷⁵ <http://sta.ganji.com/att/project/20141103/index.html>, retrieved 28 July 2014.

The survey shows that 68.8% of the surveyed identify with Diaosi, which suggests that Diaosi do also exist in Chinese offline society rather than only online. The study found that people who identify with Diaosi are usually male between the ages of 21 and 25, or single female between ages 26 and 30, and the percentage of highly educated Diaosi is apparently higher than those with a ninth-grade education or less. These results suggest that Diaosi is basically composed of educated young people.

The study also shows that Diaosi are salaried employees or remuneratively employed, do work for a living but nevertheless making ends meet. With little savings, they are struggling to establish themselves economically and socially. Their average income is 2,917.7 yuan (equivalent to about \$435) a month with 76.3% of them earning a salary below 3000 yuan, while the official monthly average income in Beijing stood at 5,793 yuan (about \$864) in 2013.¹⁷⁶ This shows that Diaosi are comparatively poor just as they are described in various online Diaosi discourses.

As to their jobs, according to this survey, most Diaosi are working in junior positions; 41% of them rely on the Internet to find a job, and most of them change jobs every three years. Employees of private enterprises and the self-employed are more likely to claim the self-mocking title than employees of state-owned enterprises and government units. These results indicate the precariousness that Diaosi suffer in their employment: underemployment, informal short-term contracts, low-paying jobs, and labor market mismatch.

According to this study, half of the Diaosi have to work overtime and almost 60% of them do not get paid for it. Most of them are frustrated in trying to construct a local social network. Nearly 75% of those who identified with (or identify themselves as) Diaosi lived far from their hometowns, with many of them pursuing higher-paid jobs, and the reason given why they left was mainly making money to send back home to their family; 71% of those surveyed said they sent part of their wages back home. They are living a very simple life, with cost of meals less than 39 yuan, and 7.8% of them try to keep the cost of meals under 10 yuan per day; half of them pay less than 500 yuan for rent. They give an average of 1,076.7 yuan to their parents monthly, taking up 36.9% of their average income. Those with children invest almost all income in their offspring, with a monthly average of 2,639.7 yuan. These results show various pressures Diaosi are experiencing, for instance work pressure, financial pressure, family pressure, social networking pressure, and so on.

This study said that working and making money occupies most of the Diaosi's time. It is a luxury for most Diaosi to have a vacation; 54.2% of the Diaosi only spend 500 yuan on vacation. Most of the time, they prefer staying at home. They choose to shop online, to socialize online and online games are their favorite pastime. This result indicates that the main part of Diaosi are Internet savvy.

This study also found that other social groups make a lot more money than Diaosi do, leaving the Diaosi trailing in the race to get married. Socially, Diaosi hold the reputation

¹⁷⁶ See the statistics by Beijing Statistics Bureau published at <http://www.chinairn.com/news/20140607/172211517.shtml>, retrieved 28 May 2015.

of being perpetually single. A repercussion of trying to stay afloat economically, work leaves little time for a social life. Potentially related to this, emotional or mental problems have also been linked to the Diaosi, with 37.8% of respondents believing they have some sort of undiagnosed mental disorder, with many of them turning to alcohol to cope. This result shows the anomie, and other negative feelings that the precariat suffer from an increasingly capitalist and commercialized society.

As shown by the results of this study, Diaosi in offline China share similar life experiences with the Chinese precariat, and have all the defining features of the Chinese precariat as reviewed in Chapter 1. First, they are suffering from employment insecurity. As educated young, they usually work on informal contracts and are constantly frustrated by various forms of inadequate employment. Secondly, according to this study, most Diaosi are foreign to the city where they stay. With a humble salary and no savings, it is difficult for them to buy a house and sustain the consumption level of the average middle-class. This has caused the Diaosi's anxiety related to consumption. In a country where every aspect of life increasingly tends to be defined by norms of consumption, when their income and social rights cannot provide what they are supposed to consume, they feel anxious.

As Liu Xiting (2012) observed, in a new consumer society like China, what frustrates the underclass young is "the exclusion from a 'normal life', the failure to meet the criteria, and the feeling of shame and guilt" (Liu Xiting 2012: np).

In this study, several results point at the high pressure that Diaosi are going through. The precariousness plus high life pressures resulting from working, family, relationships, and social networking, leads to the four A's (cf. Chapter 1) that are typically experienced by the Chinese precariat: anxiety, anomie, alienation and anger.

While Diaosi as a label sounds like nothing to brag about, it has become a popular moniker that has established itself as a cultural trend. Many who identify with it, say they aren't depressed about it. Instead, they have humble attitudes and enjoy the perceived no-frills, down-to-earth air that comes with being a Diaosi, but do not actually think they are losers (Floracruz 2014: np).

Li Xia, a coauthor of the report, argued that the connotation of Diaosi has expanded from a group label to a mindset.¹⁷⁷ According to Li Xia, the popularity of the phrase is something more than self-deprecation. The emergence of the Diaosi group is a result of fast-speed urbanization and industrialization in China in which the stronger vested interest groups have posed as a block, leaving little space for the grassroots to move upward through the social ladder.

The Diaosi report reveals the current living conditions of a certain group in society from many perspectives, such as family, job, leisure, health and consumption. After the report was shared online by the news portal NetEase, several commenters found themselves identifying. "My base pay is 5000, including commission, I make 100K a year, yet I still feel like I am a Diaosi," one commenter wrote, according to the news-blog

¹⁷⁷ See more about Li Xia's comments about Diaosi at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-10/31/content_18837756.htm, retrieved 4 October 2015.

ChinaSmack. “With overwhelming stress, without a house or car, and not daring to buy them, scrimping and saving where I can in my spending, so much that I even think I’ve developed clinical depression.” After reading this report, “all of China collapsed in tears in the bathroom,” another commenter added.¹⁷⁸

From September 29 to October 7, 2012, CCTV did a survey on the street, themed as ‘Are you happy?’ 52.7% of male young precariat (Diaosi) surveyed believe that they are not happy; female Diaosi are better off, 48.1% of them are not happy. Especially Diaosi aged 25-30 are the unhappy group. In addition to the pressure from work, they are also struggling in dating and getting married and other life pressures.¹⁷⁹

5.3 Diaosi is not the same as the precariat

When the precariat is the social group behind the Diaosi culture, the latter is best seen as a stereotype, made up of emblematic features which, by degrees, fit the real members of the community, with some members being ‘maximally’ Diaosi while others only fit the frame to some extent (cf. Agha 2007). Diaosi, as an imagined stereotype, allows the precariat to handle their collectively felt frustrations caused by an increasingly rigid and unequal society. While the imagined Diaosi and the real precariat are presented as sharing many basic life experiences (of which we saw examples above), they differ in their attitude when facing their life dilemmas. While Diaosi are typically constructed as wretched losers who are good at self-belittling confronted with Gao Fu Shuai and tend to give in without any resistance, the real precariat in offline China are displaying at least an unyielding attitude. For example, Lian Si (2009) quoted the statements of the ‘Ant Tribe’ (cf. Chapter 3) – the educated precariat: ‘I don’t regard myself as a loser, I am just not successful yet.’ Lian Si (2009) found that they are the most sensitive group in China: energetic and idealistic. Higher education provides them with knowledge and ambition, as well as a bright future. Although reality after graduation set their dreams back, they are ready to endure the precariousness and frustration hoping for a better future. Lian Si and his colleagues also found that this group is very sensitive to social issues, and have a strong capacity to act. They are the main participants of online social activities, and their participation is conducted at a very low cost. When they encounter injustice, they usually choose the Internet to disclose the issue and then obtain support from the society.

Sometimes, their resistance is violent and tragic. A typical example of this is the story of a precariat named Luo Lian.¹⁸⁰ Luo Lian was a migrant worker in Fo Shan city, Guang Dong province and went missing on 14 September 2008. Luo Lian grew up in a village in

¹⁷⁸ See more at <http://www.chinasmack.com/2014/stories/diaosi-pekings-university-releases-report-on-chinas-losers.html>, retrieved 4 June 2015.

¹⁷⁹ See at <http://edu.sina.com.cn/en/2014-10-31/150583160.shtml>, retrieved 2 July 2015.

¹⁸⁰ See more about Luo Lian at http://wapbaike.baidu.com/view/4257933.htm?fr=aladdin&ref=wiseandssid=0&from=1013377a&uid=0&pu=usm@0,sz@1320_1004,ta@iphone_2_4.4_18_andbd_page_type=1&bauid=C990FEDBEE107031EB9328FAD453F538&ntj=bk_polysemy_1_0_10_11, retrieved 17 October 2015.

Hunan province. After completing secondary school, he had decided not to take the college entrance examination, but followed his older sister into the heart of the manufacturing industry in Guangdong province. Over the course of two years, he worked in different factories but he always stayed in the city of Fo Shan. Luo Lian left a slip of paper in his dormitory copied from the Daoist foundational text, the Zhuangzi:

For the while of one's life, one toils, yet never sees the fruits of one's labor. To be exhausted and without a refuge, to fear poverty and not have an escape, to crave success and be denied its fulfilment, to have no career and no way to support one's parents, is that not a great sorrow? People say, 'It is not death' but is that an advantage?

For two months, nobody besides his sister and a few workmates even knew he was missing. Young people just like him can be found all over the Pearl River Delta – workers on the assembly line whose facial features are blurred and whose comings and goings go unnoticed. He was a quiet migrant worker who had never gone to university and who contemplated the Zhuangzi in his free time. When life was tough, he used to copy quotations from it and other books into his journal: "The earth is generous and loving and so should act a noble person, with virtuous actions and an appreciation for all beings" and "life is great because of dreams, changed because of study, and successful because of action."

Even though nobody knew much about him, they called him a dreamer because of the quotations in his journal. As a result, the fate of twenty-four-year-old Luo Lian is filled with symbolism. He was a humble migrant worker who came to the city looking for hope; an idealistic youth trying to resist reality. His fate signifies that the opportunities for someone to change their destiny are diminishing and that idealism will inevitably fail. It also symbolizes the vulnerability of individuals who have nothing to rely on and no one to confide in.

In economically capitalist China, the gap between rich and poor is widening and the distribution of benefits is less and less fluid. At the same time that social mobility is weakening, society's values are becoming more and more homogenized. As material wealth becomes the exclusive measuring stick for success, everyone competes on a perilous, narrow wooden bridge. Social systems are becoming dehumanized. As a result, individuals cannot express themselves, and, most of all, they do not know how to protect themselves. As the world becomes more and more materialistic, people find that they no longer have space in their heads to think about spiritual things.

His melancholy and defeat represent the feelings of a large group of people, i.e. the precariat, and he has become a symbol of depression and disillusionment for society. However, Luo Lian's case demonstrates another relationship between the fate of the precariat and the fate of society as a whole. When confronting their fate, the desperate precariat individual is not likely to give in, but would resist, even in an extreme manner.

From the educated 'Ant Tribe' to the migrant worker Luo Lian, their mind set seems different from what is demonstrated in online Diaosi discourses. The former is unyielding

in its resistance, but the latter is more about self-belittling and surrender. The real practice could be described as follows: Diaosi gather online, licking their wounds in the corner, composing some lonely stories, by which, intentionally or unintentionally, they disclose their precarious life experiences (Tong Ming 2013).

5.4 Diaosi as a structure of feeling

5.4.1 Diaosi is neither a counter-public nor a psychological malaise

Since 1989, international media have flirted with dozens of incipient 'next Tiananmens' – some, like the rise of social media, have had major effects on Chinese society, while others, like Ai Weiwei and the 'Jasmine Revolution', have proved to be little more than wishful thinking. To a great extent, China analysts have become jaded about disaffected youth stories.

The Diaosi phenomenon has not led to on-the-ground protest of any sort, let alone one on the scale of a movement such as Occupy Wall Street. In other words, the disaffected youth behind Diaosi discourses are not yet qualified to be called a counter-public.

Some commentators such as the author Tan Shanshan (2012) have compared the Diaosi to the author Lu Xun's legendary 'loser', Ah Q. Lu Xun's novel *Ah Q* traces the 'adventures' of Ah Q, a rural peasant in the late Qin and early Republic, i.e. around 1911 with little education and no steady occupation. Ah Q is famous for his 'spiritual victories', Lu Xun's euphemism for self-conviction and self-deception even when faced with extreme defeat or humiliation.

Despite both Ah Q and Diaosi functioning as a symbol of a loser, there are significant social differences between them as argued by Szablewicz: first, Lu Xun's Ah Q refused to embrace reality and deceived himself into thinking that all of his humiliations and defeats are actually victories. The Diaosi accept their inferior fate. While Gao Fu Shuai brag and boast about their successes, Diaosi just bend down, grinning and admitting defeat. Second, the townspeople for whom Ah Q works in the novel, such as the rich Mr. Chao, are also pitiable in the eyes of Lu Xun. According to Lu Xun, the rich townspeople are not the dominant class, representing only another faction of low-status Chinese society, but enjoy persecuting the weaker and more inferior members of the hierarchy. For Lu Xun, both Ah Q and the townspeople were indicative of a mental malaise affecting the people of China (Szablewicz 2014). But in Diaosi discourse, the tension between Gao Fu Shuai and Diaosi has to do with the inequality in power allocation between the privileged groups and under-class, and stagnated social mobility. Szablewicz (2014) further pointed out another crucial difference between Ah Q and Diaosi: Ah Q is depicted as a cowardly senseless individual who was blind to his low status and finally died without any social impact, except for occasionally featuring as a topic for an after-dinner joke. Diaosi, on the other hand, emerged out of a vibrant Internet culture that is sharply attuned to and

critical of what happens in Chinese society. The Internet has provided the space as well as the communication means for Diaosi to unite at least online to form their imagined community, and there between them, a shared structure of feeling is constructed. In this sense, Diaosi is far more significant as a societal phenomenon than the social psychological malaise of Ah Q's 'spiritual victories'.

5.4.2 Diaosi is a structure of feeling

When being interpreted as the representation of the precariat's spiritual and cultural life and the social reality it is based on, the historical legitimacy of Diaosi culture can be proved by the fact that it has constructed a shared structure of feeling for the Chinese precariat. Therefore, rather than regarding Diaosi as a counter-public or a psychological malaise, I follow Szablewicz (2014) in regarding Diaosi as a structure of feeling among the Chinese precariat.

Raymond Williams (1961, 1977) first used the concept 'structure of feeling' to characterize the lived experience of the quality of life at a particular time and place. It is "as firm and definite as 'structure' suggests, yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible part of our activities" (Williams 1961: 64). The 'structure of feeling' suggests a common set of perceptions and values shared by a particular generation or a specific class, and is most clearly articulated in particular cultural forms and conventions. He describes structures of feeling as 'social experiences in solution'. The Diaosi phenomenon would be one example of the structure of feeling that emerged in the precariat consciousness out of the proliferation of neo-liberalism in China. "Each generation lives and produces its own "structure of feeling," and while particular groups might express this most forcibly, it extends unevenly through the culture as a whole" (Bourne Taylor 1997: 1).

Diaosi characterizes the lived experiences of the life of a newly emerged precariat in China. First, it is firm and definite. Although Diaosi is often translated as 'loser' in English, my analysis so far insists on a distinction between a Chinese Diaosi and a 'loser'. My argument is: losers are responsible for their own lack of success, while Diaosi is the result of larger social conditions. No wonder then, that 'loser' remains an indisputably negative term, personal in its injury, while Diaosi is a true meme and a cultural phenomenon: dynamic, complex, and current, social rather than personal. Given its firmness, Diaosi is delineated by literary-style fictional online discourses and stories, delicate and virtual. Diaosi suggests perceived understanding of oneself and the society through creating and transmitting a particular meme. In what follows, I will describe the main features of Diaosi, and I shall start with the most overarching feature, one we also encountered in the previous chapter: the problematic place of consumerism.

The pressure of consumerism

Diaosi stories are closely linked to China's burgeoning consumer economy and Diaosi's obsession with new commodities. The image of Diaosi in online Diaosi discourses is

underprivileged people who lack many of the societal gifts that one must possess (good appearance, family background, a promising career or high social status) to become successful in today's China. However, these social gifts are exactly those which Gao Fu Shuai do have, and they demonstrate these gifts by living a luxurious, highly materialistic life: Western food, international brands, iPhone, fancy cars, vacation, gym, etc.; what Diaosi have is the opposite: low quality copycat products, cheap instant noodles, Xiaomi,¹⁸¹ online gaming, online porn, etc.

There are websites like RenRen that give users Diaosi scores and the criteria of the scores are based on what brands you use and what lifestyle you are living. While the Chinese brand Xiaomi is regarded as the cellphone particularly for Diaosias, as Ben Thompson (2015) notes in his article *Xiaomi's Ambition*, because Xiaomi's target consumer base is the young population of China, especially college students and young adults who just entered the workforce, there are also fierce debates about whether owning an iPhone makes one a fake Diaosi.¹⁸² The fact that owning an iPhone can be both an embarrassment as well as a prized possession reveals the consumption anxiety Diaosi are suffering from. When Diaosi discourses are packed with products, no matter what kind of brands they use, it already reveals the Diaosi's obsession or complex with consumerism.

The development of the market economy in China makes people pay more attention to wealth and money when measuring a person's success and value. The standards in the choice of a partner, which emphasize economic conditions and appearances (although not universal) easily give rise to a group sense of powerlessness or helplessness in the youth (Du Hanqi 2010). These consumerist stereotypes are amplified through mass media and circulated on the Internet, producing an unavoidable pressure for Diaosi. The circulation of a catch phrase 'I would rather cry in a BMW than smile on a bicycle' in the year 2000 is a typical example of this phenomenon. This catch phrase originated from Ma Nuo, a 20-year-old female contestant on the television show *Fei Cheng Wu Rao*.¹⁸³ The line was in response to a question by an unemployed suitor who asked if Ma would 'ride a bicycle with him' on a date. The series of events have been summed up in the media with the quip 'I would rather cry in a BMW than smile on a bicycle.'¹⁸⁴

The Diaosi's obsession with commodities illustrates how tightly notions of success are tied to acquisitive materialism. Liu Xiting (2012) analyzes the life of the precariat in China as follows: what 'new poor' means in a new consumer society is the exclusion from a 'normal life', the failure to meet the socially set criteria to become successful in life, as described earlier, and the feeling of shame and guilt for not achieving them. When a consumer society is trying hard to teach its members how to experience the new consumer life, the new poor are not only suffering from material poverty, but also the feeling of loss and deprivation.

¹⁸¹ Xiaomi Inc. is a privately owned Chinese electronics company headquartered in Beijing, China.

¹⁸² See <http://www.zhihu.com/question/20979033>, retrieved 27 July 2015.

¹⁸³ This show is the Chinese equivalent of the Western dating game show *Take Me Out*.

¹⁸⁴ See more at <http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-feeling-3273761-1.shtml>, retrieved 13 July 2015.

However, there are significant political possibilities offered in these seemingly rampant desires for the commodity form. These desires are significant not in the sense of the commodity form per se, but rather in a more general desire for socio-economic mobility as argued by Szablewicz (2014).

Aware of and frustrated by social inequality Zhu Chongke said in an interview by Jaycee Lui (2015), that the popularity of the word Diaosi is due to the fact that it was created by common people and thus resonates with a vast part of the population. Thus, the Diaosi phenomenon reflects not just a youth culture problem but larger social issues.

Diaosi is also a direct reflection and projection of social factors. The Diaosi's exclusion from China's burgeoning middle-class consumer culture is indicative of a growing awareness of income and resource inequality within urban China. According to an article *Disillusioned office workers – China's losers* (2014),¹⁸⁵ few Diaosi have chosen their station in life. Society has chosen it for them, especially with property prices climbing well beyond their reach. Several recent studies show that, while incomes across Chinese society continue to rise, social mobility has worsened. For example in the above mentioned article, an interviewee named Mr. Zhu insists that what makes him a Diaosi is the fact that he is the son of factory workers. He is not Erdai, the second generation of the rich or the powerful. He and his Diaosi colleagues feel that, with connections or cash, they might have attended a better university and found a better job.

According to this article, Mr. Zhu earns an after-tax income of nearly 60,000 yuan (about \$8,000) a year, but still he is among the lower wage earners at Zhang Jiang Hi-Tech Park in Shanghai. Like Mr. Zhu, many higher-wage earners call themselves Diaosi, or refer to themselves as 'IT laborers'. The reason for this self-deprecation as explained by Mr. Zhu is that, although their salaries are above average even in Shanghai – which had China's third-highest annual urban disposable income per person in 2012 at 40,000 yuan – the cost of appearing successful is stratospheric. A fancy flat and a cool car are well beyond their reach. They are wage slaves who cannot hope to become a Gao Fu Shuai and marry a woman who is Bai Fu Mei. This might seem quite normal for a rapidly developing economy.

But Zhang Yi argues that this Diaosi feeling of relative deprivation is a troubling consequence of China's growing wealth gap.¹⁸⁶ In an interview devoted to the subject for the website of Phoenix Television, a Hong Kong satellite network, Zhang Yi concluded that people at the bottom feel utterly alienated. They feel less hopeful than they did before to ever moving up in life, he said. Yi Chen of Nanjing Audit University and Frank A. Cowell of the London School of Economics found that, since 2000, people at the bottom of society were more likely to stay where they were than in the 1990s. "China has

¹⁸⁵ <http://www.economist.com/news/china/21601007-amid-spreading-prosperity-generation-self-styled-also-rans-emerges-chinas-losers>, retrieved 26 May 2015.

¹⁸⁶ Zhang Yi's arguments in this paragraph are included in an online article at <http://www.economist.com/news/china/21601007-amid-spreading-prosperity-generation-self-styled-also-rans-emerges-chinas-losers>, retrieved 25 June 2015.

become more rigid," they conclude.¹⁸⁷ While the rapid development of market economy widens the gap between the rich and the poor, the self-depreciation of Diaosi originates exactly from the social reality of wealth polarization as well as mainstream partner-selection standards. Many young people are faced with the reality that even if they make every possible effort, their wealth will still be far from Gao Fu Shuai. To summarize all this, it is easy to understand their complex Diaosi feeling, which contains their dissatisfaction about the reality and powerlessness to change the situation.

Diaosi is not just a natural response to the reality of the gap between the rich and the poor, a helpless expression of their own disadvantages, but also an expression of self-doubt of abilities, lack of confidence, and lack of self-acceptance, and more likely a false attribution of fault – blaming their parents for not providing them with favorable conditions. Szablewicz (2014) compared Diaosi with members of Occupy Wall Street's 99%. She argued that, while Occupy Wall Street targeted the big banks and other members of the privileged 1% that continued to enjoy both bailouts and large bonuses during times of economic crisis, the Diaosi use humor to point to the disparities between the lives of average Chinese youth and those privileged youth who simply inherit wealth through family connections and corrupt government back channels (Szablewicz 2014). Szablewicz (2014) further pointed out that the target of Diaosi is not wealth itself but rather the sense that the dream of upward socio-economic mobility is increasingly out of reach for the majority of people, while the wealthy few maintain their wealth at the expense of the average citizen. This can be evidenced by Diaosi discourses always describing Diaosi in comparison with Gao Fu Shuai and the fact that some middle-class members also identify with Diaosi such as Han Han – a wealthy Shanghai blogger, the once-celebrated voice of youth – who even claims to be 'an authentic Diaosi' who started from scratch with no power or connections (Kan 2013).

A delicately performed subculture

Diaosi as an online subculture does not totally equal the precariat in offline China. Diaosi is a meme presented by massive Diaosi discourses. According to Li Mingjie (2013: np),

the use of memes is a rhetoric behavior: people intentionally avoid using formal or official ways of expression, but choose a type of coded, metaphorical way to express the thoughts and desires which are different from what have been expressed by official or formal public discourses.

The formulation of the Diaosi image as the result of a rhetoric process relies on the formulation of certain semantic and pragmatic models during its evolvement (Li Mingjie 2013). Diaosi is not a one-time product, but the result of a long dynamic process of interpretation, reorganization, transformation and extension of meanings, along with the negotiation and cooperation between the meanings and their pragmatic contexts.

¹⁸⁷ Yi Chen and Frank A. Cowell's comments are included in an online article at <http://www.economist.com/news/china/21601007-amid-spreading-prosperity-generation-self-styled-also-rans-emerges-chinas-losers>

Szablewicz (2014) also points out that, like many popular Internet phenomena, Diaosi is also a meme, which acts as a floating signifier, taking on new meanings in different contexts. The meaning making of Diaosi is a dynamic process facilitated by the interactive nature of the Internet. The interactive nature of the Internet enables rapid circulation and subsequent transformation, during which some old exiting meanings can be lost and new meanings can be obtained.

Li Mingjie (2013) interpreted the evolving process of memes as a popular cultural phenomenon, which is characterized by popularized meanings and functions of social transmission. High frequency of usage, semantic extension and form variation are some of the features of the process of transmission. This interpretation explains well what Diaosi has gone through. In the first stage of the formulation of Diaosi, it was characterized by high frequency of usage. Huge volumes of clicks, forwardings and reposts explode at a certain moment. In the transmission process, the cognitive and emotional information embodied in Diaosi has been represented, transmitted and interpreted, and thereby enters the audience's memory.

The second feature of the transmission process is the 'innovation' in terms of semantic extension or form variation. Diaosi, as already explained, literally means 'pubic hair', but its meaning has changed dramatically during its evolution, until it finally connects with the collective identity of precariat.

After thorough fieldwork on China's Weibo, Chris Marquis and Zoe Yang (2013) constructed a concrete narrative of how Diaosi went from an obscure in-group identifier to a vernacular mainstay capturing the social condition of millions of Chinese young people. They find that many micro but popular cultural events subtly shifted the term's connotation, causing the evolution of Diaosi as a meme. And there is much invested in the narrative of Diaosi's popularization: an initially vulgar epithet becomes a self-ascribed identity in a classic example of an outgroup claiming a once derogatory term as their own.

This evolving process finally solidifies the semantic scope and pragmatic model of Diaosi embodied in its unique discursive styles: a combination of documentary and literary styles, a comparative narration comparing Diaosi with Gao Fu Shuai all the time, content basically about consumption and women, and the self-belittling attitude when Diaosi are confronting Gao Fu Shuai. Through these styles, Diaosi discourses delicately express the perceived social inequality, and frustration caused by the fact that the desired consumption level and love is unattainable for them.

When the styles are formulated, Diaosi enters the collective consciousness of the precariat, and becomes a structure of feeling for them.

5.5 Concluding remarks: Diaosi as a bottom-up joint call for identity

To recap what has been discussed in this chapter, Diaosi emerged as a vibrant Internet subculture that suggests the formulation of a structure of feeling among the newly emerged Chinese precariat. And the core of this structure of feeling is sharply attuned to

the identity frustration suffered by this new social class. When the Chinese precariat is striving to survive in offline China but being robbed of voice and identity, the emergence of Diaosi symbolizes a joint call for a collective identity from the bottom-up.

During the evolvement of Diaosi, many educated and employed young people also identify with Diaosi, even though they are actually not as underprivileged as the original term is meant to refer to. Like many insults, it was embraced by the people it was meant to dismiss – but Diaosi has gone on to become an almost universal identity among Chinese web users: there are now (all self-described) female Diaosi, Diaosi working in finance, Diaosi doing PhDs at China's top universities and prestigious universities overseas. For example Han Han, who is already an affluent middle-class writer, also calls himself Diaosi. Through people's claiming Diaosi identity, we can see it being used as a way for an individual to interpret and deal with a felt relation between the society and himself/herself. An increasing number of the middle class are using the term Diaosi as a form of self-parody. Zhu Chongke stated in an interview by Lui (2015):

Many people have come to accept and identify with the term Diaosi because it confirms the plight many lower or even middle-class Chinese are confronted with nowadays. As freedom of speech is relatively restricted in China, this form of self-defamation, self-satire and self-entertainment as people poke fun at themselves as Diaosi over the Internet allows them to relieve them from life's pressure in a safe way. As such, the Diaosi phenomenon has become a grassroots narrative. (Lui 2015: np)

Han Han is in fact already a so-called Gao Fu Shuai, but as he explained in his blog, he made his success all by himself and he knew how hard it is for a grassroots youngster to climb the social ladder.¹⁸⁸ Thus, his common ground with Diaosi may be that both of them are marginalized and ignored by the mainstream society. These pieces of evidence prove a perceived disparity. The disparity comes about mainly through comparisons with the second generation of the privileged groups in China (Erdai). So while Diaosi is far from being a counter-public, it is also not fair to categorize it only as a psychological malaise. The Diaosi phenomenon has facilitated the establishment of a sense of group solidarity, and becomes the symbol of a young precariat class. With almost 70% of young Chinese identifying with Diaosi, there is a shared structure of feeling that seems to emanate from similar concerns and modes of experience among them. It is a collective emotional identification and memory bonded by shared real life experiences. According to Sara Ahmed (2014), an experience can preserve a memory, a memory can preserve a feeling, and you can feel it again. It feels wrong. You feel wrong. In feeling wrong, something is wrong. This description beautifully presents the transient cultural state of structure of feeling before it evolves into a mature class-consciousness. In *The Promise of Happiness* (2014), Ahmed suggested that we could follow Raymond Williams (1977) to

¹⁸⁸ See more at <http://blog.sina.com.cn/twocold>, retrieved 2 June 2015.

explore 'structures of feeling', but also consider 'feelings of structure'; feelings might be how structures get under our skin.¹⁸⁹

Diaosi would be another example of the structure of feeling, besides memes and E'gao as discussed in earlier chapters, which emerged in young precarious-class consciousness out of the development of industrial capitalism in China's unique political context. But Diaosi represents a more urgent and direct call for identity. Many young people are faced with the reality that even if they make every possible effort, their wealth is still far behind the second generation of the privileged groups presented as Gao Fu Shuai or Bai Fu Mei. Diaosi's self-deprecating manner originates exactly from the social reality of wealth polarization as well as new mate-selecting standards. Therefore, it is easy to understand their complex Diaosi feeling, which contains their dissatisfaction with the reality and powerlessness and helplessness to change the situation; and also their envy of and jealousy as well as disdain toward the higher class young.

Diaosi, I argue, must also be seen as the explicit side of the implicit linguistic and cultural work documented in Chapters 3 and 4. Jointly, they offer us a clear image of a self-defining, conscious and reflexive community of people who convert a shared experience into shared cultural and identity practices.

¹⁸⁹ This is expressed in Ahmed's online post 'Feminist Hurt/Feminism Hurts' at <https://feministkilljoys.com/2014/07/21/feminist-hurtfeminism-hurts/>, retrieved 27 January 2015.

Conclusions

To recap the story, what I tried to establish in this study is the emergence of a new social class in China, which I call, after Guy Standing (2011a, 2014) ‘the Chinese precariat’; added to this, I argued that this particular social class can best be investigated by looking at its cultural online practices.

There was a clear correspondence between the defining features of the precariat proposed by Standing, and characteristics of the Chinese group I focused my study on: it has distinctive relations of production, with their labor being insecure and unstable; distinctive relations of distribution, in that it relies almost entirely on money wages, usually experiencing fluctuations and never having income security; the precariat has distinctive relations to the state, in having fewer rights than most others; fundamentally, it has rights insecurity; finally, it has started to develop a shared structure of feeling if not a class consciousness yet, which is a powerful sense of status frustration and relative deprivation shared by all of them, a strong sense of insecurity illustrated by four A’s, especially anomie (Standing 2014: 3-4). However, different from their Western counterparts, the members of the Chinese precariat are heterogeneous and may come from different social backgrounds: migrant workers, squeezed white-collar workers, marginalized underemployed graduates, etc. Despite the heterogeneity, they all get frustrated by underemployment, status inconsistency, frustrated careers, or the lack of other important citizen rights: civil, cultural, social, economic and political rights – they are all denizens.

As a social class in the making, the Chinese precariat is still tightly connected with or even mixed within the neighboring social classes – the middle and lower levels of middle class and underclasses. These social groups, along with the precariat, basically all sub-groups outside the elite stratum, constitute ‘the people’ who are jointly against the power bloc made up by the elite class, i.e., the ruling class and upper middle class. The deep reason that they can become an alliance lies in the fact that they are all denizens.

While the Chinese precariat emerged rapidly in the last decade when China accelerated its globalization pace, the precariat discourse is absent from offline China and the CCP turns a blind eye on this new frustrating social group. This is partly because the existence of the precariat benefits a free market (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Liew Leong 2005), and also because the spreading of a precariat discourse in today’s China is very likely to arouse an awareness of an enlarged gap between the rich and the poor, and the increased rigidity in terms of social mobility, and thus has the potential to result into social instability (Xiaoshu 2012). With the precariat’s agency

being prohibited in offline China by strict control of speech and assembly, there are still no visible public political initiatives initiated by the Chinese precariat, but mushrooming suicides prove that they are suffering from Standing's four A's.

Thanks to the Internet, when the Chinese precariat's voice is erased, marginalized or held down in China's mainstream discourses, it finds an alternative space for articulation. As an Internet generation, the members of the prohibited Chinese precariat naturally resort to the online space, using new ways of communication to make themselves heard, seen, located and identified. Since they are China's 'digital natives', they have access to the resources required to design and develop elaborate cultural practices online.

However, when the Internet becomes an alternative public sphere for Chinese precariat, this does not mean that they can escape state control. It is obviously true when one looks at China where censorship and surveillance are the norm rather than the exception. In this tightly censored space, they are learning not to speak out directly in the face of the CCP, but starting to communicate online between themselves by metaphorical means. They are used to coming up with creative tactics to evade official censorship and utilizing mimic communication to construct community and identity.

The symbolic practices conducted by the Chinese precariat online are basically 'disguised hidden transcripts' in Scott's (1985) terms, "partly sanitized, ambiguous, and coded," and "present in the public discourse of subordinate groups" (Scott 1985: 19). They are spoken in public (although online) instead of off-stage; and they balance on the border of what is legal, avoiding or reducing the impact of online censorship.

The critiques made by disguised hidden transcripts belong to what Scott (1985: 19) calls "the infrapolitics of subordinate groups," by which he means "to designate a wide variety of low-profile forms of resistance that dare not speak in their own name." These symbolic practices require little coordination or planning, and are used to resist without directly confronting or challenging elite norms. At one level, they are nothing but innocent Internet buzzwords or parodies; at another level they appear to celebrate the vengeful spirit of the weak as they triumph over the strict censorship and construct an imagined collective identity as a disillusioned precariat.

The Chinese precariat's online discursive practices predict no 'revolution' agenda, but there is already effective frustration and anger revealed by them. Precariat youngsters are busy searching for symbols online to express their frustration, find friends and peers with whom to construct a community. During this process, various precariat subcultures are formed and performed. Large numbers of the Chinese precariat have come to perform the cultural practices described in this study, because these practices tell the plight confronting many lower or even middle-class Chinese nowadays. Vibrant precariat Internet subcultures critically monitor the actions of the Chinese state. Since freedom of speech is relatively restricted in China, these cultural forms of disguised articulation, copycat consumption, self-defamation, self-satire and self-entertainment allow them to relieve their life pressure in a safe way. Through these cultural online practices, a structure of feeling shared by the Chinese precariat

can be inferred. It is in general a powerful sense of status frustration and relative deprivation shared by all of them (Standing 2014: 4). It is a structure of feeling grounded in the Chinese precariat's common living experiences. Their frustration and insecurity have to do with underemployment, status inconsistency, limited career opportunities, consumption embarrassment, or the lack of civil, cultural, social, economic and political rights.

In my study, I focused on three types of activity. First, the precariat has created its own 'language' – memes. Memes illustrate the way in which an emerging (and illegitimate) community organizes itself by means of 'cryptic' modes of communication; the precariat marks its difference from mainstream culture and power through this semiotic trick. Second, it has developed Chinese parody – E'gao as a shared culture. E'gao as a mimic discursive phenomenon demonstrates the way in which consumption behavior becomes important in understanding the frustration of the precariat: they make 'cheap' caricatures of 'expensive' stuff. The cultural material they use refers to distinctions between rich and poor and sets them apart as a category in Chinese society. Third, memes and consumption culture together lead to self-qualification as a distinct category in Chinese society. Diaosi illustrates the emergence of a joint call to identity: this is who they are and they manifest themselves as such.

A key point inferred from all three cultural practices is that by conducting these practices, the precariat online starts to form communities. In these 'light' communities, the precariat participate in memic practices, "share an enormous degree of similarity in behavior, experience a sense of almost intimate closeness and a vast amount of cognitive and emotional sharedness" (Varis and Blommaert 2015: 55). This is crucial for the precariat to become aware of their groupness as an emerging social class, or in other words, to develop a collectively felt structure of feeling grounded in similar experiences in life. In my study, I attempted merely to connect people and cultural practices in ways that credibly suggest the emergence of a new social class. Obviously, more detailed follow-up research will have to verify the plausibility of this claim, and more on this will be said below. But it is my strong belief that the sketch of a group engaging in structured and nonrandom, community-building cultural practices, drawing on competences and skills that typify their social and economic positions as white-collar workers of the digital generation, and circulating in the only public space available to them and connecting them – the Internet – provides sufficient evidence to rest my case at this point.

There are also some more general conclusions that can be drawn from what has been discussed so far. The first conclusion concerns the role of online social life in understanding contemporary societies

The theoretical premise of this research is that the Chinese precariat can best be investigated by looking at its cultural online practices. We cannot understand contemporary societies by only looking at 'offline' life. The precariat would not be detectable by only looking at offline life. It would look marginal, small and insignificant. What we have seen here is the gradual emergence of an entire social formation *online*;

a big sociological issue that demands more attention. Against a backdrop of state authoritarianism and socio-economic marginality and inequality, the potential of the role of the Internet in social class construction in China is salient. "The potency of speaking in the public sphere, the power of carnivalesque reversals and inversions, the 'positive' form of protest and dissent as well as its potential as a space for bearing witness to state manipulation and corruption" (Moser 2003: 188-189). Together these elements form an important mechanism that allows the Chinese precariat to express their views on the public stage even if it is a 'virtual' one.

The second point that can be inferred from my analysis is the role of culture in studying sociopolitical dynamics. Culture is always political, and cultural changes can foresee and precipitate social transformations at more profound levels. Thompson (1991), Williams (1961, 1977), and Scott (1985) all focused on 'soft' cultural aspects of society in order to understand its dynamics. However, very often, cultural practices are dismissed in social research. Especially since the emergence of the Internet, the relation between online cultural practices and sociopolitical changes has become even tighter. Jenkins and Thorburn (2004: 2) observed that

the effects some have ascribed to networked computing's democratic impulses are likely to appear first not in electoral politics, but in cultural forms: in a changed sense of community, for example, or in a citizenry less dependent on official voices of expertise and authority.

This tight relation between culture and social phenomena is even more highlighted by Manuel Castells (1997: 360) who concluded that "the new power (in a network society) lies in the codes of information and in the images of representation around which societies organize their institutions, and people build their lives, and decided their behavior." For Castells (1997: 360), the "embryos of a new society" are sensed through the changing cultural codes, altering identities and emerging symbolic representations in the "battle over people's mind".

Therefore, in order to understand the transformation of China's social structure brought by the new technology, it is necessary to comprehend the sociocultural significance of the Internet cultures, given the comparatively free atmosphere of online space and the seemingly unrestricted freedom of cultural practices online. Nevertheless, given the fact that there are already some studies that have explored the cultural dimensions of Chinese cybersphere (e.g. Tsui 2001; Liu Fengshu 2010; Herold and Marolt 2011), there is still a lot of research to do to investigate the social implications of online cultural practices, which have already become the main form of Chinese youths' social and political participation.

The fact that the Internet, along with other new media and communication technologies, has empowered disaffected Chinese precariat members to participate in online cultural practices has profound implications for the changing state-society relationship in post-socialist China. Not only will it rock the already precarious

foundations of cultural authority plagued by a widening ideological gap, it will also help to facilitate alternative identity-making and community-construction, which has the potential to lead to more profound social changes.

Therefore, in the case of the Chinese precariat, culture studies is the *only* road into investigating a big and important social formation and its role in contemporary China. Cultural studies, certainly when it considers online cultural material, has important contributions to make to sociology, history, political studies and social theory.

This dissertation has only 'scratched the surface' of the study of the Chinese precariat and their online cultural practices and much more can and must be done now. First, the range of online cultural phenomena is immense, rapidly changing and increasingly complex. For example, the language changes very quickly: more language research is needed; cultural practices are becoming ever more diverse and technically sophisticated, and here too, more follow-up-research is needed; the specific mechanism and process of the construction of online forms of community and identity also calls for more ethnographic investigation. Given the speed and volume of social change in China as well as elsewhere in the whole world, this type of ethnographic cultural studies has the capacity to re-imagine social structures as inherently unstable, fragmented, scaled, and complex. The implications for social theory are very important, and I hope to have pointed the way to exciting future research.

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SUMMARY

The Birth of Social Class Online: The Chinese Precariat on the Internet

China's repositioning as a globalizing superpower has affected its place in the world and its relationship with other countries, but it has also profoundly changed the social, economic, political and cultural fabric of its own society. The internet is one of the vital instruments of this global repositioning and of its domestic effects, and this dissertation investigates the way in which the internet has become an infrastructure for the gradual construction of a new social class, which I call, following the work of Guy Standing, the 'precariat'.

The Chinese precariat, I argue, consists of many millions of mostly young people, who have acquired advanced educational and literacy skills, notably in using online tools, and play a vital role in the new economy that has boosted China's place in the world. Yet, their importance as economic actors is not converted into material and symbolic social prominence; on the contrary, the precariat is characterized by a strong sense of disempowerment, marginalization and alienation. Precariat members, in a quest to articulate these frustrations, also use the internet as a forum for new cultural practices which, when viewed together, enable us to witness the growth of the precariat as a self-conscious community.

This study, then, addresses aspects of social class analysis from a 'soft', cultural viewpoint, in line with the cultural studies tradition, to which I add recent developments in online ethnography and sociolinguistics. The argument is that since the Chinese political system disprefers critical voices in the public sphere, the highly educated young people use the internet as an alternative sphere and draw on their online skills in subverting the control of the authorities, creating alternative, innovative and 'subcultural' ways of interaction, mobilization and community construction. Through the internet, the precariat members are able to articulate a voice of their own, which is denied in the 'offline' world.

I examine three sets of online practices in this light. First, I examine the ways in which members of the precariat construct and use a specific, cryptic *language*. This language consists of rapidly changing and elaborately constructed and designed memes, a typical online phenomenon. The use of memes requires advanced computer and literacy skills, and due to their possession of these skills, precariat members are able to exploit the full potential of Chinese script in sophisticated forms of graphic wordplay, to which they add appropriate visual images. Their memes go viral and have become stock material in the Chinese online subculture. Examples of this are the 'mud grass horse' and 'Tank Man' memes. The sophisticated nature of such memes, and the

capacity of precariat members to quickly change and adjust their memes to online censors' search engines and sensitivities, enables them to sustain not just lengthy interactions and identity discourses among themselves, but even engage in forceful and effective forms of social and political critique, such as 'The Human Flesh Engine' (RRSS), often focused on corrupt officials and causing much-publicized scandals.

The second set of practices I examine goes under the label of *E'gao* and can be called the precariat's new culture. *E'gao* practices are online 'satire' or 'caricature' practices in which prestigious cultural items are parodied and turned into 'cheap' pastiche ones. Memes are a frequent ingredient of *E'gao*, and so we see how the precariat's language is turned into an instrument for even more elaborate cultural practices, and how the precariat once more draws on its members' online literacy skills in constructing a voice of their own. The critical overtones of *E'gao* are clear, as *E'gao* products overtly or implicitly criticize the consumption and status hierarchies developing in the new social, economic and political panorama of globalizing China. The meanings of status items such as blockbuster big-budget movies or political emblems such as revolutionary heroes and propaganda highlights are subverted, twisted and turned against themselves. We can see the continuous production of what James C. Scott called 'hidden transcripts', challenging in a light-hearted and often amusing way the 'public transcripts' and exposing the real class and status hierarchies in China.

The third set of practices is called *Diaosi*, and consists of the self-conscious production of an identity category for precariat members. *Diaosi* is a denigrating term meaning 'pubic hair' and used in the sense of 'losers'. Precariat members define themselves as 'losers' in contemporary China, and develop extensive cultural practices making that point. Memes and *E'gao* practices converge into elaborate discourses on the identity of the *Diaosi* and their relationship with other social groups. These other social groups are 'winners': the new and influential group of super-rich Chinese, active in business and politics, and setting new standards of consumption, success and celebrity, in society at large but in sexual relationships in particular. Against these 'winners', *Diaosi* are pictured as deprived, marginal, poor, and surrounded by 'ersatz' prestige items such as fake top-brand items or cheap alternatives for 'the real thing'. Masturbation, for instance, is the 'cheap' alternative for having an attractive sexual partner, the latter being often out of bounds for precariat members when they have to compete with the extremely affluent new elite members in the market of relationships. The analysis of *Diaosi* shows what Raymond Williams called a 'structure of feeling': a gradual convergence of shared experiences into structured cultural practices, a sign of the development of a new self-conscious community.

These three sets of practices taken together offer us a glimpse of a social class-in-the-making, a process of gradual class construction effected through cultural practices that are specific to the community that performs them and draw on cultural resources that are so specific as to enable the construction of a unique, recognizable community

voice. Guy Standing calls the precariat 'the new dangerous class.' This analysis shows that such a class is perhaps not yet a reality in China, but could be well underway.

Tilburg Dissertations in Culture Studies

This list includes the doctoral dissertations that through their authors and/or supervisors are related to the Department of Culture Studies at the Tilburg University School of Humanities. The dissertations cover the broad field of contemporary sociocultural change in domains such as language and communication, performing arts, social and spiritual ritualization, media and politics.

- 1 Sander Bax. *De taak van de schrijver. Het poëtische debat in de Nederlandse literatuur (1968-1985)*. Supervisors: Jaap Goedegebuure and Odile Heynders, 23 May 2007.
- 2 Tamara van Schilt-Mol. *Differential item functioning en itembias in de cito-eindtoets basisonderwijs. Oorzaken van onbedoelde moeilijkheden in toetsopgaven voor leerlingen van Turkse en Marokkaanse afkomst*. Supervisors: Ton Vallen and Henny Uiterwijk, 20 June 2007.
- 3 Mustafa Güleç. *Differences in Similarities: A Comparative Study on Turkish Language Achievement and Proficiency in a Dutch Migration Context*. Supervisors: Guus Extra and Kutlay Yağmur, 25 June 2007.
- 4 Massimiliano Spotti. *Developing Identities: Identity Construction in Multicultural Primary Classrooms in The Netherlands and Flanders*. Supervisors: Sjaak Kroon and Guus Extra, 23 November 2007.
- 5 A. Seza Doğruöz. *Synchronic Variation and Diachronic Change in Dutch Turkish: A Corpus Based Analysis*. Supervisors: Guus Extra and Ad Backus, 12 December 2007.
- 6 Daan van Bel. *Het verklaren van leesgedrag met een impliciete attitudemeting*. Supervisors: Hugo Verdaasdonk, Helma van Lierop and Mia Stokmans, 28 March 2008.
- 7 Sharda Roelsma-Somer. *De kwaliteit van Hindoescholen*. Supervisors: Ruben Gowricharn and Sjaak Braster, 17 September 2008.
- 8 Yonas Mesfun Asfaha. *Literacy Acquisition in Multilingual Eritrea: A Comparative Study of Reading across Languages and Scripts*. Supervisors: Sjaak Kroon and Jeanne Kurvers, 4 November 2009.
- 9 Dong Jie. *The Making of Migrant Identities in Beijing: Scale, Discourse, and Diversity*. Supervisors: Jan Blommaert and Sjaak Kroon, 4 November 2009.
- 10 Elma Nap-Kolhoff. *Second Language Acquisition in Early Childhood: A Longitudinal Multiple Case Study of Turkish-Dutch Children*. Supervisors: Guus Extra and Kutlay Yağmur, 12 May 2010.
- 11 Maria Mos. *Complex Lexical Items*. Supervisors: Antal van den Bosch, Ad Backus and Anne Vermeer, 12 May 2010.
- 12 António da Graça. *Etnische zelforganisaties in het integratieproces. Een case study in de Kaapverdise gemeenschap in Rotterdam*. Supervisor: Ruben Gowricharn, 8 October 2010.
- 13 Kasper Juffermans. *Local Linguaging: Literacy Products and Practices in Gambian Society*. Supervisors: Jan Blommaert and Sjaak Kroon, 13 October 2010.

- 14 Marja van Knippenberg. *Nederlands in het Middelbaar Beroepsonderwijs. Een casestudy in de opleiding Helpende Zorg*. Supervisors: Sjaak Kroon, Ton Vallen and Jeanne Kurvers, 14 December 2010.
- 15 Coosje van der Pol. *Prentenboeken lezen als literatuur. Een structuralistische benadering van het concept 'literaire competentie' voor kleuters*. Supervisor: Helma van Lierop, 17 December 2010.
- 16 Nadia Eversteijn-Kluijtmans. *"All at Once" – Language Choice and Codeswitching by Turkish-Dutch Teenagers*. Supervisors: Guus Extra and Ad Backus, 14 January 2011.
- 17 Mohammadi Laghzaoui. *Emergent Academic Language at Home and at School. A Longitudinal Study of 3- to 6-Year-Old Moroccan Berber Children in the Netherlands*. Supervisors: Sjaak Kroon, Ton Vallen, Abderrahman El Aissati and Jeanne Kurvers, 9 September 2011.
- 18 Sinan Çankaya. *Buiten veiliger dan binnen: in- en uitsluiting van etnische minderheden binnen de politieorganisatie*. Supervisors: Ruben Gowricharn and Frank Bovenkerk, 24 October 2011.
- 19 Femke Nijland. *Mirroring Interaction. An Exploratory Study into Student Interaction in Independent Working*. Supervisors: Sjaak Kroon, Sanneke Bolhuis, Piet-Hein van de Ven and Olav Severijnen, 20 December 2011.
- 20 Youssef Boutachekourt. *Exploring Cultural Diversity. Concurrentievoordelen uit multiculturele strategieën*. Supervisors: Ruben Gowricharn and Slawek Magala, 14 March 2012.
- 21 Jef Van der Aa. *Ethnographic Monitoring. Language, Narrative and Voice in a Caribbean Classroom*. Supervisors: Jan Blommaert and Sjaak Kroon, 8 June 2012.
- 22 Özel Bağcı. *Acculturation Orientations of Turkish Immigrants in Germany*. Supervisors: Guus Extra and Kutlay Yağmur, 3 October 2012.
- 23 Arnold Pannenburg. *Big Men Playing Football. Money, Politics and Foul Play in the African Game*. Supervisor: Wouter van Beek, 12 October 2012.
- 24 Ico Maly, N-VA. *Analyse van een politieke ideologie*. Supervisors: Jan Blommaert and Sjaak Kroon, 23 October 2012.
- 25 Daniela Stoica. *Dutch and Romanian Muslim Women Converts: Inward and Outward Transformations, New Knowledge Perspectives and Community Rooted Narratives*. Supervisors: Enikő Vincze and Jan Jaap de Ruiter, 30 October 2012.
- 26 Mary Scott. *A Chronicle of Learning: Voicing the Text*. Supervisors: Jan Blommaert, Sjaak Kroon and Jef Van der Aa, 27 May 2013.
- 27 Stasja Koot. *Dwelling in Tourism. Power and Myth Amongst Bushmen in Southern Africa*. Supervisor: Wouter van Beek, 23 October 2013.
- 28 Miranda Vroon-van Vugt. *Dead Man Walking in Endor. Narrative Mental Spaces and Conceptual Blending in 1 Samuel 28*. Supervisor: Ellen van Wolde, 19 December 2013.
- 29 Sarali Gintsburg. *Formulaicity in Jbala Poetry*. Supervisors: Ad Backus, Sjaak Kroon and Jan Jaap de Ruiter, 11 February 2014.
- 30 Pascal Touoyem. *Dynamiques de l'ethnicité en Afrique. Éléments pour une théorie de l'État multinational*. Supervisors: Wouter van Beek and Wim van Binsbergen, 18 February 2014.
- 31 Behrooz Moradi Kakesh. *Het islamitisch fundamentalisme als tegenbeweging. Iran als case study*. Supervisors: Herman Beck and Wouter van Beek, 6 June 2014.
- 32 Elina Westinen. *The Discursive Construction of Authenticity: Resources, Scales and Polycentricity in Finnish Hip Hop Culture*. Supervisors: Sirpa Leppänen and Jan Blommaert, 15 June 2014.

- 33 Alice Leri. *Who is Turkish American? Investigating Contemporary Discourses on Turkish Americanness*. Supervisors: Odile Heynders and Piia Varis, 9 September 2014.
- 34 Jaswina Elahi. *Etnische websites, behoeften en netwerken. Over het gebruik van internet door jongeren*. Supervisors: Ruben Gowricharn and Sjaak Kroon, 10 September 2014.
- 35 Bert Danckaert. *Simple Present*. Supervisors: Jan Blommaert and Odile Heynders, 29 October 2014.
- 36 Fie Velghe. *'This is almost like writing': Mobile phones, learning and literacy in a South African township*. Supervisors: Jan Blommaert, Sjaak Kroon and Piia Varis, 3 December 2014.
- 37 Nico de Vos. *Lichamelijke verbondenheid in beweging. Een filosofisch onderzoek naar intercorporaliteit in de hedendaagse danskunst*. Supervisors: Odile Heynders and Frans van Peperstraten, 16 December 2014.
- 38 Danielle Boon. *Adult literacy education in a multilingual context: Teaching, learning and using written language in Timor-Leste*. Supervisors: Sjaak Kroon and Jeanne Kurvers, 17 December 2014.
- 39 Liesbeth Hoeven. *Een boek om in te wonen. De verhaalcultuur na Auschwitz*. Supervisors: Erik Borgman and Maaïke de Haardt, 21 January 2015.
- 40 Laurie Faro. *Postponed monuments in the Netherlands: Manifestation, context, and meaning*. Supervisors: Paul Post and Rien van Uden, 28 January 2015.
- 41 Snezana Stupar. *Immigrants regulate emotions in the same way as majority members in the Netherlands*. Supervisors: Fons van de Vijver and Johnny Fontaine, 30 January 2015.
- 42 Jia He. *The general response style from a cross-cultural perspective*. Supervisors: Fons van de Vijver and Alejandra del Carmen Dominguez Espinosa, 4 February 2015.
- 43 Dorina Veldhuis. *Effects of literacy, typology and frequency on children's language segmentation and processing units*. Supervisors: Ad Backus, Jeanne Kurvers and Anne Vermeer, 1 April 2015.
- 44 Harrie Leijten. *From idol to art. African objects-with-power: A challenge for missionaries, anthropologists and museum curators*. Supervisors: Wouter van Beek and Paul Post, 15 April 2015.
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