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Biaoqing on Chinese Social Media

**Practices, products, communities and markets
in a knowledge economy**

Biaoqing on Chinese Social Media

Practices, products, communities and markets in a knowledge economy

PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor aan Tilburg University,
op gezag van de rector magnificus, prof. dr. K. Sijtsma,
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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Preface

By the time I decided to pursue a PhD in 2015, I had a research proposal that I was very proud of about emojis on Chinese social media, which was the extension of a small research project for a course of sociolinguistics in my MA studies at Peking University. In the process of application for a PhD position, the more universities I checked, the more disheartened I became, because there seemed to be no place for my research in the 'mainstream' research paradigms of the majority of PhD programs. The game changer was when I found the Babylon Center for the Study of Superdiversity and the Department of Culture Studies in the School of Humanities and Digital Sciences at Tilburg University. With a wide range of studies not confined to traditional linguistic research paradigms, Babylon and the Department impressed me as the avant-garde in sociolinguistic ethnography and culture studies in a global and digital perspective. This impression transformed into my application for a PhD position that led to an offer, and this is how I came to Tilburg University and started the research that I was (and still am) interested in but that was (and maybe still is) regarded as marginal or peripheral elsewhere.

My PhD research culminated in this thesis: Biaoqing on Chinese social media. Through meticulous digital ethnographic description and analysis of people's actions with Biaoqing on Chinese social media, it reveals the emergence of a community of knowledge of Biaoqing through and by knowledge products and practices in a knowledge economy. What I have been observing in this research are light communities of knowledge omnipresent in a dynamic online-offline nexus, the existence of which invites re-imagination of social facts and re-thinking of ontology, epistemology and methodology in sociolinguistics and culture studies in an era of digitalization and globalization.

The majority of the four years of study (2015-2019) can be described as peaceful and quiet, interspersed with numerous small achievements such as finishing reading an article, or accomplishing a piece of writing. But there were also some difficulties. A very challenging one was that, my object of study being relatively new and marginal in academic research, currently popular analytical models turned out to be either inapplicable or insufficient for my study. In the process of looking and searching (the final result of which is an ethnographic approach that employs whichever method useful for data collection and analysis), there were multiple times when I felt lost and not knowing how to approach Biaoqing. This difficulty led to other challenges, of which the most devastating one was doubting myself and the value of my research.

Being trapped in a whirl of doubts (which went on and off for quite a long time), I indulged in novels, YouTube and an unhealthy lifestyle, the consequences of which were

severe hair loss, acne outbreak, and slow research progress. During these bad patches, my supervisor Piia Varis, whom I frequently pestered with my insecurity and doubt, shared her own PhD research experiences and repeatedly assured me of my abilities and the value of my research. During these bad patches, I assembled my first chapter-like writing that was tolerantly and generously received by my supervisor Jan Blommaert, who warmly and patiently encouraged me not to worry too much but to keep on writing down what I found interesting. It was also during these bad patches that I began to have more communication with Sjaak Kroon (who later also became my supervisor) in the process of co-supervising MA students and co-teaching a course for my University Teaching Qualification. Through our collaboration, Sjaak not only showed me a role model of a disciplined scholar, but also spurred me to be confident. I would never forget what he said when he noticed that I was an apology person: "When you cannot see through a crowd of people, it's not because you are too short, but because others are too tall. It's not your fault." I am more than grateful to the patience, tolerance, encouragement and support that I receive from Jan, Piia and Sjaak. They gave me the motivation and courage to continue my research, and they generously helped me improve as a PhD candidate, develop as a researcher, and mature as an individual.

I am proud of myself of having accomplished this research and having produced this book, which would not have been possible without the help of people around me. Apart from my supervisors Jan Blommaert, Piia Varis and Sjaak Kroon who provided me with insights and inspirations and gave me meticulous constructive feedback on my thinking and writing, I would like to thank my family who supported my decision to study abroad and never stopped loving me; my boyfriend Radek Ibrom and good friend Gosia Szabla who accompanied and pampered me all along the way, especially in my emotional breakdowns; and my friend Nie Hua who engaged in intensive academic discussion and writing with me. I consider myself very lucky to have a group of friends who have enriched my life: jolly parties and inspirational chittings with Gosia Szabla, Nie Hua, Hou Mingyi, Jin Di, Li Kunming, Zhang Huan, Du Caixia and Tang Xuefei; warm and inspiring chitchats with Pika Colpaert; guilty-pleasure cheese cake gatherings with Ad Backus and Gosia Szabla; and gym challenges with Tang Xuefei. Last but not least, I would like to express my thanks to Karin Berkhout who sacrificed her spare time to help me with the editing of this book.

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PART I

Introduction

Part I, consisting of two chapters, offers the general introductory elements of the entire study. Chapter 1 will provide preliminary information on the background for this research and the object of study, summarize the current state of scholarship in the field of graphic semiotic resources online, and clarify the principles behind this research. Chapter 2 will explain the theoretical framework and the methodology of this research.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Emojis on Chinese social media: Biaoqing and Biaoqingbao

This is a study on emojis on Chinese social media. Emojis, as we know, are omnipresent on social media around the world. In the case of Chinese social media, however, emojis are far more versatile than the graphic smileys that have gained worldwide currency (see Figure 1.1). Emojis on Chinese social media include emoticons, stickers, image macros and memes, which are collectively named *Biaoqing* (表情, literal meaning: facial expression). On many social media, Biaoqing featuring a certain figure or theme come in a set, i.e. a *Biaoqingbao* (表情包, literal meaning: Biaoqing package). This thesis will address Biaoqing and Biaoqingbao.



Figure 1.1 Yellow-face emojis on WeChat since 2011

The term Biaoqingbao originates from QQ, an instant messaging software service developed by Tencent and released in 1999.¹ At that time, if QQ users wanted to have more Biaoqingbao besides the default ones, they needed to install eip or eif documents to their QQ accounts. Eip and eif are document types developed by Tencent specifically for Biaoqingbao on QQ.² The icons for the documents look like packages, and there are multiple Biaoqing in a 'package' – thus the term Biaoqingbao (see Figure 1.2). Since then,

¹ Retrieved from on https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Tencent_QQ&oldid=803898314 on October 11, 2017.

² Eip documents are for QQ versions before 2008, and eif documents are for versions after 2008. Retrieved from <http://m.onegreen.net/QQ/HTML/33793.html> on October 11, 2017.

Biaoqingbao is used to refer to a series of Biaoqing (including emoticons, emojis, image macros, memes, gifs) on various social media in China. The term Biaoqingbao is in fact so widely used that sometimes even a single Biaoqing is referred to as Biaoqingbao. In this research, Biaoqing and Biaoqingbao, which can be used as both singular and plural nouns, will be used for referring to emoji, meme and sticker phenomena on Chinese social media.

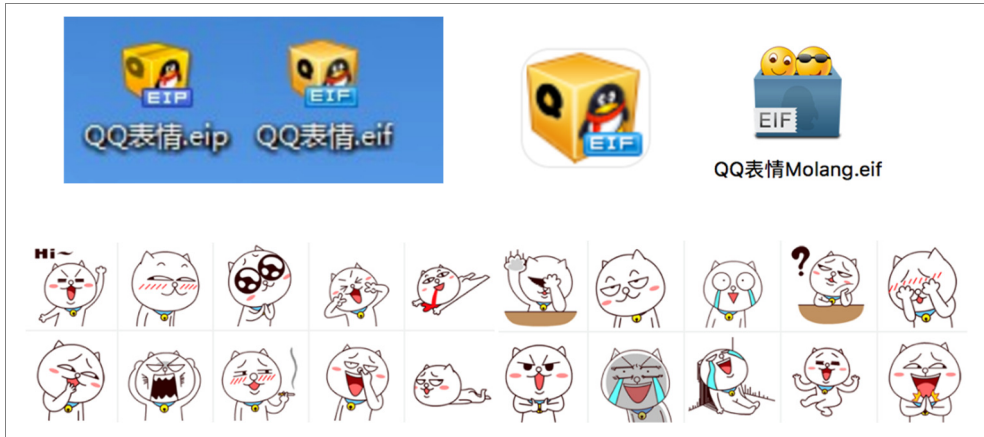


Figure 1.2 Package-like icons of Biaoqing documents for QQ³ and an example of QQ Biaoqingbao

1.2 Background: Graphic semiotic resources online

Biaoqing is a relatively new phenomenon that came into being with the popularization of smart phones, the development of cellular networks, and the development of various social media, especially instant messaging apps (Wang Yue, 2016; Zheng Manning, 2016). Biaoqing, like its counterparts on social media elsewhere in the world, fall in the category of graphic semiotic resources. These graphic resources are so widespread on social media that they are increasingly attracting the interest of researchers who focus on their interpretation and usage. Disparate understandings and usages of emojis are attributed to different renderings on various platforms like Apple, Google, Twitter, etc. (Miller et al., 2016, 2017), gender differences (Wolf, 2000) and cultural differences (Park, Baek, & Cha, 2014).

In terms of the functions of graphic resources in communication, some scholars claim that emojis are substitutions of non-verbal cues, for instance to indicate facial expressions (Walther & D'Addario, 2001) or to convey emotions (Kelly & Watts, 2015). However, the functions of graphic resources go far beyond that. They also serve various pragmatic functions, e.g. to work like punctuations (Duque, 2018; Ge Jing & Herring, 2018) or phatic expressions (Stark & Crawford, 2015), to mediate interpersonal relations (Kelly & Watts, 2015), or to stimulate a specific up-take of the message (Dresner & Herring, 2010; Huang Albert, Yen David, & Zhang Xiaoni, 2008).

³ The logo of QQ is a penguin. That is why there is a penguin on the icon of the documents.

In the current stage of research, there exists a distinction within online graphic resources between what is commonly referred to as memes and what is widely known as emoticons, emojis and stickers. There are two major reasons behind this distinction. First, memes, especially those rendered in the form of image-macros and gifs, are often shared online as topics per se on social media (Ask & Abidin, 2018; Börzsei, 2013; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Shifman, 2013, 2014) whereas emojis, emoticons and stickers are mostly used concurrent with text messages (Anuar, Saat, & Talib, 2009; Feng Shi et al., 2015; Jibril & Abdullah, 2013; Miller et al., 2017; Stark & Crawford, 2015; Wolf, 2000). As a result of the different contexts of use, many scholars regard memes on the one hand and emojis, emoticons and stickers on the other as two different categories. This difference is a result of the fact that it is not necessarily convenient or possible for social media users to freely use all forms of graphic resources on different social media. In this sense, the distinction is caused by the limitation of the affordances of social media. Even though there are scholars who regard emojis and emoticons as a subcategory of memes, there still exists a differentiation in their usage: memes are to be shown, while emojis and emoticons are to be used (Davison, 2012). This brings us to the second reason. Memes have been characterized as reflecting certain social problems and/or social facts, and thus are considered to be of social and political importance (De Seta, 2018; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Milner, 2013; Shifman, 2013). In comparison with memes, emojis and emoticons are often regarded as mere paralanguage or pragmatic resources (Ask & Abidin, 2018; Dresner & Herring, 2010; Gn, 2018; Walther & D'Addario, 2001). Consequently, their analysis is confined to the textual level, and their social and cultural importance is to a great degree neglected. These two reasons result in an inadequate scholarly approach to the social and cultural implications of semiotic resources such as emojis, emoticons and stickers.

On Chinese social media, the ecology of graphic resources is quite different from most other online cultures in the sense that there is no distinction between memes and emojis, emoticons and stickers. All these types of graphic resources are collectively referred to as Biaoqing and all are used in various online communicative situations. The majority of researches on Biaoqing regard them as reflections of the problems in Chinese society, for instance anxiety of young people (Jiang Jianguo & Li Ying, 2017), political participation of grassroots young citizens (Yu Xiaodong & Huang Yayin, 2016; Zhang Ning, 2016), and inequality in society (Zheng Manning, 2016), to name just a few. A common shortcoming of these studies is that they take Biaoqing per se as their topic, the corollary of which is that they are confined to textual analysis on the micro level (see e.g. De Seta, 2018; Ge Jing & Herring, 2018; Hu Yue, Zhao Jichang, & Wu Junjie, 2015; Tang Hongfeng, 2016) or to a simple mapping of the characteristics of Biaoqing and social issues on the macro level (see e.g. Jiang Jianguo & Li Ying, 2017; Zhang Ning, 2016; Zheng Manning, 2016).

To have an understanding of the relationships between the graphic resources and the society, it is necessary to follow what people do with the resources in which loci (Garfinkel, 2006; Glaser, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 2017). However, many researchers fail to take actual communicative practices with graphic resources as their starting point (see for instance Derks, Bos, & Von Grumbkow, 2004; Novak et al., 2015; Wu Jing, 2016; Yu Xiaodong & Huang Yayin, 2016; but see Halvorsen, 2012; Tossell et al., 2012), neglect the

role of the agency of internet users in the meaning changes of graphic resources (see for instance Aoki & Uchida, 2011; Feng Shi et al., 2015; Jiang Fei et al., 2013; Miller et al., 2017; but see Ask & Abidin, 2018; Davison, 2012; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Stark & Crawford, 2015; Wolf, 2000), and few consider the online-offline nexus (i.e. the loci of the communicative practices) as a research field (see for instance Bauckhage, 2011; Graham, 2019; Park et al., 2014; Porter, 1997; but see Blommaert & Dong Jie, 2019; Blommaert & Maly, 2019).

At the current stage of research on graphic semiotic resources online, there are several problems:

1. Many graphic resources are regarded as static and non-polysemic (see for instance Aoki & Uchida, 2011; Miller et al., 2017).
2. The dynamic essence or meaning-uncertainty of graphic resources is often not considered by scholars (see for instance Ptaszynski et al., 2010; Walther & D'Addario, 2001; but see Highfield & Leaver, 2016).
3. What people do with graphic resources is not given due attention in many studies (see for instance Bauckhage, 2011; Davison, 2012; Moschini, 2016; Park, Baek & Cha, 2014; but see Dresner & Herring, 2010; Wiggins & Brower, 2015).
4. The role and function of people's agency in the development and change of social meanings of semiotic resources are underexposed in many researches (see for instance Duque, 2018; Stark, 2018; Walther & D'Addario, 2001; but see Graham, 2019; Milner, 2013; Shifman, 2013).
5. There exists a too simplistic distinction between memes and emojis, emoticons and stickers, which is caused by the restrictions of textual level analysis. As a consequence, there is a lack of research adopting an ethnographic perspective to explore the social and cultural implications of graphic resources.
6. The working of algorithms and the complication of the online-offline nexus are seriously under-investigated.

This research will attempt to fill this gap in the current scholarship of graphic semiotic resources, and will use a number of principles in the attempt.

1.3 Principles behind this research

The research effort documented here must be situated within an emerging tradition of work, in which a number of principles are used that set it apart from more mainstream research on online features of language and communication. I shall spell out these principles below (cf. Blommaert, 2018a; Blommaert & Maly, 2019; Maly, 2018; Varis, 2016).

1. A study such as this one inevitably has to take the fact of globalization as a point of departure. Online infrastructures are the big drivers behind the current stage of globalization, and they lead to a whole range of new social and cultural phe-

nomena captured by Appadurai (1996) under the label of ‘vernacular globalization’. Biaoqing are typical instances of such vernacular globalization: a global format (emojis, memes etc.) which is locally inflected by the specific characteristics of the Chinese internet, Chinese society and cultures.

2. Online, digital phenomena cannot be separated as a part of social reality detached from ‘offline’ life. Social reality, as lived by people in a digital age, is led within what is called the online-offline nexus (Blommaert, 2018a). Social actions performed offline are affected, influenced and shaped by online infrastructures and resources, and vice versa, and no clear line can be drawn between online and offline dimensions of such actions. This fundamental merging of online and offline dimensions has, by some, been qualified as ‘the post-digital’ (Albrecht, Fielitz, & Thurston, 2019), referring to the inextricable effects of a change that has already happened due to widespread digitization.
3. This means that when we examine online phenomena such as Biaoqing, we are examining ‘ordinary’ social phenomena that, like any other social phenomenon addressed from within an ethnographic paradigm, need to be clearly and accurately described and contextualized. The concept of ‘chronotope’ will be a central tool to satisfy the requirements of description and contextualization (cf. Blommaert, 2018a, 2018c; Blommaert, Smits & Yacoubi, 2018). We assume that social actions such as Biaoqing usage are played out within highly specific time-space configurations in which normative expectations of ‘normal’ conduct prevail: chronotopes.
4. Online chronotopes are, as said, ‘ordinary’ and fully integrated parts of social life in the online-offline nexus. Yet they have specific properties. One key property is that they are inevitably *algorithmically mediated* (Pariser, 2011; Poell & Van Dijck, 2014; Tufekci, 2015; Van Dijck, 2013). Social actions online proceed within formats and by means of resources that are partly generated and conditioned by automated machine actions, direct access to which is usually restricted since they operate in the ‘backstage’ of online actions. An awareness of this inevitable algorithmic mediation helps us avoid seeing online phenomena as simply ‘mirroring’ offline ones.
5. Algorithmic effects are acute whenever we attempt to define the *participants* in online social actions, since algorithms shape ‘bubbles’ in which people are algorithmically brought together in specific chronotopes, around topics, resources and forms of action. Biaoqing is no exception to that, as we shall see. This means that we should be very careful in defining *communities* in online activities: how such communities gathered and which specific forms of community they constitute, all demand great care, as a priori assumptions about who is who online are, at best, questionable (Blommaert & Dong Jie, 2019). This is further complicated by the fact that, certainly on Chinese social media, people often appear anonymously behind an avatar.
6. The latter issue takes us to a central methodological principle. Since we cannot comfortably start from known individual and group identities in online research, we have to assume an *action-centered perspective*, in which we (following

Garfinkel, 2002 and Goffman, 1959) observe the specific actions undertaken by participants and derive tentative but descriptively grounded identities from an analysis of actions. People follow actions, in short.

7. The line that will emerge throughout this study regarding action can be announced here. *Knowledge* will be central. We shall see that in the field of Biaoqing, knowledge-related activities are overwhelmingly present, as people instruct, learn and discuss the rules for appropriate understanding and deployment of specific Biaoqing in what can be called 'communities of knowledge'. These knowledge activities and communities are, as said above, chronotopically organized on specific platforms, and algorithmically mediated.
8. Knowledge is central because Biaoqing can be seen as intangible knowledge products, and their circulation and usage as social phenomena characterizing what is known as a 'knowledge economy'. In this study, I shall move from analyses of specific communities of knowledge, to analyses of the economic aspects of Biaoqing. Thus, Biaoqing, as an object of study, can be defined as follows. In this study, I shall investigate *intangible knowledge products and actions that generate communities, markets and values in an algorithmically mediated and chronotope-specific way and that illustrate processes of vernacular globalization*.

In this study, these principles will acquire a more concrete form, and concepts used here will receive more detailed discussion and clarification they deserve.

1.4 Thesis structure

This thesis consists of five parts. Part I introduces the object of study and the current state of scholarship on graphic semiotic resources online (Chapter 1) and the research methodology (Chapter 2). Part II will give a detailed introduction to the object of study – Biaoqing and Biaoqingbao – which is a necessary preparation for in-depth exploration (Chapter 3). Part III reveals the knowledge practices inside Biaoqing-related chronotopes: the formation of communities of knowledge (Chapter 4), the popularity of posh Biaoqingbao (Chapter 5), the genre of Doutu (Chapter 6). The chronotopes discussed in Part III lead to issues of cross-chronotopic nature of Biaoqing in Part IV, Biaoqing markets, which will be illustrated through a discussion of the cases of transformations and expansions of Biaoqing-related knowledge products (Chapter 7), the expanding economy of Biaoqingbao (Chapter 8) and Biaoqingbao-hatched economic practices (Chapter 9). The thesis will close in Part V with the conclusions to the story of Biaoqing and Biaoqingbao on Chinese social media.

CHAPTER 2

Outlining the approach

This chapter will specify the conceptual framework and research approach, the former focusing on the ontological and epistemological perspectives towards sociolinguistic research in general in the context of globalization, and the latter focusing on specific implications for the current study. After this, the research ethics and a summary of the data will be introduced.

2.1 Conceptual framework: Chronotope

2.1.1 From context to chronotope

The responsibility of sociolinguistic research is to present a holistic image of how people interact in society and thereby shape and are shaped by society (Blommaert, 2018a). By extension, the starting point of sociolinguistic research should be the total semiotic fact, instead of linguistic signs (Blommaert, 2015a). It is through communication that people become social and become proactive agents in society (Blommaert, 2018a). As communication is anchored in concrete situations, the study of communication and society is inescapably simultaneously the study of situations (Cicourel, 1974). Communicative situations are dominantly glossed under the umbrella term context, including the micro context, i.e. who talks when to whom in what way and why (Auer & Di Luzio, 1992; Schegloff, 2007; Weiss & Wodak, 2003), or the analysis of spoken interaction and individual variables (Blommaert, 2015a), and the macro context, i.e. the sociocultural background, historical background, etc. (Goffman, 1974; Gumperz, 1992; Van Dijk, 1993; Weiss & Wodak, 2003), or the analysis of language ideology, policy and attitudes (Blommaert, 2015a; Fishman, 1999). The micro-macro dichotomy of context, although it classifies two different levels of context, fails to capture the complexity of context for two reasons.

First, context is not a static given, but a dynamic contingently evolving process (Akman, 2000; Blommaert, 2015a; Gumperz, 1992; Silverstein, 1992). In this process, participants co-construct the context through the recognition or questioning of the actions of others in communication (Garfinkel, 2006). The recognizability of a communicative sequence or event is guaranteed by participants' shared knowledge of and compliance with the criteria for what is appropriate or possible when and where, i.e. their social norms. By extension, communication is possible only through the deployment of macro-context norms in the micro contexts (Blommaert, 2015a; Goffman, 1974; Gumperz, 1992;

Silverstein, 1992). However, the micro-macro dichotomy is unable to accurately and adequately capture the dynamic nature and the normative dimension of context. What is worse, this simplistic dichotomy establishes an artificial segregation of different levels of context, which results in a rupture in the integrity of the object of study, i.e. the total semiotic fact.

Second, the micro-macro dichotomy presupposes "a vast amount of shared resources among language users, including agreements about the conventions governing their deployment", i.e. a one-dimensional model of meaning which addresses only the denotation (Blommaert, 2015a: 106). However, communicative behaviors at the same time have pragmatic and metapragmatic aspects, i.e. ideological aspects. A fatal flaw of this presupposition is the exclusion of the ideological aspects of communicative behaviors, and thus it eradicates indexicality out of the picture.

Indexicality lies at the nexus of these two problems. To be more specific, it concerns the local enactment of translocal historical meanings, which endow semiotic signs their evaluative, moral and identity-related dimension (Blommaert, 2015a). This entails that each micro contextualization is at the same time macro and historical.

The two above-discussed problems result in a paralyzed study of context, render the study of the total semiotic fact impossible, and thus refract researchers away from the essence of social structure and organization behind social action and communication. To address the descriptive and analytical inadequacy of context, Blommaert (2015a, 2018a, 2018c; Blommaert, Smits, & Yacoubi, 2018) suggests 'chronotope' as a way out. The notion of chronotope (literally time-space) is developed by Bakhtin (1981) to underline the inseparability of time and space in social actions and to describe the sociohistorical dimension of voices in novels.

According to Bakhtin (1981: 263), the actual deployment of language opens a reservoir of "internal stratification present in every language at any given moment of its historical existence". In other words, each instance of language use is loaded with historical and social voices, which make the communication understandable to participants. Chronotopes, where "spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole", define plot structures, identities, and action norms (Bakhtin, 1981: 84). In this sense, chronotopes are time-space configurations, which define "genre and generic distinctions" (1981: 85).

A genre is a cluster of formal features, which makes a communicative event recognizable as an instance of socially and culturally established categories of such events, for example, a lecture, or a novel (Blommaert, 2008, 2018a; Lillis, 2013). Recognizable formal characteristics form only one aspect of genre. As a cultural object, genre intrinsically entails behavioral norms in the social cultural sphere or context it fits into (Bakhtin, 1986; Blommaert, 2008). In other words, genre can be seen as a roadmap for communication with the help of which actual communicative events are recognized, expected behavioral norms are invoked, and expected responses are suggested by the norms. Put in another way, communication is enacted in and through genres. A shift in genre is simultaneously a shift in the communicative context, behavioral norm, and thereby chronotope of which genre is an ingredient and in which genre operates (*ibid.*).

That genres are materialized in and registered through ongoing communicative actions entails three highly relevant methodological side notes:

1. It is hard to say that a genre is finished at a certain stage of the communication, as a genre is stochastically determined by the responsive behavior it triggers;
2. There are high chances that one chunk of communication will witness frequent genre shifts (Blommaert, 2008), for instance from narrative to argument;
3. Genre presents a layered nature: different genres may co-occur, with subordinate ones embedded in dominant ones (Blommaert, 2008). There are numerous examples from daily life, for example a 'joke' during 'chatting'.

Chronotope is a specific and highly precise tool for approaching what Goffman (1964) called the situation; and genre, as an ingredient of the chronotope, is what happens in and because of such a situation. "Chronotopes are mutually inclusive, they co-exist, they may be interwoven with, replace or oppose one another, contradict one another or find themselves in ever more complex interrelationships" (Bakhtin, 1981: 252). This inclusive nature is the root for the endless emergence of new chronotopes. As concluded by Bakhtin (1981: 257-258):

We somehow manage however to endow all phenomena with meaning, that is, we incorporate them not only into the sphere of spatial and temporal existence but also into a semantic sphere. This process of assigning meaning also involves some assigning of value. [W]hatever these meanings turn out to be, in order to enter our experience (which is social experience) they must take on the *form of a sign* that is audible and visible for us (a hieroglyph, a mathematical formula, a verbal or linguistic expression, a sketch, etc.). Without such temporal-spatial expression, even abstract thought is impossible. Consequently, every entry into the sphere of meanings is accomplished only through the gates of the chronotope.

The potential of a semiotic sign to trigger the invocation of a certain normative time-space configuration, or chronotope, is its indexicality. As a nexus between sign forms and socially stratified meanings, indexicalities constitute the "verbal-ideological belief systems" (Bakhtin, 1981: 311). Chronotopes function through genres, the recognition of which operates through the principle of indexicality. Chronotope, genre and indexicality belong together (Blommaert, 2018a; Harris, 1988).

Blommaert (2015a: 111) proposes to regard chronotope as "the aspect of contextualization through which specific chunks of history... can be invoked in discourse as meaning-attributing resources or, to refer to earlier terminology, as historically configured and ordered tropes". The notion of chronotope theorizes context as resources for meaning making, takes the historical dimension of language into consideration, gets rid of the artificial segregation of different levels of context, regards indexicality as the bridge between signs, meanings and situations, and thus overcomes the descriptive analytical inaccuracy and inadequacy of context.

Chronotope is a heuristic concept, which directs researchers to the phenomena to be scrutinized. In other words, chronotope enables a search strategy and a control of method. It is not to be used to interpret the object of study, but to be taken as perspective on it. In this research, chronotope is a lens through which the story of Biaoqing and Biaoqingbao will be told. It leads us to genres, indexicalities and social behavioral norms related to the cultural form of Biaoqing.

Thus, the notion of chronotope is not an analytical or interpretive concept. The detailed description and analysis in this study rely on more specific theories, which will be introduced in what follows, including the perspective of vernacular globalization towards communication, the action-centered perspective towards communication, and the logic in conducting sociolinguistic research.

2.1.2 Vernacular globalization

Appadurai (1996) coined the term 'vernacular globalization' in unravelling the cultural dimension of globalization. The analysis of the decolonization of cricket in India provides concrete empirical evidence for theorizing the transformation of cultural forms in the context of globalization. According to Appadurai (1996), three factors contributed to the decolonization of Britain-originated cricket: the indigenization of patronage, state support through media, and commercial interest. These factors constituted a contingent historical arena where cricket became a linkage between "gender, fantasy, nation and excitement", and thus became a national passion (Appadurai, 1996: 111). The case study of cricket illustrates that "indigenization is often a product of collective and spectacular experiments with modernity, and not necessarily of the subsurface affinity of new cultural forms with existing patterns in the cultural repertoire" (Appadurai, 1996: 90). This conclusion points to the interaction between the global and the local:

The megarhetoric of developmental modernization (economic growth, high technology, agribusiness, schooling, militarization) in many countries is still with us. But it is often punctuated, interrogated, and domesticated by the micronarratives of film, television, music, and other expressive forms, which allow modernity to be rewritten more as vernacular globalization and less as a concession to large-scale national and international policies. (Appadurai, 1996: 10)

The term vernacular globalization accurately captures the social fact that global cultural forms are re-imagined and re-presented in local environments with locally constructed accents and social meanings. In contemporary society, the internet is revolutionizing the spread of cultural forms in terms of intensity, speed and scope (Blommaert, 2005, 2010). One of the results is the omnipresence of an online-offline nexus in society, which makes vernacular globalization an inevitable social fact in the field of linguistics, sociolinguistics and ethnography.

Vernacular globalization captures the complex interaction between the global and the local, and thus is an accurate gloss for the condition of contemporary social facts

(Appadurai, 1996). Simultaneously it constitutes a theoretical perspective towards communication, which provides adequate descriptive and analytical accuracy necessary for understanding society in the context of globalization (Blommaert, 2018a). In this research, Biaoqing is considered to be the vernacularization of the global cultural forms of emoji, meme and sticker on Chinese social media. What Chinese people do with this vernacularized cultural form is loaded with localized meanings and reflects the structure of the local society.

2.1.3 Action-centered perspective

There are multiple reasons for adopting an action-centered approach. In this research four factors are most relevant, one concerning the essence of social organization, two relevant to the influence of the internet on society, one from a methodological perspective.

In order to decipher the social organization and social structure underlying the everyday life of people, it is necessary to look for why people do what they do (Cicourel, 1974; Garfinkel, 2006). To achieve this end, many scholars have resorted to motivation, social value or morality for an explanation (see for instance Bernstein, 1964; Fairclough, 1989, 1995; Labov, 1972), which in the end proves to be flawed in one way or another and fails to unveil the essence of social order. The root problem is that by focusing on motivation and value, researchers refract away from social order per se to the result of social order (Garfinkel, 2006; Heritage, 1984), which is putting the cart before the horse.

According to Garfinkel (2006), signs are polysemies, whose uptake depends on their position in the sequence of interaction, i.e. the recognizable orderliness of interaction. Orderliness is the accomplishment of actors who interpret and give feedback to each other's action. Such mutual engagement of actors makes them situated actors, and their identities in that specific situation are situated identities, both of which are not relevant to the demographic characters or other (situated) identities of the participants in a conspicuous or salient way.

Engaged in communication, situated actors do not have a plan or project for their current engagement. What they aim for is to construct order for the communicative event through interpretation and (dis-)confirmation of the other's action. It is through the practices of situated actors that mutual understanding emerges or comes into being during interaction or communication (Garfinkel, 2006). That is to say, the process of making recognizable order is the process of making meaning and achieving mutual understanding. The implication of this is that the focus of research should be on how situated actors achieve orderliness in communication, i.e. on detailed situated actions.

The second factor derives from the fundamental influence of the internet on the way people act (Blommaert et al., 2018), or interaction according to Strauss (2017). The internet brings about revolutionary changes to the way people communicate through the affordance of non-simultaneous, translocal, multimodal, multiparty mediated communication, all of which makes communication ever more unpredictable, dynamic and evolving.

Third, internet users (may) communicate behind avatars in algorithmically mediated environments. Anonymity is often there in online communication, even though what is

anonymous from the point of view of researchers may not be so for those involved. Without the immediately available knowledge about who is involved as in offline face-to-face communication, identity uncertainty has become a rule in online space. What researchers can observe is the frontstage of the social media, and they have no access to the identities of online actors which are only available backstage to internet service providers, authorities, etc. (Blommaert & Dong Jie, 2019).

The second and third facts compel researchers to focus on what is constant in social life: action (Blommaert et al., 2018).

The fourth factor is a remedy for the unavoidable anachronism between social facts and sociological imagination. It often takes a while before social changes are reflected in academic resources or sociological imagination (Blommaert, 2018a; Blommaert et al., 2018). Such anachronism renders some of the vocabulary in the current toolkit not precise and explanative enough, which invites focus on what is constant in social life, i.e. action (Blommaert et al., 2018).

2.1.4 Four-step sociolinguistic methodological program

Ethnographic investigation provides concrete empirical bedrock for the study of social groups, which is only possible if we take social actions as the starting point (Blommaert, 2018a; Garfinkel, 2006). Blommaert (2018a: 67) proposed a four-step methodological program for the investigation of groups:

1. Patterns of communication necessarily involve meaningful social relationships as prerequisite, conduit and outcome;
2. Such relationships will always, similarly, involve identities and categorizations, interactionally established;
3. Thus, when observing patterns of communication, we are observing the very essence of sociation and 'groupness'— regardless of how we call the groups.
4. And specific patterns of interaction shape specific forms of groups.

Note that 'group', to which an alternative term is community (Gumperz, 2001; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger & Snyder, 2000), may vary tremendously in size, organization, configuration and nature (Blommaert, 2017, 2018a). This four-step sociolinguistic methodological program spells out the relation between communication patterns and social groups, and thus provides guidance for inspecting social groups through the lens of detailed actions in communication.

To briefly summarize this section, in this research I will be investigating chronotopically situated genres of action. The heuristic concept of chronotope is a perspective on what has been (theoretically) defined, a roadmap that directs us to a particular set of phenomena which we can understand as involving for instance indexicality, norm, genre. Vernacular globalization is the ontological perspective on the object of study, Biaoqing and Biaoqingbao. The action-centered perspective and four-step methodological program provide epistemological directions as to how we can know the object of study.

Immediately related to epistemology is methodology (i.e. the specific investigation approaches and methods), which will be spelt out in Section 2.2.

2.2 Research approach: Digital ethnography

This research approaches Biaoqing on Chinese social media from a digital ethnographic perspective. As digital ethnography develops on the basis of ethnography, it is necessary to introduce both as well as their implications for the current study.

2.2.1 Ethnography

Ethnography emerged from anthropology (Blommaert & Dong Jie, 2010; Hymes, 1996) as a field concerned with the “description and analysis of culture” (Saville-Troike, 2003: 1). However, there is no consensus on the definition of ethnography among anthropologists (Hymes, 1996). As ethnography is not a complete fully-fledged package of methods or techniques (Hymes, 1996), it is difficult to give a simple, conclusive and straightforward definition to ethnography, and what follows is an explanation of how ethnography will be used in this study.

The aim of ethnography is to “learn the meanings, norms, patterns of a way of life” (Hymes, 1996: 13), which in essence is obtaining comprehensive knowledge of the society under study and revealing the social structure underlying communicative practices and social life (Bauman & Sherzer, 1975; Blommaert & Dong Jie, 2010; Hymes, 1974, 1996). Instead of being merely a complex of methods and techniques for data collection and/or analysis (see for instance Dewan, 2018), ethnography is a scientific apparatus with specific ontological, epistemological and methodological perspectives on semiotic resources and communication (Bauman & Sherzer, 1975; Blommaert, 2007; Blommaert & Dong Jie, 2010; Hymes, 1996).

From an ethnographic perspective, languages, or to be more precise meaning-making resources, are one of the systems in a culture and society (Hymes, 1996; Saville-Troike, 2003). This entails that the study of communicative resources cannot be detached from the study of the society and culture in which they are located (Blommaert & Dong Jie, 2010; Varis, 2016). In this research, Biaoqing or Biaoqingbao are regarded as defining features of the culture of Chinese online society. They, as graphic semiotic resources, will be studied with full consideration of their relation and connection to broader aspects of Chinese culture and society.

Ethnography, as an inductive science, “works from empirical evidence towards theory” (Blommaert & Dong Jie, 2010: 12). In other words, the life-worlds and locally situated experiences of informants are the field to obtain solid evidence for ethnographic inquiry (Hymes, 1974; Saville-Troike, 2003; Blommaert & Dong Jie, 2010). In this study, the data of communicative practices with Biaoqing collected from online spaces are the object of study and the concrete basis for conclusions.

Following the previous point, entering the life-worlds of informants and following their locally situated experiences are de facto a learning process for researchers

(Blommaert & Dong Jie, 2010; Geertz, 2005; Hymes, 1996; Varis, 2016). In this learning process, researchers augment knowledge of and insight into the society under study, and subject the inquiry to self-monitoring and self-correction. In this study, I have spent four years following and observing people's practices with Biaoqing on Chinese social media. This data collection experience makes me a connoisseur of Biaoqing, and my inside knowledge provides reliable reference for selecting and analyzing cases.

In the process of data collection and analysis, there are no default techniques or methods (Hymes, 1996; Saville-Troike, 2003), and ethnographers need and are free to use any available method (Blommaert & Dong Jie, 2010). In both data collection and analysis, ethnographers are a crucial factor in the sense that they are the instrument and means of inquiry. Their characteristics and talents give or deny them access to the society under inspection and endow them the possibility to learn about this society (Geertz, 2005; Hymes, 1996). However, researcher partiality raises the question of subjectivity. It is worth mentioning that ethnographic researches are interpretative, and thus subjective in essence (Blommaert & Dong Jie, 2010; Saville-Troike, 2003). This does not mean ethnographic researches are invalid. The validity lies in correct understandings of the meanings of norms and institutions, which are ensured by

1. ethnographers' familiarity with and knowledge of the society under investigation;
2. discipline of the scholarly scientific community on ethnographers; and
3. ethnographers' self-correction in the process of systematic inquiry (Hymes, 1996).

Following the ethnographic insights, this study is not restricted to certain specific ways to execute the research. Whichever methods and techniques useful for data collection and analysis are adopted.

2.2.2 Digital ethnography

Digital ethnography is the application of an ethnographic approach as outlined above to the exploration of culture and society through the lens of communication which has been shaped by digital technologies (Varis & Hou Mingyi, 2020). Digital ethnography does not entail the exclusion of offline data, but emphasizes the epistemological implications of digitalization for communication (Varis, 2016; Varis & Hou Mingyi, 2020). In what follows, the aspects most relevant for this research will be introduced.

First, in digital ethnography, the field is an online-offline nexus in the sense that the online-offline demarcation is highly porous, and happenings in both spaces spill over to each other in unpredictable ways (Blommaert & Dong Jie, 2019; Blommaert, Lu Ying, & Li Kunming, 2019). This epistemological fact is one of the base colors in all our online data. It plays a not-immediately-visible yet crucially important role in the analysis and the theorization of online communication. In this research, the fact that Biaoqing are produced in an online-offline nexus is the key to understanding miscellaneous Biaoqing-related knowledge practices, genres and chronotopes.

Second, the research field is permanently under change as a result of the actions performed by internet users. In such a volatile field, actions are being continuously performed and the volume of actions is perpetually growing. Consequently, it is impossible and impractical to comprehensively document the actions. Digital ethnographic researchers are faced with a changing field, which might not always be retrievable after the observation. In this research, I am often confronted with deleted posts and web pages and overhauled social media interfaces. These facts are a property of the online space. On the one hand, they compel digital ethnographic researchers to document what might be used for analysis (even though there might only be a slim chance of being eventually included). On the other hand, they compel digital ethnographic researchers to approach their objects of study as happening at a stage in a changing trajectory.

Third, digital contents can be easily duplicated and spread online (boyd, 2009), which contributes greatly to the mobility and resemiotization of semiotic resources through unpredictable innovation by internet users (Leppänen et al., 2014; Varis, 2016). Biaoqing and communicative practices with Biaoqing are highly replicable on Chinese social media. In this study, the resemiotization of Biaoqing will be one of the loci of the analysis.

Fourth, in online spaces people are digitally presented as usernames, profiles and social-media-mediated avatars. From the point of view of digital ethnographic researchers, the lack of physical co-presence and mutual monitoring leads to highly incomplete knowledge of who the person is. As a consequence, the study of online identities needs to resort to concrete communication cases. Though online communication is greatly complicated by the uncertainty and unpredictability of user behavior (Blommaert, Lu Ying, & Li Kunming, 2019; Skalski, Neuendorf, & Cajigas, 2017), as well as by the algorithmic effects performed by providers, what remains observable is interactional actions, which are conducted on the premise of social facts and social orders (Blommaert, Lu Ying, & Li Kunming, 2019; Blommaert & Maly, 2019). To depict a clear and holistic picture of internet users' communicative practices with Biaoqing, concrete observable actions will be followed and analyzed.

Fifth, online space is an algorithmically configured environment which differs for internet users depending on their data profiles, software tools, computer terminals and, most importantly, specific modes of online behaviors (Pariser, 2011; Tufekci, 2015; Van Dijck, 2013). Such algorithmically imposed biases are the extensions of internet users' subjectivities. Digital ethnographers are internet users who happen to be observers at the same time, which makes a neutral and unbiased observation position impossible. Ethnography is in essence a process of inter-subjectively co-constructing knowledge through the contribution of all participants. In the process of conducting this research, my extensive search history on Biaoqing and active reactions to Biaoqing-related posts on various social media might have caused the social media I use to impose an identity of a super enthusiastic Biaoqing user on me through the workings of algorithms. It is reasonable to speculate that during my research, what the internet presents me has been influenced by my algorithmically-imposed identity in one way or another. The awareness of such subjectivities and biases keeps me alert and open-minded to other aspects of my object of study.

2.3 Research ethics

Doing ethnographic research online involves numerous ethical issues. In the current study, three such issues are the most conspicuous.

First, the privacy of internet users. Internet users may not be fully aware of who will view or what will be done with what they post online. To avoid infringing the privacy of internet users, two measures are taken. First, open-access social media are resorted to for data collection. This means that the contents on such social media are to be consumed by the general public, and internet users who produce these contents can be assumed to have an expectation of publicity for their creations (boyd, 2010). Second, where there is personal information relevant to individual internet users, anonymization is used to prevent retrievability. Note that this does not apply to organizations, institutions and public figures.

Second, reliability of the data. The reliability issue is closely related to the fourth implication of digital ethnography discussed in the previous section. To overcome the uncertainty of online fields, the current research resorts to what people do or say online, i.e. concrete observable social actions, instead of who they are or what they intend, as has been discussed in the action-centered perspective.

Third, the issue of observer bias is unavoidable in algorithmically configured online spaces. As discussed in the fifth point in the previous section, such biases are not too problematic as they are part of the co-constructed knowledge in ethnographic research. Apart from this, with a full awareness of the existence of algorithmically imposed biases, I resort to all the top social media platforms and all currently available types of data to be exposed to as much information as possible about Biaoqing as a counterbalance to the biases.

2.4 Summary of data

Data collection took place between September 2015 and January 2019 on various Chinese social media, including Sina Weibo, QQ, WeChat, Baidu Post Bar, Baidu Knows, Bilibili, Douban. As the infrastructure, affordances and market orientation of the social media play an important role in influencing the actions of users, it is necessary to give a brief introduction to the current top Chinese social media platforms where the data are generated and/or collected.

Sina Weibo (新浪微博; *xīn làng wēi bó*), one of the most popular social media sites in China, is a Twitter-like Chinese microblogging website launched in August 2009.⁴ By

⁴ Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Sina_Weibo&oldid=807854035 on November 2, 2017.

March 2019, there were 465 million monthly active Weibo users.⁵ Weibo users can comment on a post, or reply to a comment, which constitutes an interaction between and among post hosts and viewers.

QQ and **WeChat**, both developed by Tencent, are multifunctional social media, integrating messaging and content sharing functions. By March 2019, there were 823 million monthly active users on QQ. By March 2019, WeChat was one of the largest standalone messaging apps with over 1.1 billion monthly active users.⁶

Baidu Post Bar (百度贴吧; *bǎi dù tiē bā*), established in March 2003, is the largest Chinese communication platform provided by Baidu, a Chinese web services company. Baidu Post Bar has over 1.5 billion registered users and 300 million monthly active users. By 2018, there were 22 million Post Bars.⁷ Each Post Bar is a topic/theme-based space/forum of social interactions for interested users, which can be initiated by Baidu Post Bar users or be established upon keyword search. The activities in the Post Bars are sharing information, asking questions, providing answers, receiving information. In essence, each Post Bar is a community of knowledge about the interested topic.

Baidu Knows (百度知道; *bǎi dù zhī dào*) is “a Chinese language collaborative Web-based collective intelligence by question and answer provided by the Chinese search engine Baidu. The questions and answers together with search engine make it possible for members to be a producer and consumer of knowledge, which is the so-called collective intelligence”.⁸ In terms of numbers of users, Baidu Knows is one of the most influential collaborative Q&A forums in China, and internet users have free access to it.

Bilibili, founded in 2010, is a video sharing website featuring anime, manga and game fandom based in China. By June 2018, there were 342.7 million registered users and 25.2 million videos on Bilibili.⁹ Unregistered users can watch the videos on Bilibili, but cannot upload videos, leave comments/*danmu*,¹⁰ donate coins to uploaders, or save videos as registered users can do.

⁵ Retrieved from <https://tech.sina.com.cn/i/2019-05-23/doc-ihvhiwv4077548.shtml> on November 5, 2019.

⁶ Retrieved from <https://new.qq.com/omn/20190516/20190516A0AY8B.html> on June 9, 2019.

⁷ Retrieved from <http://it.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0628/c1009-29367407.html> on October 31, 2017 and <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E8%B4%B4%E5%90%A7/122101?fromtitle=%E7%99%BE%E5%BA%A6%E8%B4%B4%E5%90%A7&fromid=95221> on September 1, 2019. In this research, most of the statistical information on Baidu Post Bar is taken from these two sources.

⁸ Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Baidu_Knows&oldid=769686761 on March 3, 2017.

⁹ Retrieved from <http://www.bilibili.com/read/cv614761/> on June 25, 2019.

¹⁰ *Danmu*, literally bullet screen (to compare the abundance of comments to a barrage of bullets), is the functionality of overlaying comments, usually in a moving manner, on the screen when the video is being played. Each comment is also referred to as a *danmu*.

Douban (豆瓣; *dòu bàn*), launched in March 2005, is a Chinese social networking service website where registered users share information of books, movies and music, and participate in communication in various theme groups. Douban is open to both registered and unregistered users. By 2018, Douban had 160 million registered users and 300 million monthly active users.¹¹

Zhihu (知乎; *zhī hū*), launched in January 2011, is a Chinese question and answer forum. By the end of 2018, Zhihu had more than 220 million registered users, 30 million questions and 130 million answers to these questions.¹² Unregistered users can view the Q&A threads on Zhihu, but they cannot comment, save, up-vote or down-vote.

The result of the data collection is a 4,398-items corpus (1,72 GB) of various types of Biaoqing-related data, including Sina Weibo posts, QQ and WeChat chatting records, blogs, Q&A threads, news reports and webpage articles. The detailed information of the data used for analysis in this research will be given in the chapters where they are invoked.

¹¹ Retrieved from http://www.sohu.com/a/286874218_114930 on June 25, 2019.

¹² Retrieved from http://tech.163.com/18/1213/13/E2TLQ9SG00097U7R_mobile.html on July 25, 2019.

PART II

The knowledge product: Biaoqing

Biaoqing, the object of study in this research, are designed, created and modified by internet users, and their usage is established, negotiated and refined on various social media. They constitute the Biaoqing landscape and are intangible knowledge products in the Biaoqing market. Part II will give a detailed introduction to the Biaoqing ecology in China, including Biaoqing forms and characteristics, the social environment in which they occur, as well as current scholarship on Biaoqing.

CHAPTER 3

Biaoqing ecology on Chinese social media¹³

Biaoqing is a new phenomenon and a new genre engendered by the rapid development of information technology and growing accessibility to the internet (Sun Yuting, 2016; Chu Yanfang, 2018; Wang Tingting, 2019). Their characteristics are inevitably intertwined with Chinese society. The characteristics of popular Biaoqing fall in the following categories: cute, mischievous and insulting, decadent, dirty, violent. These characteristics might not be exhaustive, and there are always minute differences in the characteristics of each Biaoqing, but they reflect the most prominent features of Biaoqing on Chinese social media. Apart from this, Biaoqing also share a common feature, i.e. they are ludic.

A number of self-evident aspects of Biaoqing need to be underscored from the start. One, Biaoqing and their communicative modes of usage are cultural phenomena that could only emerge due to online and mobile technologies, and they are entirely determined by them. That means, concretely, that what people do with Biaoqing is conditioned, enabled and constrained by the affordances of such technologies, ranging from the availability of internet connections to the specific design of platforms and the affordances of specific devices such as new-generation smart phones.

Two, this inevitably involves *distributed agency* (Blommaert, 2018b; Blommaert & Dong Jie, 2019) in whatever we can observe regarding Biaoqing. The technological factors are not merely windows through which participants' actions are transmitted, they are mediators that affect, organize and change such actions. Thus, in general terms, online social practices operate through two layers, and we can adopt Goffman's (1959) terminology to describe these layers. There is a *frontstage* layer in which participants perform observable actions: discussing topics, updating posts, asking and answering questions, insulting or teasing each other and so forth. But next to that, there is a *backstage* layer of algorithmic actions and platform organization performed by the providers and continuously creating forms of order in the social practices performed frontstage. Every frontstage activity is converted into data, and transformed into programmed, automated operations creating thematic priorities, hierarchies of traction and visibility, selections of participants and even erasure of certain parts of what goes on (Poell & Van Dijck, 2014; Tufekci, 2015; Wang Feng-Hsu & Shao Hsiu-Mei, 2004; Zittrain, 2014). This backstage

¹³ The examples of Biaoqing in this chapter were retrieved from WeChat Sticker Gallery, <https://www.doutula.com/> and https://image.baidu.com/search/index?tn=baiduimage&ipn=r&ct=201326592&cl=2&lm=-1&st=-1&fm=result&fr=&sf=1&fmq=1563892647806_R&pv=&ic=&nc=1&z=&hd=&latest=©right=&se=1&showtab=0&fb=0&width=&height=&face=0&istype=2&ie=utf-8&sid=&word=%E8%A1%A8%E6%83%85%E5%8C%85 between October 25 and November 15, 2017.

layer is very difficult to observe but needs to be incorporated as a crucial part of what we observe online (Blommaert & Dong Jie, 2019; Tufekci, 2014).

Three, since Biaoqing, as we shall see, are perpetually renewed and reconstituted, engaging with them involves extensive knowledge work by participants. New Biaoqing forms and new modes of usage need to be instructed and learned continually, and a lot of what we will see in the following chapters will provide evidence for that. In addition, we are looking at *intangible* objects, visual signs that are given meanings by the front-stage and backstage actors of online actions and are being deployed in social interaction. As results of online design work and technologically mediated practices, Biaoqing are prototypical instances of contemporary knowledge economies.

This chapter will present a sketch of the Biaoqing ecology to pave the way for analyzing the knowledge economy spawned by Biaoqing in the following chapters. Biaoqing usually consist of images and texts (though there is no shortage of image-only and text-only Biaoqing). It is difficult to say exactly which element in a Biaoqing, i.e. the image or the text, endows it with its defining characteristics. The image and the text shape and define each other, and they together regulate the uptake of a Biaoqing. In this sense, different elements in Biaoqing are inseparable from each other. The general emotional vector of a Biaoqing, for instance, positive, negative or neutral, is often mediated through the facial expression of Biaoqing figures, and the general emotional vectors are open to more refined interpretation. For the convenience and clarity of description, an introduction of most popular Biaoqing facial expressions and figures will be provided here before discussing characteristics of Biaoqing in Section 3.2.

3.1 Popular facial expressions and figures in Biaoqing

In the process of observing Biaoqing usage on various social media, the facial expressions of several celebrities and public figures are repeatedly seen. The photos of them with specific facial expressions are made into Biaoqing. Furthermore, the facial expressions are extracted and superimposed on various other figures, in most scenarios with different texts as well.

This section will focus on popular facial expressions and figures that have spawned numerous new Biaoqing. Their characteristics are very telling of the sociocultural origins of their popularity.

3.1.1 Popular facial expressions

The most popular facial expressions are selected on the basis of my observation of Biaoqing usage on various social media. They originate from Chinese actor and singer Jacky Cheung, Chinese basketball player Yao Ming, Korean actor Choi Seong-guk, American professional wrestler D'Angelo Dinero, and Japanese voice actress Hanazawa Kana.

The facial expressions of Chinese singer and actor Jacky Cheung (张学友) in the film *As Tears Go By* (1988) became viral through various social media, for instance Baidu Post

Bar, Weibo, WeChat etc. In the viral scene, he was pointing a gun at his opponent, threatening and mocking him. His facial expressions became one of the archetypes for creating numerous new Biaoqing (see Figure 3.1). Jacky Cheung's facial expression conveys a general negative emotion, and is often concurrent with threatening, derogative and/or contemptuous texts.



Figure 3.1 Jacky Cheung in 'As Tears Go By' and examples of Biaoqing spawned by his facial expression

Yao Ming (姚明) is a Chinese basketball player. In a post-game conference in May 2009, Yao Ming showed a peculiar smile when basketball player Ron Artest was recounting a funny experience. In July 2010, Yao Ming's smiling face was reproduced in a comic by a Reddit user and went viral on various social media.¹⁴ His peculiar smiling facial expression became an inspiration for Biaoqing (see Figure 3.2).



Figure 3.2 Photo of Yao Ming and examples of Biaoqing spawned by Yao's facial expression

Korean actor Choi Seong-guk (최성국) is another contributor of facial expressions. In the film *Three Kims* (2007), Mr. Kim (played by Choi Seong-guk), after winning a small kid in a game by cheating, roared laughter at the kid. Choi Seong-guk's laughing face went viral and became an archetype of Biaoqing (see Figure 3.3).

The facial expressions of Yao Ming and Choi Seong-guk resemble each other, and consequently it is difficult to tell whose expression a Biaoqing is based on. Their facial expressions impress as a bitter smile, which is frequently concurrent with ironic, dismissive, contemptuous elements, or with texts expressing helplessness, speechlessness, self-mocking, etc.

¹⁴ Retrieved from <https://sports.qq.com/a/20150730/033835.htm> on March 8, 2019.

¹⁵ Translation of the text: *Hehe~Both my cousin and I begin to laugh*. 'Hehe', an onomatopoeia of laughter, projects a dismissive, contemptuous, or 'no comment' attitude. 'My cousin' indexes an elder male cousin who is very strong and protects the younger cousin from bullying. This Biaoqing might be used in contexts that are relevant to contempt and/or bullying.



Figure 3.3 Choi Seong-guk in 'Three Kims' and examples of Biaoqing featuring his facial expression

The enigmatic smiles of American professional Total Nonstop Action Wrestling wrestler D'Angelo Dinero, also known as the Pope, and Japanese voice actress and singer Hanazawa Kana (花澤香菜) are two other examples of popular facial expressions for Biaoqing. After D'Angelo Dinero won a game, his facial expression dramatically changed from almost-crying, stressed, depressed, angry to sly smirking (see Figure 3.4), and this smirking is described by Chinese internet users as 'evil yet enchanting' (邪魅).¹⁸ Hanazawa Kana was invited as a guest to an entertainment TV program, during which her hilarious smile was captured by viewers (see Figure 3.5) and spread onto various social media by her fans and anti-fans. The facial expressions of D'Angelo Dinero and Hanazawa Kana are not ordinary smiles, but smiles with a tint of superiority, smirking, teasing or seducing. Their facial expressions are often superimposed with some funny and/or lewd texts. Yao Ming, Choi Seong-guk and Hanazawa Kana were even nominated as the top three Biaoqing tycoons in Asia¹⁹ (see Figure 3.6). This happened before the facial expressions of Jacky Chueng and D'Angelo Dinero became popular.

Besides the above-mentioned five facial expressions, there are many other frequently used ones. They mostly originate from characters in teleplays, movies, social events, for instance the facial expressions of British actor Gerald Butler, Chinese actor Zhou Jie (周杰), Chinese actress Sun Jiaqi (孙佳奇), American president Donald Trump, etc. (see Figure 3.7). It is impossible to be exhaustive, and this section presents only some of the more frequently used ones.



Figure 3.4 Professional wrestler D'Angelo Dinero and examples of Biaoqing based on his facial expression

¹⁶ Translation of the text: *Fucked-up life*

¹⁷ Translation of the text: *No need to feel happy for living, and shouldn't feel sorrow for death.*

¹⁸ Retrieved from <http://www.aulas.cn/biaoqing/1179644> on October 25, 2017.

¹⁹ Retrieved from http://news.china.com.cn/shehui/2013-05/20/content_28874536.htm on October 19, 2017.

²⁰ Translation of the text: *Tell you the truth, it's impossible.*

²¹ Translation of the text: *Bro, calm down (Breast man, keep your pecker down).* The original Chinese text is a pun, which is lost in translation. 胸弟 (胸: breast; 弟: little brother) pronounces the same as 兄弟 (bro). 鸡动 (鸡: chicken, also slang for penis; 动: move) pronounces the same as 激动 (excited).



Figure 3.5 Japanese voice actress Hanazawa Kana and examples of Biaoqing based on her facial expression



Figure 3.6 News report about the top three Biaoqing tycoons in Asia²⁵



Gerald Butler in *300* (2007) and examples of Biaoqing based on his facial expression



Zhou Jie in *My Pair Princess* (1998) and examples of Biaoqing spawned by his facial expressions



Sun Jiaqi in *The Empresses of China* (2014) and examples of Biaoqing featuring her facial expression

Figure 3.7 Examples of other popular facial expressions for Biaoqing

²² Translation of the Chinese text: *Let's dance.*

²³ Translation of the text: *So thrilling to run away after having behaved pretentiously.*

²⁴ Translation of the text: *Do you like my little flower?*

²⁵ Retrieved from <https://kknews.cc/news/895444g.html> on October 25, 2017.

²⁶ Translation of the text: *If you don't humour me, you'll lose me!*

²⁷ Translation of the text: *Fuck you!*

²⁸ Translation of the text: *Your dad me is the future of the country, but u r nobody.*

²⁹ Translation of the text: *So disgusting.*

³⁰ Translation of the text: *Who do you think you are.*

³¹ Translation of the text: *Stupid human being.*

These facial expressions seem to be unrelated to each other, but upon a closer look, they have some commonalities. First, they are quite far away from neutral expressions, and show very conspicuous distinctive features. Jacky Cheung's expression is hostile, D'Angelo Dinero is smirking; Yao Ming, Choi Seong-guk and Hanazawa Kana are smirking/laughing accented with irony, ridicule and teasing; Gerald Butler is roaring; Zhou Jie pulls a poker face; and Sun Jiaqi is rolling her eyes. On the whole, the general emotional vectors of these facial expressions are more related to negative emotions (for instance anger, irony, disgust, unrest, discomfort) than positive ones (for instance joy, love).

Second, all of them are highly pliable to be superimposed on various figures and go with different texts to create new Biaoqing, and thus are capable of conveying a wide range of emotions or attitudes. The range of emotions or attitudes is wide, but it is not without limitations and boundaries. Each facial expression conveys one or several most basic emotions or attitudes, and numerous variations to the basic emotions fall in the expressive scope of these facial expressions. Open to interpretation, these facial expressions can be used to convey various emotions in miscellaneous situations, and thus become popular materials for Biaoqing. But what is more interesting is the indefinable basic emotions conveyed by these expressions. They are the key to finding out why these specific facial expressions, but not others, are popular, which will be discussed in Section 3.2 dealing with the social origins of the characteristics of Biaoqing.

Third, these facial expressions are not originally meant to be Biaoqing expressions. Usually they become popular after internet users processed them into Biaoqing. The specific ways of making and using Biaoqing with these facial expressions are learned, spread and innovated by internet users, which is the knowledge work regard Biaoqing. In other words, it is such knowledge work that catalyzes and maintains the popularity of the facial expressions.

It should be pointed out that the above-mentioned facial expressions are frequently used for making Biaoqing, and they are usually (one of) the most salient elements in a Biaoqing, but they are not the only ones. There are numerous Biaoqing which do not feature these facial expressions, though much less dominant in the Biaoqing landscape. Apart from this, thousands of Biaoqing inspired by currently popular TV dramas or social events are being made and added to the repository of Biaoqing.

3.1.2 Popular Biaoqing figures

Figures are the characters in Biaoqing, which may be real people or animals, stick figures or cartoons. Figures are not only the carrier of facial expressions, appearance and demeanor, but also media of actions and events presented in Biaoqing. Consequently, figures are a crucial element for Biaoqing users to communicate, demonstrate or perform identities. Here the identity refers to both the identity of the figure in Biaoqing, and the identity of Biaoqing users, and in some cases, one Biaoqing might convey different identities on the two dimensions.

In this section, three categories of figures will be introduced. The first category are stick figures or cartoons superimposed with real-person facial expressions, especially

those introduced in the previous section. The second category are figures with distinctive personalities. The third category are figures with sociocultural significance.

Cartoon figures with real-person facial expressions

Typical examples of the first category of figures include Panda Man, Mushroom Hairstyle, little girls, (pet) animals, and other coarsely drawn figures (see Figure 3.8). Panda Man and Mushroom Hairstyle are so far two of the most popular Biaoqing figures. Panda Man originates from the television commercials of Panda Cheese.³² In the advertisement an aggressive and violent giant panda terrorizes people to try the cheese.³³ Mushroom Hairstyle is a figure designed by cartoonist Wu Wuzhe (吴武泽) on the basis of the protagonist of his master piece *Xiao Yuer's Life* (小鱼儿生活记), a comic strip (see also Section 8.2.2 Fame economy). Biaoqing with Panda Man and Mushroom Hairstyle usually present only the headshot of the figures. In such Biaoqing, the facial expressions and the texts, if there is any, are the most salient elements.



Figure 3.8 Examples of Panda Man and Mushroom Hairstyle Biaoqing

In the case of figures of little girls and pets, the contrast between the cuteness of figures and the exaggeration of facial expressions creates a sense of black humor (see Figure 3.9). There are also stick figures, which have no distinctive body features. For instance, the third Biaoqing in Figure 3.9 presents minimal body features, and the spotlight is on the text, which alludes to the incident of a female vlogger live-streaming masturbation with a swamp eel. Such Biaoqing are recontextualized and heavily loaded with background information, which is a result of the accumulation of historical knowledge of the indexicalities and norms. This is knowledge work by internet users, including teaching, learning and spreading the indexicalities and usage norms. The emotions and attitudes conveyed by the recontextualized elements are the most salient. But facial expressions might be reduced to less important status.

³² Retrieved from <https://www.douban.com/group/topic/85796344/> on November 8, 2017.

³³ Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XYz3sl0LEA4> on November 8, 2017.

³⁴ Translation of the Chinese text: *I need comfort*. The pinyin of the word 安慰 (comfort) is *ān wèi*, the pronunciation of which is very close to AV (adult video, i.e. porn).

³⁵ Translation of the text: *I doubt it*.

³⁶ Translation of the text: *Enn, go on bragging. I'm listening*.



Figure 3.9 Examples of Biaoqing featuring little girls, pets and stick figures

Figures with distinctive personalities

The second category are figures with distinctive personalities, which may be real people, pets, stick figures or cartoons. These figures are distinctive in the sense that they are often connected to certain personalities and characteristics. They mostly have their own facial expressions, though there are cases where other facial expressions are superimposed on them. Typical examples of this category of figures are celebrities, for instance Chinese actor Deng Chao (邓超) and South Korean boy Song Minguk (송민국). Deng Chao is one of the first stars who accepted the invitation of WeChat to shoot pictures to make Biaoqingbao for WeChat Sticker Gallery,⁴⁰ and his Biaoqingbao is among the most popular ones.⁴¹ Besides the self-volunteered Biaoqingbao, internet users, especially Deng Chao's fans, also create Biaoqing with his pictures (see Figure 3.10).



Figure 3.10 Examples of self-volunteered (the first three) and internet-user-created Biaoqing of Deng Chao

Song Minguk, son of Song Il-gonk, a South Korean actor, became popular in China after he participated in the reality-variety show *The Return of Superman* (슈퍼맨이 돌아왔다),⁴⁴ which has a Chinese fan group. Song Minguk is a cute and sweet boy with quite rich facial

³⁷ Translation of the text: *Take it. Don't bother me anymore.*

³⁸ Translation of the text: *Please go away. My mom doesn't allow me to play with a dumbhead.*

³⁹ Translation of the text: *Open the door. Deliver of the swamp eel you ordered.* In March 2017, a female vlogger live-streamed masturbation with a swamp eel. After that incident, swamp eel was connected to masturbation.

⁴⁰ Sticker Gallery is a feature of WeChat where users can download Biaoqingbao of their choice. For more information see the discussion of the financial economy in Chapter 8.

⁴¹ Retrieved from http://epaper.yzwb.net/html_t/2016-05/28/node_201.htm on October 12, 2017.

⁴² Translation of the text: *Interesting.*

⁴³ Translation of the text: *I'm rich, and I can afford to be brash!*

⁴⁴ In this reality-variety show, celebrity dads are required to take care of their kids alone for 48 hours, during which the dads and children are either doing a task given by the wives or the dads exploring new activities with their kids. Occasionally celebrity friends of the dads will stop by to interact with the kids. Retrieved from [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=The_Return_of_Superman_\(TV_series\)&oldid=809296173](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=The_Return_of_Superman_(TV_series)&oldid=809296173) on November 9, 2017.

expressions, and these qualities are ideal for making Biaoqing. When his fans made his photos into Biaoqing (see Figure 3.11), Song Minguk's popularity was greatly boosted, and even more Biaoqing featuring him are created by his fans or by people who simply like Biaoqing of him.

Thanks to the internet and various social media, the range of celebrity, besides movie/teleplay stars, politicians and other public figures, can be greatly expanded to include grassroots internet celebrities, or *wanghong* (Li Kunming, 2018). Though having a film-star father, Song Minguk is more an example of grassroots internet celebrity. Biaoqing spawned by different celebrities are usually popular among specific groups of people, for instance fans of celebrities, pop culture gurus, etc. However, celebrity Biaoqing would (at a surprising speed) infiltrate into the general public from the original interest groups.

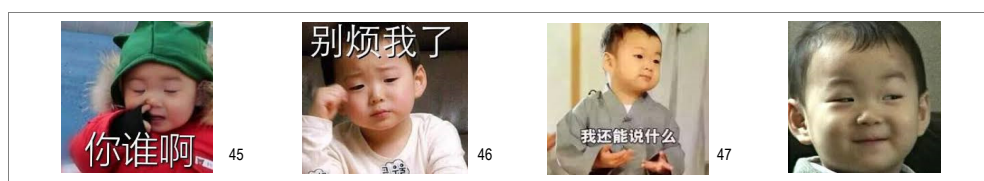


Figure 3.11 Examples of Biaoqing featuring Song Minguk

Besides celebrities, there are also animals and cartoon figures, typical examples of which are cats and dogs, Well-Behaved Baby (乖巧宝宝; *guāi qiǎo bǎo bǎo*), and Enigmatic Small Person (魔性小人; *mó xìng xiǎo rén*). The pictures of animals, especially pets such as cats and dogs, are superimposed with texts and/or photo-shopped to make Biaoqing (see Figure 3.12).

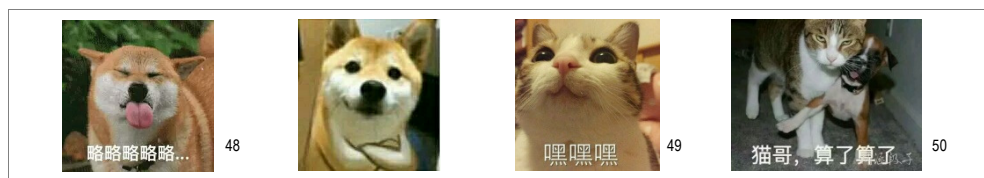


Figure 3.12 Examples of animal/pet Biaoqing

Well-Behaved Baby is an image designed by cartoonist Chao Neng (for more see Section 8.2.2 The fame economy). This image (see the first three Biaoqing in Figure 3.13), as its

⁴⁵ Translation of the text: *Who do you think you are.*

⁴⁶ Translation of the text: *Leave me alone.*

⁴⁷ Translation of the text: *What else can I say.*

⁴⁸ Translation of the text: *Luelueluelue...* This is an onomatopoeia of sticking out and flipping the tongue, which is a childish and naughty way of expressing dismissive attitudes.

⁴⁹ Translation of the text: *Heiheihei.* This is an onomatopoeia of smiling, smirking or intercourse, and the interpretation is contingent on the specific context.

⁵⁰ Translation of the text: *Bro Cat, let it be.*

name suggests, indexes the qualities of cute, docile, sweet, lovable, etc., which have precipitated in the sitting-on-heels figure through repeated and prevalent use. The popularity of this figure exposes it to further editing of internet users. For instance, the contour of the sitting-on-heels figure is kept, but the facial expression is substituted with different ones. Sometimes in edited Biaoqing, the facial expressions present qualities in conflict with the precipitated indexicalities of the Well-Behaved Baby (see the last two Biaoqing in Figure 3.13). To some degree, this contrast and incompatibility in edited Biaoqing make the Well-Behaved Baby even more popular. These practices, which require varying degrees of knowledge, are actually instances of re-contextualization (Bauman & Briggs, 1990; Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000; Silverstein & Urban, 1996) or re-semiotization (Iedema, 2003; Leppänen et al., 2014). They involve a considerable amount of knowledge work from internet users.



Figure 3.13 Examples of Biaoqing of Well-Behaved Baby and its derivatives

Similar to Well-Behaved Baby, Enigmatic Small Person is another popular Biaoqing stick figure (see Figure 3.14). But different from Well-Behaved Baby, the latter is not designed by a single person, but is the result of collective creation of internet users who modify the image on the basis of each other's re-edits to create new Enigmatic Small Person Biaoqing. Following Garfinkel (2002: 46), it is an intangible knowledge product resulting from "congregational work" of internet users.



Figure 3.14 Examples of Biaoqing featuring Enigmatic Small Person

The distinctive personalities in the popular figures are the indexicalities and norms that are established, learned, negotiated and innovated by internet users. They are collectively creating intangible knowledge products.

⁵¹ Translation of the text: *Fuck off.*

⁵² Translation of the text: *Smile with tears.*

⁵³ Translation of the text: *I'm only a baby. What you said scares me.*

⁵⁴ Translation of the text: *Please look at my cute eyes.*

Figures of sociocultural significance

The third category of Biaoqing figures is of historical or cultural significance. They might not be as widely used as other figures, but their peculiarity makes them popular among certain groups of users. Typical examples in this category are Xuanzang and politicians.

Xuanzang (602–664) was a Chinese Buddhist monk who travelled to Tianzhu (the name for ancient India in Chinese) for Buddhist sutra and translated them in the early Tang dynasty. Xuanzang made a great contribution to the development of Buddhism and to cross-cultural communication in the history of China.⁵⁵ Xuanzang inspired the novelist Wu Cheng'en (1500–1582) to write the novel *Journey to the West*, one of the great classics in Chinese literature. In this novel, Tang Seng (唐僧, *táng sēng*, literally: Tang-dynasty monk), whose archetype is Xuanzang, is the reincarnation of Golden Cicada, a disciple of the Buddha. His mission to Tianzhu is to fetch a set of Buddhist scriptures back to the Tang Empire for the purpose of spreading Buddhism in his native land. Tang Seng is depicted as a decent, honest, kind-hearted and devoted disciple of Buddha. The image of Tang Seng has been invoked for Biaoqing. The cultural connotations of Tang Seng are exploited to form sharp contrasts with rude, violent texts in Biaoqing (see Figure 3.15).



Figure 3.15 Examples of Biaoqing featuring Tang Seng

Politicians, especially those with distinctive characteristics and behavioral traits, are subject to being made into Biaoqing, for instance Jiang Zemin, Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un. Jiang Zemin, former president of the People's Republic of China, is quite well-known for not playing by the rules, for instance combing his hair in front of the king of Spain, scolding Hong Kong journalists for asking questions which were "too simple, sometimes naïve", switching between Mandarin and heavily-accented English, etc., which is often ridiculed as being boorish.⁵⁹ Though Jiang was regarded as a bit of a buffoon, he, in comparison with poker-faced Hu Jintao and scripted-persona Xi Jinping, has a much more human touch.⁶⁰ Jiang Zemin's broad mouth, heavy brim glasses and high waistline earned him the nickname of *ha* (蛤, toad), and his fans refer themselves as *hasi* (蛤丝, *há sī*, toad-worshippers). *Hasi* make Jiang's funny pictures into Biaoqing, superimposing

⁵⁵ Retrieved from <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Xuanzang&oldid=808809449> on November 10, 2017.

⁵⁶ Translation of the text: *Monks do not lie. I said I would fuck your mom and then I will.*

⁵⁷ Translation of the text: *WTF, that's enough.*

⁵⁸ Translation of the text: *You dumbhead fuck your mother. What do you want from me.*

⁵⁹ Retrieved from [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Toad_worship_\(Chinese_internet_subculture\)&oldid=809576356](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Toad_worship_(Chinese_internet_subculture)&oldid=809576356) on June 26, 2019.

⁶⁰ Retrieved from <https://www.economist.com/news/china/21702777-it-began-mockery-former-leader-now-it-has-strange-life-its-own-jiang-jiang-hall> on November 12, 2017.

texts from his catchphrases, for instance 'excited', 'too simple, sometimes naïve', '苟利国家生死以，岂因祸福趋避之'，⁶¹ etc. Some even make Biaoqing of Jiang dancing with his rumored mistress. Biaoqing of Jiang Zemin (see Figure 3.16) are spread from *hasi* to the general public, who also begin to use them, though they might know nothing about the stories behind the Biaoqing. Biaoqing featuring Jiang Zemin are often employed by (some) Chinese people to allude to politics in China or to insinuate dissatisfaction with president Xi Jinping (Changping, 2015; Nie Hua, 2018; Qin Amy, 2015).



Figure 3.16 Examples of Biaoqing featuring Jiang Zemin

Besides Jiang Zemin, Biaoqing of other politicians such as Donald Trump, known for his sometimes-exaggerated body language and facial expressions, and Kim Jong-un, known for his hairstyles and serious posture, are also frequently seen on Chinese social media (see Figure 3.17).

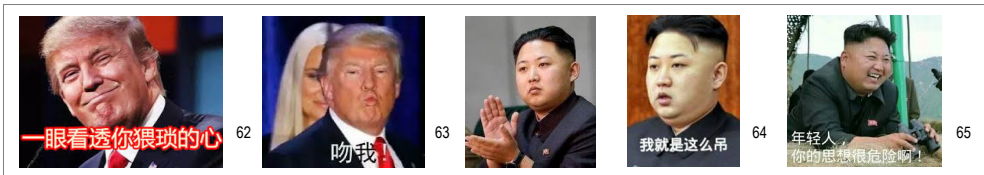


Figure 3.17 Examples of Biaoqing featuring Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un

The third category of Biaoqing figures is usually loaded with historical, social and cultural connotations. Their Biaoqing often smack of (black) humor created by the contrast between the status/persona of the figures and their funny facial expressions, body language, as well as the funny (sometimes-sarcastic) texts. They are employed by people to express social voices, but very often there is a strong ludic flavor, which is exactly why the Biaoqing also become popular among the general public (a more detailed discussion will be presented in Section 3.2).

⁶¹ Translation: *Were it to benefit my country I would lay down my life; What then is risk to me?* These two lines are from a poem by Lin Zexu, a patriot official in Qing dynasty, who is best known and highly praised for his forceful opposition to the opium trade.

⁶² Translation of the text: *I see through your dirty heart at first sight.*

⁶³ Translation of the text: *Kiss me!*

⁶⁴ Translation of the text: *I'm just so diao.* Diao is slang for penis in Chinese. When it is used as an adjective to describe a person, it means that the person has a strong character (especially brash), or that the person is very capable.

⁶⁵ Translation of the text: *Young man, your thoughts are very dangerous!*

The popular facial expressions and figures, which are open to interpretation and modification, are quite sensitive to pop cultures and they have a high turn-over speed, though some (for instance facial expressions of Jacky Cheung, Choi Seong-guk, figures of Panda Man and Mushroom Hairstyle) tend to stay in trend for much longer than others. What's more, the texts in Biaoqing, often containing neologisms or catchphrases related to social events or incidents, reflect voices and opinions of internet users, or the general public. These Biaoqing are the intangible knowledge products of internet users, and their virality is only possible through repeated learning and spreading of their usage norms and indexicalities, i.e. knowledge of Biaoqing. Put it another way, Biaoqing and their virality are the result of knowledge work by internet users.

3.2 Characteristics of Biaoqing

The previous section has presented a brief picture of popular Biaoqing figures on Chinese social media. In this section, the most sought-after characteristics will be discussed to reveal the sociocultural reasons behind them.

3.2.1 Méng (cute)

Méng (萌, literally: cute), is a concept imported from Japanese culture. In the 1990s, the term *moe* (萌え), homonymous with Japanese words for 'burning' or 'budding', refers to strong affection towards cute anime, manga or video game characters, which is not necessarily sexual, though sex is in its scope.⁶⁶ Moe culture became popular among Japanese fans of anime, manga, video games, especially among *otaku*,⁶⁷ and was spread to China through Japanese anime and manga fan communities to the general public. Chinese internet users take the liberty to use the Chinese character 萌 (*méng*) to describe what they regard as cute.⁶⁸ In China, the objects of *méng* (萌) are not confined to female characters in anime, manga and video games, but also include animals, real or fictional, toys, and other non-life items. The objects described as *méng* are mostly cute, adorable, innocent, and arouse people's desire to protect them from the corruption of adulthood.⁶⁹ The concept of *méng* is already very popular in China, and its usage is expanded to broader scopes, for instance, the practice for a person to play cute is referred to as *mai méng* (卖萌, literally: sell *méng*).

Méng is conspicuous in the Biaoqing landscape. *Méng* Biaoqing mostly feature small creatures (e.g. pets) or little children, either real or stick figures (see Figure 3.18). In some

⁶⁶ Retrieved from <https://www.japanator.com/-just-what-on-earth-is-moe-is-the-question-of-the-day-10704.phtml> on November 13, 2017.

⁶⁷ Retrieved from <https://web.archive.org/web/20120316130559/http://japattack.com/main/?q=node%2F108> on November 13, 2017. Otaku (おたく/オタク) is a derogatory term in Japanese for people who have obsessive interests, especially in anime and manga.

⁶⁸ Retrieved from <http://cul.sohu.com/s2014/meng/> on November 13, 2017.

⁶⁹ Retrieved from <https://web.archive.org/web/20150521195124/http://www.animation.net/blog/2012/05/28/ask-john-what-are-the-defining-moe-anime/> on November 13, 2017.

cases, Biaoqing with *méng* figures are superimposed with naughty, mean, vulgar or lewd texts. By superimposing such texts on *méng* Biaoqing, the socially unacceptable texts are softened and protected by the cuteness of the Biaoqing, but the biting quality of the texts is maintained. This process is de facto a creation of usage norms for cute yet mischievous Biaoqing. With the establishment of a set of (tacitly accepted) behavioral norms, a series of genres related to this specific type of Biaoqing emerge, including both *méng* Biaoqing per se and communicative practices associated with them. The enactment of these genres shapes corresponding chronotopes within which the genres operate.



Figure 3.18 Examples of 'méng' Biaoqing

The popularity of *méng* culture in China, and also in East Asia, has a lot to do with the ethos of the society. In Japan, adults are faced with great stress from work and society, and *moe* characters become a resort for them (Tack, 2004). In China, young adults are faced with similar stress. What is more, strict hierarchy had existed in China for over two thousand years, where it is called Fengjian ('Fengjian', 2017), and it is deep-rooted in Chinese culture. Fengjian social hierarchies are accurately captured by the Three Cardinal Guides (described by the Confucian scholar Dong Zhongshu in 206 B.C.): ruler guides subject, father guides son, husband guides wife. Though these hierarchies do not define the social structure and organize the society in modern China anymore, their influence still exists and is embodied in various aspects in social life, for instance, respect for and (subservient) compliance with the senior and elderly, government officials, authorities, etc. (Chen Guyuan, 2011; Liang Qichao, 2012; Liang Shuming, 2005; Yang Minghui, 2013). Another profound influence of the Fengjian social system is the one on the social status of females and youngsters. In Fengjian societies, females and youngsters were not regarded as independent people, but were guided, or even possessed, by their husbands and fathers (Dong Zhongshu, 206 B.C.; Li Junhui, 2010; Liang Shuming, 2005; Liu Xuezhi, 2011; Zeng Li, 1994), and they were the vulnerable groups in society (Liu Wenling, 2013; Tong Lin & Tong Nan, 2012). The principles of conduct in Chinese Fengjian societies were the Three Cardinal Guides, and the Five Constant Virtues (i.e. benevolence, righteousness, propriety, knowledge/wisdom, sincerity/ fidelity, which were the principles of moral conduct in dealing with relations between ruler and subject; father and son; brothers; husband and wife; friends) (Dong Zhongshu, 206 B.C.; Liang Shuming, 2005; Sun Longji, 2004). The former stipulated social hierarchies and master-slave relations (Chen Ying, 1998; Fairbank & Goldman, 2006; Miao Zehua, 2017; Weber, 1959), and the latter regulated the

⁷⁰ Translation of the text: A cutie who waits to be flirted with.

⁷¹ Translation of the text: Kisses.

⁷² Translation of the text: I'm still a baby.

moral principles in dealing with personal ethics and morality (Fairbank & Goldman, 2006; Fei Xiaotong, 2004; Luo Cai, 2015). The Three Cardinal Guides and the Five Constant Virtues precisely stipulated the roles and status for people in a network of moral relations, in which a person's value and code of conduct were always prescribed and defined by their role and status in the network (Chen Guyuan, 2011; Wang He, 1986; Zhuang Shiwen, 2014). Under the regulations of the Three Cardinal Guides and the Five Constant Virtues, the initiative of a person as an independent individual was stifled (Hansen & Svarverud, 2010; Kleinman et al., 2011; Liang Shuming, 2005; Wang He, 1986), and a consequence was the tendency for adults to imitate the behavior of youngsters, whose status and roles, according to the Fengjian principles of conduct, were to be guided, to be loved and to be taken care of (Chai Ling & Bao Zhiming, 2010; Fei Xiaotong, 2004; Liang Shuming, 2005; Sun Longji, 2004). These status and roles projected moral behavioral codes and power relations.

These deep-rooted cultural conventions are still functioning in modern China, and a conspicuous manifestation of that is the popularity of *méng* culture, i.e. the adoration of the cute, the innocent, and the tender that stir up people's desire to protect them. The quality of *méng* is sometimes greatly helpful in the workplace. It is a way of showing weakness/inferiority, which may attract favor or win convenience (Wu Ming, 2015), and at the same time is an efficient lubrication for interpersonal relationships, especially for females and juniors (Cao Huiping, 2013; Xin Yue & Liu Jing, 2014; 'History of meng culture', 2014). Though Fengjian-society hierarchies have been abolished, their influence is still resonating in the modern Chinese society. It is not uncommon for males and seniors to receive more respect, power, or (monetary or material) resources for the sake of their gender and age in comparison with females and juniors. In such contexts, playing cute, especially by females and juniors, might often be a means of regulating interpersonal relations.

The quality of *méng* can be manifested in numerous different ways, one of which is the language a person uses. For online communication, which has become a daily must in modern society, *méng* Biaoqing conveniently become a resource for people who have the need to *mài méng* (play cute) in online communication. In many cases, *méng* is not confined to a means of handling interpersonal relations, but has become a micro-hegemonic identity (Nong Yu, 2016; Xu Liying et al., 2019). The need to perform *méng* identity derives from the indexicalities, values and potential benefits attached to the quality of *méng*. Besides this, some Biaoqing are for the purpose of expressing (mock) hostile, negative emotions or attitudes, which is not in line with the principle of 礼 (lǐ, propriety). Some *méng* elements can thus be very helpful in buffering the harm and making unfriendly Biaoqing acceptable to message receivers.

3.2.2 Jiàn (lit. cheap; mischievous and insulting)

Jiàn (贱) means cheap or lowly. In ancient China, *jiàn* was used to describe people at the bottom of the social ladder, especially people who were (partially) deprived of political rights (Chen Linghai, 2015; Fang Xiao & Tian Yuan, 2017). On the basis of this meaning, a

different sense of the adjective *jiàn* was gradually derived to describe those who are morally cheap and lowly (Chen Ting, 2017; Guo Ye, 2015). But nowadays, people add their own understandings of *jiàn* through their online communicative practices. The connotations of *jiàn* are being further expanded and new indexicalities are being discussed and established on various Chinese social media, which will be illustrated through *jiàn* Biaoqing.

To have a clearer picture of *jiàn* Biaoqing on Chinese social media, a keyword search with '贱表情' (*jiàn* Biaoqing) and '贱兮兮表情' (*jiànxiǎxi* Biaoqing) was conducted. As it is not possible to present all the Biaoqing from the search results, several representative ones are used to illustrate the common features of *jiàn* Biaoqing.

One of the most prominent features of *jiàn* Biaoqing is the presentation of the self through Biaoqing. The self might be portrayed as a vulnerable inferior person (see the first two Biaoqing in Figure 3.19), might be uglified (see the third Biaoqing in Figure 3.19), might be depicted as conceited (see the fourth and fifth Biaoqing in Figure 3.19), or might be presented as nonchalant (see the last Biaoqing in Figure 3.19). A commonality is that they mostly have some humble, self-debasing and/or funny tint, which is the defining element of being *jiàn*. However, the ways *jiàn* Biaoqing are used show that to a great extent, such a self-debasing and funny tint is subversive in the sense that it is mostly pretended inferiority, and its purpose is usually to sugar-coat pride and superiority on the part of Biaoqing senders.



Figure 3.19 Examples of *jiàn* Biaoqing of self-presentation

A second striking feature of *jiàn* Biaoqing is other-debasement. The derogative messages are either blatantly expressed through the texts, or hinted by the facial expressions and figures in Biaoqing (see Biaoqing in Figure 3.20). For instance, the last two Biaoqing in

⁷³ Translation of the text: *Please give me a chance to hug your large leg*. 大腿 (literally large leg), is a metaphor for big potatoes in a field, or people with rare resources. 抱大腿 (literally hug the large leg) means to curry favor with powerful or influential people. 抱大腿 is often used between friends for joke in a self-mocking way. Retrieved from <https://baike.baidu.com/item/抱大腿> on November 16, 2017.

⁷⁴ Translation of the text: *Thank you~!* The figure is sitting on his knees kowtowing. In Chinese culture, kneeling down to a person is a symbol of inferiority or a gesture of self-debasement.

⁷⁵ Translation of the text: *Kisses*.

⁷⁶ Translation of the text: *I'm so smart*.

⁷⁷ Translation of the text: *Don't be jealous of my handsome appearance*.

⁷⁸ Translation of the text: *I, your dad, don't care at all*. In Chinese culture, the young/junior should show respect to the elder/senior. Self-address terms with father (老子), mother (老娘), grandfather (爷爷), grandmother (姑奶奶), and other-reference terms with son (儿子), brat (崽子), grandson (孙子) are used by message senders to claim higher status over message receivers for the purpose of humiliating them, especially when they are not related in blood.

Figure 3.20 respectively convey a standing-by and a contemptuous attitude. Similar to *jiàn* Biaoqing self-presentation, the figures in other-debasement Biaoqing are mostly boorish and vilified. Such figures, on the one hand add to the snarkiness of the Biaoqing, and on the other hand detach Biaoqing senders from the Biaoqing, making the derogative messages the voice of Biaoqing figures instead of Biaoqing senders. This is a very subtle measure to alleviate any potential harm, even though Biaoqing receivers are not supposed to take offense in communication where Biaoqing indicate a light-hearted key.



Figure 3.20 Examples of *jiàn* Biaoqing of other-debasement

Another distinctive feature of *jiàn* Biaoqing is irony and teasing. Some of them are so sarcastic that they almost impress as adding insult to injury (see the first and second Biaoqing in Figure 3.21). Some are mischievous, teasing and naughtily annoying (see the third and fourth Biaoqing in Figure 3.21). Some are very malleable to different interpretations, which may be a complicated combination of naughty, teasing/luring, smirking, sometimes gloating, and a sense of superiority (see the last Biaoqing in Figure 3.21).



Figure 3.21 Examples of ironic and teasing *jiàn* Biaoqing

⁷⁹ Translation of the text: *Monks do not lie. Benefactor, you are really very ugly.*

⁸⁰ Translation of the text: *The cheap will be cheap forever. Even inflation won't make them appreciate. In the text, the meaning of 贱人 (literally: cheap person) is close to that of 'bitch'.*

⁸¹ Translation of the text: *Considering your IQ, it would be difficult for me to explain it to you.*

⁸² Translation of the text: *You are beautiful, but I would never flirt with you.*

⁸³ Translation of the text: *Suck up.*

⁸⁴ Translation of the text: *Do you have a partner?* In China, getting married is regarded as a must for a person to be a properly functioning individual in society, to be a whole person. But nowadays, many young adults are single, and they are often urged by their parents and relatives to find a partner. For some single people, this question annoys them so much that it has become a taboo for them.

⁸⁵ Translation of the text: *Rumor has it that you are trying to lose weight?*

⁸⁶ Translation of the text: *Come and hit me! Come on!* Biaoqing with such texts are often used in situations when message senders want to tease and further annoy message receivers, especially when the latter cannot come and hit the former.

⁸⁷ Translation of the text: *Feel so good.*

Jiàn Biaoqing is part of the recently emerging *jiàn* culture in China. *Jiàn* culture originated from the hilarious comedies of Hong Kong actor Stephen Chow Sing-chi (周星驰) which feature protagonists of lowly social status who often behave nonchalantly or mock themselves in the face of humiliation, or have to sacrifice their self-esteem to survive (Ma Xiaoyan, 2016; Zhou Nanyan, 2014; Zhou Yan, 2016). When Chow's films were released in mainland China in the 1990s, they became a great hit not only because of the hilarious plots and exaggerated performance, but also because the hard life of the grassroots struck a chord with the audience (Zhou Yan, 2016), which laid the foundation for the development of *jiàn* culture in mainland China. Under the influence of Chow's films, gradually people, instead of being ashamed of their predicaments and trying to hide or ignore them, began to openly admit their awkward situations, mock themselves with belittling terms, blatantly express their admiration for power, fame and wealth, often in a subservient manner, and thus emerged the *jiàn* culture (Ma Xiaoyan, 2016; Zhou Yan, 2016).

Social media provides *jiàn* culture with fertile soil for development. The general public have a space to voice and let out their frustrations or desperations in numerous modes, for instance blog posts, comments, neologisms (for instance *diaosi*; see Du Caixia, 2016), Biaoqing, etc. The internet is a potent infrastructure, which spreads *jiàn* culture through various social media, and the general public is exposed to it even without knowing it. According to some critics and researchers, *jiàn* culture is low, belittling, and lacks any positive effect on the development of society (see e.g. Guo Ye, 2015; Ma Xiaoyan, 2016; New Weekly, 2005; Zhou Nanyan, 2014). But they all failed to see the social facts behind the popularity of *jiàn* culture. First, people are faced with a lot of difficulties in life, career, marriage, etc. Openly talking about and mocking these difficulties is a reaction in desperation, but also a way of admitting them and facing them, which are necessary for properly overcoming them (Zhou Yan, 2016). Second, the self-belittling elements in *jiàn* culture are ludic in essence, the purpose of which is not to discard self-esteem and self-respect, but to entertain, to seek alliance and companion, and thus to protect one's self-esteem (Chen Ting, 2017).

Jiàn culture now is not the same as it was in the 1990s. People are constantly adding their own understanding of *jiàn* to shape the culture. The indexicalities of *jiàn* have vastly expanded in the recent years. It is not confined to being disrespectable, but evolves to cover the senses of irony, teasing, mischief, as well as revealing the funny but unflattering facets of the self or others (Lihonglian, 2013). The quality of *jiàn*, instead of being derogative, even took on a flattering sense, especially when used between close friends, referring to the sharp humor or liveliness of a person (ibid.). On the one hand, the conduct and innovation of *jiàn* practices and the discussion and construction of behavioral norms are the knowledge work that establishes and develops *jiàn* culture. On the other hand, internet users who do the knowledge work might not be aware of the existence of *jiàn* culture and the result of their actions. Such knowledge work is woven into the backstage layer of algorithmic actions by internet service providers, which creates forms of order in the *jiàn* practices performed frontstage by internet users. The frontstage and backstage actions feedback to each other.

3.2.3 Sàng (decadent)

Sàng culture (丧, literally: decadent), which became popular in 2016, is an online subculture of young people which features blatant exposure of negative elements in one's life, for instance, exhaustion, frustration, reluctance to work, helplessness in life, etc. (An Moyan, 2017; Yi Na, 2018; Zhou Xiangning, 2019). Biaoqing are an important carrier of *sàng* culture. The representative figures of *sàng* Biaoqing (e.g. Ge You, Salty Fish, Pepe the Frog, Bob Hill, etc.) will be introduced in this sub-section.

Ge You (葛优) is a well-known Chinese actor. He played a loafer in the Chinese sitcom *I Love My Family* (1993) in episodes 17 and 18. In 2016, pictures of him slouching on the sofa (the first two pictures in Figure 3.22) suddenly became viral on social media, and internet users added different texts to his picture to make Biaoqing (see Figure 3.22). Ge You Slouch (葛优躺), with the tired numb facial expression, strikes a chord with many young people who work over hours and suffer great stress, but earn a low salary (Dong Ziming, 2017; Shi Lei, 2017; Yan Daocheng & Ma Susu, 2018). Ge You Slouch Biaoqing became a means for young people to let out their negative emotions and a way of making peace with reality (Li Yao, 2019; Zhang Lu, 2016; Zhang Xiaoqing, 2019; Zhou Lin, 2016).



Figure 3.22 Ge You in 'I Love My Family' and examples of Biaoqing featuring him

With the viral spread of Ge You Slouch Biaoqing, *sàng* culture became increasingly discussed by researchers as well as the general public. Peculiar figures from video games, cartoons, and manga were usurped for *sàng* Biaoqing, for instance Salty Fish,⁸⁹ Pepe the Frog,⁹⁰ Bob Hill⁹¹ (see respectively the first to the third Biaoqing in Figure 3.23). Besides these peculiar figures, any figure might be made into *sàng* Biaoqing (see the last three Biaoqing Figure 3.23). A common characteristic of these figures is that they express the desperate emotions of people, for instance sadness, struggle, loss of hope, etc.

⁸⁸ Translation of the text: *I feel like my body is hollowed out.*

⁸⁹ Salty Fish, literal translation of the Chinese word 咸鱼, originates from a Japanese web browser game *Kantai Collection*. Players who do not have any skills and do not try hard to win the game will win 咸鱼 medal, and thus 咸鱼 is used to referred to people who do not want to make any effort to become better and are happy with their current situation. Retrieved from <http://www.jianshu.com/p/54441953349e> on November 17, 2017.

⁹⁰ Pepe the Frog originates from *Boy's Club*, a comic by Matt Furie.

⁹¹ Bob Hill is a character from the animated sitcom *King of the Hill* by Mike Judge and Greg Daniels.



Figure 3.23 Biaoqing featuring Salty Fish, Pepe the Frog, Bob Hill, and other figures

Quite similar to *jiàn* culture, *sàng* culture is also a grassroots culture driven by frustration and anxiety in life, and by confusion and uncertainty about the future (Chen Juanli, 2019; Liu Qiudi, 2017; Tang Xiaobing, 2017). In Chinese society, young people, especially those born in the 1980s and 1990s, are caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, society highly esteems the senior and attaches great importance to experience which young people do not have much of yet. On the other hand, high expectations are put on young people, which are very difficult for them to live up to when they do not have the age-honed experience (Tang Xiaobing, 2017; Yan Daocheng & Ma Susu, 2018). What is more, China is now going through great social changes, and the Chinese society is full of contrasts: the prosperity brought by high-speed economic development in contrast with widening gaps between the rich and the poor (Dong Kouyan, 2017; Li Yao, 2019; Shi Lei, 2017); the Chinese Dream in contrast with unsatisfactory situations (Chen Juanli, 2019); hard work in contrast with the struggles to climb the social ladder (Yan Daocheng & Ma Susu, 2018); traditional stereotypes of success and traditional criteria in contrast with increasing individualism (Hansen & Svarverud, 2010; Liu Zhaoxia & Wang Yu, 2019). In such a social background, young people are faced with tremendous stress. They form an emerging precariat class (Du Caixia, 2016; Standing, 2014). According to some researchers and social critics, *sàng* culture, which spells out various negative emotions, is dangerous, contaminates the spirit and erodes the ethos of young people (Zhang Lu, 2016; Zhou Xiangning, 2019). But other researchers and social critics point out that though young people blatantly expose their tiredness and negative emotions, reluctance to work and helplessness in life, they never give up working hard and improving themselves (An Moyan, 2017; Li Yao, 2019; Liu Zhaoxia & Wang Yu, 2019). *Sàng* culture, which resides on the convenient and congenial online space provided by the internet, is a means for young people to let out their tension pent up from offline life, a way of admitting their imperfection and accepting themselves as they are (Dong Ziming, 2017; Liu Zhaoxia & Wang Yu, 2019; Yi Na, 2018).

⁹² Translation of the text: *Drink up this cup of bitter wine.* 苦酒 (bitter wine) is a metaphor for hardship.

⁹³ Translation of the text: *Force a smiling face.*

⁹⁴ Translation of the text: *However, that doesn't help at all.*

⁹⁵ Translation of the text: *Oh, I have no partner.* For more explanation, see footnote 84 and Section 3.4.

⁹⁶ Translation of the text: *I don't want to go to work!* In the text, the first character in the word 上班 (*shàng bān*, go to work) is substituted with 丧 (*sàng*, literally decadent), the pronunciation of which is very close to the former.

⁹⁷ Translation of the text: *Happiness is written on my face.*

3.2.4 Wū (dirty)

Wū (污, literally: dirty) originates from Japanese word 汚い, and is used on Chinese social media to refer to what is dirty and vulgar. Wū basically means to 'talk dirty', and wū Biaoqing mostly have blatant or subtle sexual allusions. It is a characteristic prominently present and constantly felt in the Biaoqing landscape. This characteristic is so established that 污 is even metapragmatically used in the texts of Biaoqing, even though sex-related content is not accepted according to (mainstream) Chinese social ethics and moral values. To be more specific here, we can see how online chronotopes offer moral affordances not available or considered deviant in other offline chronotopes of public interaction.



Figure 3.24 Examples of 'wū' Biaoqing

In many wū Biaoqing, the images and the texts are often not in congruence with each other, one of them blatantly or subtly pointing to sex, while the other totally irrelevant to sex (see the 1st-5th Biaoqing in Figure 3.24). The incongruence between images and texts

⁹⁸ Translation of the text: *I'll treat you to bubble chewing gum.* What the girl has in her hand is a Durex condom.

⁹⁹ Translation of the text: *You've been working so hard. Let me massage your shoulders.*

¹⁰⁰ Translation of the text: *After my sacred sword is laced with poison, you'll be dead.* The sword is a dildo, and the green bottle is 风油精, a Chinese over-the-counter medicine for itch, burning, insect bite, etc., which induces a cooling feeling on the skin. 风油精 took on a strong sexual insinuation after various stories and personal experiences of applying 风油精 to private parts spread on various forum posts in the last few years, and got viral through live video streaming forums in 2017.

¹⁰¹ 搽 is not a Chinese character. It is invented by internet users as a joke. 扌 is the semantic component of 'hand', 上 is the ideogram of 'up', and 下 'down'. 搽 is a rebus meaning a hand moving up and down, which alludes to masturbation.

¹⁰² Translation of the text: *Do you love me or cucumber?* Cucumber has a sexual connotation because of its resemblance to a penis or dildo in shape.

¹⁰³ Translation of the text: *I think you need this.* The figure in the Biaoqing is holding a bag of 去污粉 (household cleanser, literally: anti wū powder).

¹⁰⁴ Translation of the text: *So dirty. But I like it.*

¹⁰⁵ Translation of the text: *To be wū in the lips in order to hide the decency in the heart.*

¹⁰⁶ Translation of the text: *Girls who often use Biaoqing are usually very dirty.*

not only creates a sense of (black) humor, but also provides a hedge for the sex-related elements in Biaoqing.

There is a negotiation of the purchase of *wū* Biaoqing among internet users, but it is not happening in the traditional form of negotiation. It is taking place through the attitudes people have expressed in the *wū* Biaoqing they create and in the way they use them, both of which are further spread on various social media. The negotiation is materialized in what Biaoqing people decide to create and which Biaoqing they deem usable and actually use, in essence voting with one's feet. Such negotiation is conducted in such a way that people might not even be aware of it. Some internet users express a negative attitude towards the characteristic of *wū* (see the first Biaoqing on the bottom row in Figure 3.24), some admit the stigma of the characteristic of *wū*, but at the same time applaud it (see the second Biaoqing on the bottom row in Figure 3.24), and some defend this characteristic (see the third Biaoqing on the bottom row in Figure 3.24), some even generalize the behavioral traits of *wū* (see the last Biaoqing in Figure 3.24).

The last three Biaoqing on the bottom row in Figure 3.24 are at the same time instruction and discussion of the norms for evaluating *wū* Biaoqing. In these Biaoqing, texts are not only part of the Biaoqing, but also Biaoqing designers' attitudes, evaluations and understanding of the characteristic of *wū*. By integrating these texts in the Biaoqing they create, Biaoqing designers are creating knowledge about Biaoqing and about the characteristic of *wū*. The usage of these Biaoqing thus involves the spread, teaching and learning of the norms. Here we begin to see the extensive knowledge work done by internet users.

Actual communications by Biaoqing users in the data for this research show that *wū* Biaoqing are used in a joking manner in light-hearted communicative situations. In other words, *wū* Biaoqing, or Biaoqing in general, are ludic in nature (Deng Arong, 2018; Liu Shujie & Liu Yixuan, 2019; Wu Jing, 2016). *Wū* Biaoqing, though vulgar and denounced in traditional moral principles (Gong Jianxing, 2017; Jiang Jianguo & Li Ying, 2017), are used on Chinese social media in a ludic manner, which to a great extent cancels the moral corruption in *wū* Biaoqing. Besides this, using *wū* Biaoqing, as an action against the traditional moral values and socially recognized behavior, provides internet users a sense of thrill and a sense of being different (Jiang Jianguo & Li Ying, 2017). The data collected for this research reveals that being *wū* is also regarded as an expression of forthright attitude, of humor, and of vivacity in some occasions. These factors ensure the virality of *wū* Biaoqing on Chinese social media, especially among young people.

3.2.5 Violent

Violent Biaoqing, as suggested by the description, feature fighting and/or coarse and rude cursing texts. Different from *méng*, *jiàn*, *sàng* and *wū*, violent is not, at least not yet, an established description for this type of Biaoqing (as in the case of *méng* and *jiàn* Biaoqing), and it seldom appears in the texts in Biaoqing (as in the case of *sàng* and *wū* Biaoqing).¹⁰⁷ Nor is it recognized as a subculture by the general public or researchers.

¹⁰⁷ An exception is when the text in the Biaoqing is the Chinese neologism 很黄很暴力 (very erotic very violent), which has evolved from the punchline in an interview of a schoolgirl to a mocking expression (Nie Hua, 2018).

Violent Biaoqing often present fighting, threatening, and derogative contents (see Figure 3.25). To some degree, violent Biaoqing are the extension of other-debasement *jiàn* Biaoqing, both featuring uglification of the self and for the purpose of insulting others (for more see Section 3.2.2 *Jiàn*). There is no clear demarcation between these two categories, and they differ mainly in the degree of violence and rudeness.

Though violence and rudeness are blatantly incompatible with the (traditional) social ethics and etiquettes of benevolence (仁, *rén*) and propriety (礼, *lǐ*), they constitute a considerable part of the Biaoqing cultural system in Chinese society. The tolerance and acceptance of such violence and rudeness are confined to Biaoqing-related genres and chronotopes where being ludic is often one of the governing norms. The usage norms of violent Biaoqing are part of the community of knowledge of Biaoqing and part of the Biaoqing cultural system.



Figure 3.25 Examples of violent Biaoqing

3.2.6 Multi-characteristic Biaoqing

The above-introduced characteristics are not exhaustive, but are the most prominent and frequently present ones in the Biaoqing landscape. There is no clear definition and demarcation of the Biaoqing characteristics, and there are often overlaps between them. In many cases, different characteristics, sometimes seemingly controversial or incompatible ones, are fused in one Biaoqing. *Méng*, the most versatile one, is malleable to go with all other characteristics, for instance *méng* yet *jiàn*, *méng* yet *sàng*, *méng* yet *wū*, *méng* yet violent Biaoqing (see Figure 3.26). As explained in Section 3.2.1, this has to do with the cultural indexicalities of *méng* (i.e. cute, innocent, tender, needing protection) and the practice of *mai méng* (playing cute) as a way of showing weakness/inferiority to attract favor or win convenience, and/or as an efficient lubrication for interpersonal relationships.

¹⁰⁸ Translation of the text: *Eat shit, you stupid dick.*

¹⁰⁹ Translation of the text: *Give you a slap.*

¹¹⁰ Translation of the text: *Be pretentious again, and your willy will be cut off.* 装逼 (*zhuāng bī*, behave pretentiously) is a neologism on Chinese social media. 装 means to pretend, and 逼 means cunt. This word is used to refer to the practice of pretending to be a better person than what one really is. 装逼 has been so widely used that its connotation has expanded to refer to practice or phenomena towards which people hold a negative opinion (Jia Yuyang, 2016). But in further spread and in quite some situations, the negative connotations are bleached, and it might simply refer to pretentious exaggerations (Shang Yang, 2017).

¹¹¹ Translation of the text: *Watch your manner when you talk to your mother me!* Claiming to be a person's senior family member is a way of insulting that person. For more, see footnote 78.

¹¹² Translation of the text: *Stupid cunt, walk your son away.* 傻逼 (*shǎ bī*, stupid cunt) as a curse and insult is genderless. In Chinese culture, when used to describe a person, dog is a very insulting and derogative term.

The layering of different characteristics in one Biaoqing, especially the characteristic of *méng*, is an attempt to alleviate the harshness of the qualities (e.g. *jiàn, sàng, wū*, violent) which are denounced in traditional social ethos and etiquette, as has been discussed in the previous sections. This practice is on the one hand a gesture of paying tribute to traditional moral values, and on the other hand, a challenge of these values.



Figure 3.26 Examples of Biaoqing with multiple characteristics

3.3 Ludic nature of Biaoqing

The previous section discussed the characteristics of Biaoqing and their sociocultural backgrounds. This section will focus on the common feature of Biaoqing practices in online communication, i.e. their ludic nature.

As has been pointed out by Huizinga (1949: 4), play is “a function of culture proper”, and the fun of playing is beyond analysis or any logical interpretation. Fun and play are elusive yet familiar, and consequently they are often neglected in research, especially research on interaction (Goffman, 1961). However, play is not merely for entertainment. It also serves a wide range of purposes, for instance, identification, empowering, etc. (Frissen et al., 2015; Omasta & Chappell, 2015). The popularity of Biaoqing on Chinese social media is premised on the desire for fun (Deng Arong, 2018; Jiang Jianguo & Li Ying, 2017), and at the same time Biaoqing are capable of serving various other communication purposes (Al Zidjaly, 2017; Hu et al., 2015).

The ludic nature of Biaoqing is twofold. On the one hand, the Biaoqing are fun per se, incorporating humorous and/or funny elements, as has been analyzed in the previous sections. On the other hand, the usage of Biaoqing in the process of communication is for the purpose of fun. Here it is necessary to introduce Goffman’s view on the concept of game. A game is “a body of rules associated with a lore regarding good strategies” (Goffman, 1961: 33), where participants abide by *rules of irrelevance*, i.e. “participants are willing to forswear for the duration of the play any apparent interest in the esthetic, sentimental, or momentary value of the equipment employed” (1961: 19), and *transformation rules*, i.e. “a locally realized world of roles and events cuts the participants off from many

¹¹³ This Biaoqing is a GIF, with the inner side of the eyebrows moving up and down.

¹¹⁴ Translation of the text: *Hug your large leg*. The pinyin under the 抱大腿 is *ceng jing yan* (蹭经验), meaning to learn from the experience of the ‘large leg’, a metaphor of resourceful people. For more see footnote 73.

¹¹⁵ Translation of the text: *Ah, life*.

¹¹⁶ Translation of the text: *I’ll treat you to bubble chewing gum*. What the girl has in her hand is a durex condom.

¹¹⁷ Translation of the text: *Watch your manner when you talk to your mother me!*

externally based matters that might have been given relevance, but allows a few of these external matters to enter the interaction world as an official part of it" (1961: 29).

Communication is a game where participants play by the rules of irrelevance and transformation rules to achieve their mutual and/or respective aims. In the case of online communication, it is even more so for several reasons. First, non-face-to-face online communication per se is a realization of rules of irrelevance. Separated by screens and unable to see each other, participants by default assume that their counterparts are devoted to the communication, and the meaning of their messages can only be judged from the semiotic resources they employ, for instance language texts and Biaoqing, regardless of how they really feel or what their facial expressions actually are when they type and send messages. Second, there are numerous semiotic resources to indicate the commencement of a game, or playful communication (Deffree, 2019; Garrison et al., 2011; Novak et al., 2015; Tossell et al., 2012), and Biaoqing are one of the most prominent indicators. Note that the game metaphor of communication is in essence chronotopic: time-space configuration governed by rules.

Online communication is already a game, and when Biaoqing are invoked, it becomes a game within a game. Though most people might not be aware that they are playing a game when they conduct online communication, the majority are distinctly aware that they are engaging in a game when they use Biaoqing, as indicated by the joking or light-hearted tones in the Biaoqing and in the conversation. In most cases, when Biaoqing are used during online communication, a lighthearted and/or not-so-serious tone is usually spontaneously indicated, and a Biaoqing-related chronotope is immediately triggered.

3.4 Discussion and conclusion

Biaoqing and Biaoqing-related phenomena are possible only through the infrastructure of the internet, social medial and smart (mobile) devices. Biaoqing in Chinese society usually feature specific (celebrity) facial expression and figures. The facial expressions, figures and/or texts in Biaoqing endow them certain recognizable characteristics, including but not exclusive to *méng, jiàn, sàng, wū* and violent (or cute, mischievous and insulting, decadent, dirty or lewd, and violent). The characteristics of Biaoqing and their virality are the result of the extensive knowledge work by internet users, creating Biaoqing, instructing usage modes, discussing and learning norms.

Biaoqing per se is a genre that is an ingredient operating in related chronotopes. The characteristics and ludic nature of Biaoqing are some of the signals for people to recognize the communicative genre and follow the behavioral norms, which define the chronotopes.

The Biaoqing characteristics discussed in this chapter (e.g. *méng, jiàn, sàng, wū* and violent) are the most prominent and dominant in the Biaoqing landscape. The prominence and dominance of these characteristics are on the one hand a result of the historical and cultural influence of dominant features of Chinese society (as has been discussed in the previous sections in this chapter), and on the other hand a result of the mediation of algorithms that operate on the basis of people's profile data and online behaviors

(Epstein & Robertson, 2015; Liu Ye-Zheng et al., 2008; Wang Feng-Hsu & Shao Hsiu-Mei, 2004; Zittrain, 2014). In the process of conducting this research, I noticed that some Biaoqing are highly visible on various social media and search engines. For instance, on baidu.com (the largest Chinese search engine), when I searched with the keyword 'cute Biaoqing' (可爱表情), some Biaoqing are placed on the top and thus are highly visible and accessible; while some are placed at the far end of the webpage, and thus are much less visible and accessible (see Figure 3.27). Apart from this, the search results may differ for different people, depending on their IP addresses, the quality of network connections, etc. ('2010 exploration', 2010; Pariser, 2011; Xu Weiwei, 2017; Zac, 2017).

What is more, social media and internet service providers may suggest information on the basis of the big data of people's online behaviors. For instance, on baidu.com, when I searched with the keyword 'cute Biaoqing', related search keywords would pop up (in a visible place) on the webpage (e.g. WeChat Biaoqingbao, naughty Biaoqingbao, super *méng* Biaoqing of cuties, Biaoqingbao of love, nerdy *méng* Biaoqing, etc.; see the red circle in Figure 3.27).



Figure 3.27 The screenshot of the search-result page with keyword 'cute Biaoqing' on baidu.com

The differential visibilities of Biaoqing and suggested keywords are a reflection of the big data of people's Biaoqing preferences and online behaviors, i.e. a result of the mediation of algorithms. The search results are determined by algorithms the working of which involves multiple influencing factors, for instance the domains and visit frequency of the websites, the frequency of search keywords, IP addresses, etc. (Pariser, 2011; Poell & Van

Dijck, 2014; Shilov et al., 2007). Through these influencing factors, algorithms and people's online behaviors mutually influence and shape each other (Diakopoulos, 2016; Liu et al., 2008; Maly, 2018; Tufekci, 2015; Zhang Jun, Ackerman, & Adamic, 2007). The complex interaction between the influencing factors and the unpredictable interaction between algorithms and people's online behaviors together determine, shape and influence the Biaoqing ecology, which in turn feeds back to algorithms and people's online behaviors. The algorithmic actions are conducted backstage and thus not observable. However, the results of such algorithmic actions are presented on the frontstage of social media, i.e. forms of order in the social practices, which will be illustrated in Section 4.5.

After the discussion of the characteristics of Biaoqing, I would like to explore a different perspective to approach Biaoqing, the face-work perspective, which provides a fresh insight to Chinese online culture. To a large degree, Biaoqing is a barometer for reading social changes in China.

According to Goffman (1967: 5), face is the "positive social value a person effectively claims for himself" through the verbal and nonverbal acts by which "he expresses his view of the situation and through this his evaluation of the participants, especially himself". In Chinese culture, face-work is much more complicated than this. It has two dimensions: *miàn zi* (面子) and *liǎn* (脸), the literal meaning of both is face. The former refers to a person's social status and prestige achieved through personal effort, knowledge, ability, wealth, appearance, family background, social connection, etc., and the latter stands for the recognition of a person's moral integrity, the loss of which renders a person unable to function properly in a community (Hu Hsien Chin, 1944; Hwang Kwang-kuo, 1987; Zhai Xuewei, 2004).

Confucian ethics have great influence on the moral principles of conduct in Chinese society, especially the Five Constant Virtues (benevolence, righteousness, propriety, knowledge/wisdom, sincerity/fidelity) and the regulations of the achievements people were supposed to have at different stages of their life.¹¹⁸ 'Standing firm at thirty' (三十而立) had become an indicator of a fully functioning member in society, and thus a criterion for measuring a person's *miàn zi*. These over-two-thousand-year-old doctrines are deeply rooted in Chinese culture, though not all of them are still suitable for modern Chinese society. According to traditional Chinese criteria, a person who has no marriage, no children, no successful career, etc. at the age of thirty might be regarded as *mei miàn zi* (to have no *miàn zi*). In some extreme situations, this might even be regarded as *duī rén* (丢人, literally: lose person; to be disgraced), which connects 'standing firm at thirty' to the integrity of a person, and blurs the boundary between *miàn zi* and *liǎn*. Nowadays, many people cannot achieve standing firm at thirty, they are faced with great stress from society, and are struggling to do better. Their predicament induces a change of attitudes towards *miàn zi*. People gradually began to openly admit their unsatisfactory or embarrassing situations, the gaps between their dreams and harsh realities, and thus the rising of *jiàn* and *sàng* culture (Dong Kouyan, 2017; Ma Xiaoyan, 2016). As people care less about *miàn zi*, they have much less moral burden in *mai méng* (playing cute) as a way of showing

¹¹⁸ The regulations are 三十而立, 四十而不惑, 五十而知天命, 六十而耳顺, 七十而从心所欲, 不逾矩. Translation: At thirty, I stood firm. At forty, I had no doubts. At fifty, I knew the decrees of Heaven. At sixty, my ear was an obedient organ for the reception of truth. At seventy, I could follow what my heart desired, without transgressing what was right (Confucius, n.d.).

inferiority in order to gain some favor, the practice of which has been to some degree normalized (Wu Ming, 2015). Together with less caring about *miàn zi* of the self, people also began to care much less about the *miàn zi* of others, and make much less effort to maintain or give *miàn zi* to others, which is manifested in other-debasement and violent Biaoqing.¹¹⁹

Wū Biaoqing have much less to do with *miàn zi*, but are more related to *liǎn*, a person's moral integrity. Regarded as dirty and vulgar, sex-related contents were denounced in (traditional) Chinese social ethics, and were regarded as morally corrupted (Li Yinhe, 2009; Liu Dalin & Hu Hongxia, 2007; Wang Guimei & Wang Sidong, 2018). With the opening up policy and the influence of cultures from other countries, Chinese society has become much more tolerant of sex-related topics. The rise of *wū* Biaoqing is an indicator of the de-stigmatization of the ancient sex taboo.

It should be noted that, these phenomena are observed in Biaoqing, in online spaces, and it does not entail that people will behave similarly in offline spaces, which are governed by norms different from that of the online spaces. Besides this, online transgression of *miàn zi* and *liǎn* is conducted in a ludic manner, which indicates that the traditional concepts of *miàn zi* and *liǎn* are still relevant, respected, and even binding in Chinese society. But these changes, though neither extreme nor thorough, are clear indicators of the emergence of new social values and principles of conduct. This fact at the same time points to complexity of the online-offline nexus: the online and the offline influence, shape and reshape each other, and become part of each other.

This chapter has introduced the Biaoqing ecology in Chinese society. One of the conspicuous characteristics of Biaoqing and Biaoqing usage is their ludic nature. The next chapter will make a step in this direction to explore ludic practices performed within a particular type of community, i.e. the community of knowledge of Biaoqing.

¹¹⁹ Change in the perception of *miàn zi* is one reason, but not the only one. Chinese society is transforming from an acquaintance society to a stranger/contractual society. This is also an important factor behind various social changes (Zhao Juanjuan, 2011).

PART III

The community of knowledge of Biaoqing

The community of knowledge of Biaoqing is constructed of the knowledge products generated and the knowledge work performed by participants, i.e. people who happen to be exposed to the topic and phenomena of Biaoqing. Such a community is a result, not a precondition, of the knowledge practices performed in it. Part III will introduce and discuss different ways in which the community of knowledge of Biaoqing takes shape and operates, and the social implications of the community.

CHAPTER 4

The formation of the community of knowledge of Biaoqing

4.1 Introduction

Biaoqing are intangible knowledge products. To investigate the formation of Biaoqing-related communities, we need to turn to the knowledge products and knowledge activities which generate such communities.

In online spaces, people attracted to certain topics and contents view, spread, or create relevant information, i.e. intangible knowledge products. These actions and practices de facto make people participants of online communities revolving around such intangible knowledge products. Different from traditional offline communities with robust structures where people have specific roles to play and duties to perform (Durkheim, 1973; Parsons, 1991), the online communities I have observed are light in the sense that people are not connected through thick demographic, bureaucratic or sociological features such as nationality, gender, class, education, etc. (Fernback, 2007; Varis & Blommaert, 2015; Wellman, Boase, & Chen, 2002; but see Parsons, 1991). Such light communities are open and flexible, and there is no threshold for entry and no coercive membership responsibilities. I refer to such a light community as 'community of knowledge' for three reasons.

1. It is a congregation of knowledge products, that is to say the building blocks are knowledge shared by people. Participants of the community of knowledge may come and go, but the knowledge products stay, and the actions and practices of sharing and learning stay.
2. The congregation of knowledge is well structured around relationships and actions. In other words, participants have different positions and roles in the hierarchy of the community depending on the actions they perform, for instance producing knowledge, learning, discussing or innovating knowledge.
3. These actions, i.e. establishing, learning and sharing meanings and norms, define the community of knowledge.¹²⁰

¹²⁰ The focus on actions and knowledge may cause one to think that the well-established concepts of 'community of practice' and 'affinity space' are appropriate terms to describe what I have observed in this research. However, both concepts have serious limitations.

According to Wenger (2011: XX), "[c]ommunities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor". Three characteristics are crucial: the domain, the community, the practice. A community of practice is homogenous in the sense that it consists of members from a single discipline (Li Linda et al., 2009; Wenger & Snyder, 2000). The membership is

In the communities that I have observed in this research, the meanings and norms learnt and shared evolve around Biaoqing, and thus they will be referred to as communities of knowledge of Biaoqing. There are four characteristics common to the numerous communities of knowledge of Biaoqing on Chinese social media.

1. They are extremely open and flexible. They are formed by the fact that the participants in the communities are connected through the internet and the topic of Biaoqing. What is more, participants in a community play different roles, and their roles may change from time to time according to their actions.
2. People are not necessarily aware of the existence of such communities, let alone recognize themselves as participants. People become participants of a community of knowledge through the fact that they get, spread or create knowledge products in the community. Participation in a community of knowledge is to a large degree

self-selected, which implies a commitment to the joint enterprise of the community (Wenger, 1998; Wenger & Snyder, 2000), and the development of shared practice (i.e. the practice) is more or less self-consciously conducted by members (Wenger, 2011). The starting point of a community of practice is the actions ("creating, refining, communicating, and using knowledge") of a group of specific recognizable and labelable people (Wenger, 1998). This implies that the community of practice is a model based on the imagery of traditional offline groups (even though email might be used in communities of practice) (Gee & Hayes, 2012).

Nowadays the development of information technology and affordance of infrastructure have dramatically changed the way groups emerge or organize, especially in online spaces where super-diversity, anonymity, unpredictability and algorithms blatantly defy traditional imageries of a community. This renders the concept of community of practice outdated in the description and analysis of online groups.

Affinity space is a learning space or site, which features a common cause, or generator, with internal and external grammars and portals (Gee, 2005; Gee & Hayes, 2012). A great advance of this concept is its focus on the space instead of people, which helps circumvent various constraints intrinsic to the problem of membership in a community of practice. However, this concept has five restrictions.

1. The notion of generator is confusing. On the one hand, it refers to the common endeavor of people in the space, i.e. the content. On the other hand, according to Gee (2005) it is the actors who generate signs and change the relationships between signs, but these actors are not called generator. This means there is a lack of clarity in terms of the roles and actions in an affinity space.
2. The internal and external grammar do not provide much concrete information about how the space operates.
3. The terms of generator and portal refer to some abstract being/entity in the space under study, which fails to provide insight into what is happening in the space, and thus do not provide descriptive, explanative or analytical adequacy and/or accuracy to the study of the community or the space.
4. Affinity space is a prescriptive concept, which implies the practice of squaring concrete complicated semiotic social spaces and the human activities happening there to fit certain frames.
5. One of the features of affinity space is encouragement of the development and spread of knowledge (Gee & Hayes, 2012). The emphasis is on the knowledge-related actions as the core defining processes in the space. In comparison, a community of knowledge emphasizes the light online and offline connections, which organize and structure the community. Knowledge is an (unintended) result of the actions performed in the community.

Even though the concept of affinity space is claimed to allow "us to ask about what thoughts, values, actions and interactions go on in this space, by whom and with whom" (Gee, 2005: 223), the first four restrictions render it unequal to what it aims to achieve, and the fifth restriction renders it less suitable for describing the groups or communities that emerge online.

the result of the fact that knowledge activities are performed in an algorithm-mediated online space and the activities are partly generated and conditioned by algorithms, which has been discussed in Section 3.4 and will be further discussed in Section 4.5.

3. Communities of knowledge of Biaoqing emerge in miscellaneous forms on various social media with different regulations and market orientations, which endow a chronotopic nature on Biaoqing-related activities performed on these social media. The social media include blogs (Sina Weibo, Baidu Post Bar, etc.), Q&A forums (Zhihu, Baidu Knows, etc.), video sharing forums (Bilibili, etc.), instant messaging social media (WeChat, QQ, etc.), and other social media catering to more specific audiences. The knowledge practices in the communities of knowledge have different orientations, some focusing on the usage of Biaoqing, some on the making of Biaoqing, some on the sharing and spreading of Biaoqing, and in some, the usage of Biaoqing is not even the focus but background to other forms of activity.
4. Miscellaneous communities of knowledge of Biaoqing might overlap with each other, and they together form a layered grand community of knowledge of Biaoqing. In this research, the term community of knowledge of Biaoqing may refer to the grand community, or a sub-community, depending on the context.

The community of knowledge of Biaoqing is very complicated. It consists of numerous sub-communities of knowledge between which there is often an overlap between the knowledge products and practices in them. According to the dominant actions performed in the community, three types are recognized:

1. communities where Biaoqing-making knowledge is created and spread;
2. communities where the meanings of Biaoqing are established, negotiated and spread;
3. communities where Biaoqing-related norms are spread through Biaoqing usage in communication.

Community of knowledge is a very big umbrella term, especially when we think of the actions performed in the community. More precision is necessary when specific communities are being scrutinized. The focus of the first and second types of communities is teaching and learning, i.e. instruction, and therefore the label 'instruction community' will be used to refer to the two types of community of knowledge. In this chapter, the first type will be illustrated through three Biaoqing-making instruction communities, the second through one Biaoqing-usage instruction community.

In the third type of communities, Biaoqing is the background to other forms of activities, and the focus is on communication per se but not on meta-knowledge of Biaoqing (e.g. how to make Biaoqing, where to find Biaoqing, and the indexicalities or usage norms of Biaoqing, etc.). Though they are a very important part of the grand community of knowledge of Biaoqing, focusing on them would sidetrack the argument in the current chapter. Therefore, they will not be addressed here, and will be discussed in detail in Chapters 6 and 7.

4.2 Biaoqing-making instruction community 1: Bilibili tutorial videos

Biaoqing-making instructions are an indispensable part of the community of knowledge of Biaoqing. To get a clear picture of the community, I searched with keywords 'Biaoqing-bao making' (表情包制作) and 'making Biaoqingbao' (制作表情包) on various social media and different search engines, and found a sea of instructions which come in miscellaneous forms, for instance videos, texts, pictures, dialogic discussions, most of which are in multiple modes. Some of the instructions are initiatively shared by 'instructors', i.e. instructor-initiated, while some come into being because there are people asking for Biaoqing making instructions, i.e. question-initiated.

Among the thousands of Biaoqing-making instructions, the instruction which resulted in the biggest volume of (observable) actions among 'instructors' and 'learners' was chosen for analysis in this chapter. It was a series of tutorial videos posted on Bilibili.com on May 20, 2016. By August 22, 2017, this tutorial series had been watched 80,000 times, saved by 9,337 Bilibili users,¹²¹ shared 435 times on various forums, accumulated 1,742 *danmu*¹²² and 214 comments. This tutorial series, '[Xiaobai on PS] A must for Doutu, making Biaoqingbao through Photoshop',¹²³ consists of seven episodes, which cover different ways of making both static, and animate Biaoqing, or GIF:

- | | |
|-----------------|---|
| 1. 原图换脸大法 | Changing face for Biaoqing |
| 2. 图片切换制作动态表情 | Making a GIF out of several static pictures |
| 3. 简单几笔绘制贱兮兮的表情 | Adding drawing to pictures to make mischievous Biaoqing |
| 4. 让实拍照片动起来 | Turning a picture to a GIF |
| 5. 视频上绘制逐帧动画 | Adding drawing to frames in a GIF |
| 6. 分解表情局部做动态 | Turning a static Biaoqing to a GIF |
| 7. 逐帧动画 | Modifying frames to make a GIF |

In this instruction community, there are many people who did not leave much trace of participation, but they are there, as indicated by the frequency the videos have been watched and saved (80,000 and 9,337 respectively). At the same time, there are a handful of people who leave *danmu* and comments (1,742 and 214 respectively out of 80,000), the information in which is an intangible knowledge product generated through actions, and thus are an ideal window to investigate this community of knowledge.

¹²¹ Bilibili users are people who have an account on Bilibili. People not registered on Bilibili can also watch the videos, but they cannot leave comments or save the videos.

¹²² *Danmu*, literally bullet screen (to compare the abundance of comments to a barrage of bullets), is the functionality of overlaying comments, usually in a moving manner, on the screen when the video is being played. Each comment is also referred to as a *danmu*.

¹²³ Xiaobai is the name of the instructor, and PS refers to Photoshop. Doutu is a specific practice with Biaoqing. For more information, see Chapter 6. The Chinese title of this tutorial is 【小白讲PS】斗图必备, PS 表情包制作大法. Retrieved from <https://www.bilibili.com/video/av4709557/?p=7> on August 22, 2017. When I revisited this tutorial on November 6, 2019, the statistics of play, save, *danmu*, comment and coins had risen respectively to 174,000; 17,000; 2,435; 291 and 3,149.

A scrutiny of actions in the community reveals three levels of activities, which are scaled in terms of their relevance to Biaoqing-making, or to be more specific, relevance to the knowledge of Biaoqing resources. First-level activities are directly related to Biaoqing-making; second-level activities are meta-comments on role relationships in the community, the quality of the knowledge products, and the community environment; third-level activities are off the topic of instruction or Biaoqing (see Figure 4.1). In the following part, the three levels of activities will be presented in detail.

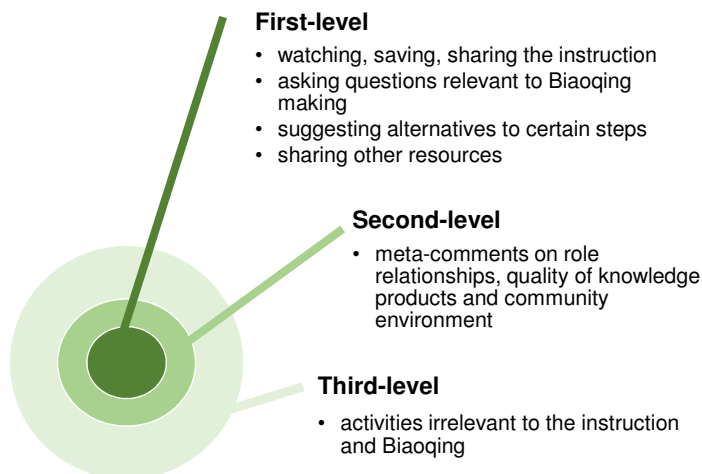


Figure 4.1 Three levels of activities in the Bilibili Biaoqing-making instruction community

4.2.1 First-level activities

First-level activities, which are directly relevant to Biaoqing-making, cover a wide range. The most common activities and also the cornerstone of this community, are watching, sharing and saving the tutorial videos, marking them to watch later, and also donating coins to the uploader.¹²⁴ The most basic actions in this community are reflected in the frequency of share and save, and the amount of coins it gets: this set of tutorial videos has been played 80,000 times, saved 9,347 times, shared 435 times, and has fetched 1,522 coins. These statistics at the same time reflect the popularity of the tutorial videos, and play an important role in deciding the visibility of the videos on the social media. On the one hand, the statistics of these first-level activities share the status of second-level activities, i.e. providing meta-information about the popularity and thereby the quality of the instruction. On the other hand, these statistics feed into the algorithms and amplify the influence of this tutorial instruction community. First, the fact that this tutorial was placed on the top of the lists when I searched with keywords 'Biaoqingbao making' and

¹²⁴ Coins are the virtual currency on Bilibili.com. The more coins a post gets, the more visible it will be on Bilibili.

‘making Biaoqingbao’ illustrates this point. Second, Bilibili provides different ranking choices for people to access its contents, including most viewed, most recently published, most *danmu* and most saved. Both points illustrate the influence of algorithms on the visibility of this tutorial.

Though this website is mainly popular among anime, comics and games (ACG) fans, the videos can be directly shared not only on the most used social media in China, including Sina Weibo, Qzone, QQ, Baidu Post Bar (the four icons behind ‘Share’ on the top left) and WeChat, but also on other less popular social media through URL links (see Figure 4.2). The trans-media sharing functionality makes the tutorial videos accessible to an inestimably wider audience. In other words, the affordance of social media (in this case Bilibili.com) assists the spread of knowledge. This points to the (often neglected) role and importance of infrastructure in the formation and development of community of knowledge (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Kietzmann et al., 2011; Yan Daocheng & Ma Susu, 2018).

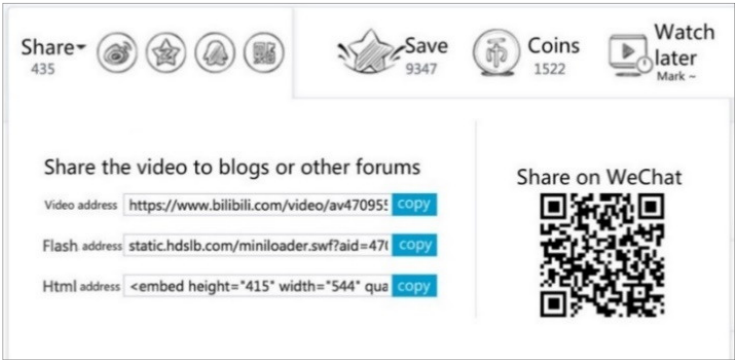


Figure 4.2 Trans-media sharing function of Bilibili

Apart from watching, saving and sharing the tutorial, participants leave *danmu* and comments in this instruction community. A small portion of the *danmu* and comments are relevant to the processes of making Biaoqing. Some participants state where they fail and ask for solutions, some suggest (better) alternatives to certain steps, some ask for the raw materials for making Biaoqing, and some share other resources for making Biaoqing (e.g. other software or apps) (see comments in Figure 4.3). The actions in these *danmu* and comments are the learning of Biaoqing making, i.e. knowledge activities.

1	真心求回答，做换脸的表情包，添加第二张图片的时候，为什么第二张原图再怎么清晰，倒入以后都会变成马赛克	When I insert the second picture, no matter how clear it is, it would become mosaic. Does anybody know why
2	求素材包 谢谢勒	Does anybody know where to get the raw material for Biaoqing
3	然而这些手机软件花熊分分钟制作。	Cellphone app Huaxiong can make Biaoqing super conveniently.

Figure 4.3 Examples of first-level activities through ‘danmu’ and comments

Two viewers left comments saying that they did not have the same tools as the instructor, as in 'without a digital panel, what should underdogs like us do'. These comments convey multiple layers of information. It is an attempt to find a solution to the lack of advanced tools, i.e. a knowledge activity. At the same time, it is a self-satire by the participants, i.e. a performance of micro-hegemonic identity.

Micro-hegemonic identity is one of the fundamental aspects of social actions and is repeatedly observed in people's actions. Identity is not given, but performed in highly 'situated contexts' (Garfinkel, 2002). Each of the situated contexts, or chronotopes, is governed by a set of behavioral norms, which makes communication possible and understandable, i.e. 'hegemony' (Blommaert, 2005). There is no overarching chronotope, and consequently there does not exist a set of norms and rules which applies to all chronotopes. Numerous chronotopes coexist and people orient to a different set of norms each time they enter a specific chronotope (Bakhtin, 1981). Chronotopes are fractal (ibid.) and there are endless chronotopes within which people conduct themselves according to the norms which define the chronotopes. Each set of norms governs only one segment of people's life, and are thus 'micro'. The identities performed in accordance with the norms in specific chronotopes are micro-hegemonic identities. In comparison with the thick bureaucratic demographic parameters such as ethnicity, class, gender, etc. (Parsons, 1991), micro-hegemonic identities are *light*, and they complement the *thick* identities (Blommaert & Varis, 2015). Such identities are performed in different segments of a person's life, and are diacritics of a person.

To sum up, first-level activities in this instruction community are directly related to Biaoqing making, raw materials for Biaoqing, or alternative apps. The overwhelming majority of the activities are implicitly played out through the actions of watching, saving, sharing and donating coins to the tutorial videos. A fraction of these activities is conducted through explicitly asking and answering questions through comments or *danmu*.

These activities project the relevance and quality of the Biaoqing-making knowledge involved in them (e.g. donating coins) and produce robust new information (e.g. suggesting alternative apps). An extra note is that these activities are frequently multi-layered: one activity can be at the same time about Biaoqing-making and about other topics (i.e. micro-hegemonic identity).

4.2.2 Second-level activities

Second-level activities, carried out in comments and *danmu*, are meta-comments on the quality of the knowledge products, the environment of the community, and role relationships in the community. A handful of participants state that they click on the videos because they see the keywords 'Biaoqing' or 'winning Douyu' in the title of this tutorial. Through such messages, participants manifest their interest in Biaoqing, and at the same time demonstrate their identities of eager learners and enthusiastic Biaoqing users.

Examples of comments on the quality of the tutorial are, for instance, ‘useful’, ‘very interesting’, ‘so funny’, ‘cute’, ‘more saves than comments’,¹²⁵ ‘comprehensive’,¹²⁶ ‘high end’, ‘prolific’, ‘I like her way of teaching’. There are also denials of the quality of the tutorial, for example ‘so complicated’, ‘Tao is enough for every demand’,¹²⁷ ‘I’m so sad to know that all these can be done easily on Huaxiong’.¹²⁸

Some participants comment on the raw materials used in the tutorial. In one of the episodes, the picture of Kim, a character in a film played by Choi Seong-guk, is made black and white. Many participants leave comments such as ‘gives me goosebumps’, ‘forever Kim’, ‘picture of a deceased’, etc. Some declare their favorite stars for making Biaoqing, for instance ‘I prefer Pope and Jacky Cheung’.

A few participants make general remarks on Chinese people’s obsession with Biaoqing (see Figure 4.4). An interesting phenomenon is that some participants invoke the Biaoqingbao Battle between internet users from Mainland China and Taiwan on Facebook in January 2016 to demonstrate the point. In making such comments, community participants are not only sharing their opinions towards Biaoqing, but also sharing knowledge of social facts (i.e. the Biaoqingbao Battle) which is not widely known to the general public.

一直觉得国人对表情包和梗有着迷之执着……(‘·_·’) ‣ 蜜汁赞同 ‣ 捕捉两个表情包 ‣ 嗯确实是这样 ‣ 想到了 FB 表情包大战	I feel that Chinese people have a mysterious obsession with Biaoqingbao and memes (‘·_·’) ‣ Agree ‣ Collected two Biaoqingbao ‣ Indeed ‣ Reminds me of the Biaoqingbao Battle on FB
就是你们这些人，成天制作表情，导致海峡两岸战斗力严重不对等！你们这是穷兵黩武懂咩！咩！	You guys devote yourselves to making Biaoqing. Consequently, Taiwan lags far behind Mainland China in combat effectiveness! You are investing too much in it!

Figure 4.4 Examples of comments on Chinese people’s enthusiasm with Biaoqing

Second-level activities cover a wide range, and through them participants express their attitudes and opinions towards the tutorial, raw materials of Biaoqing, and practices relevant to Biaoqing usage. These activities are de facto people’s reflection on their own preferences, tastes and behavioral traits in the Biaoqing cultural system, which boil down to their (micro-hegemonic) identities. What is more, some people proactively perform certain micro-hegemonic identities through these activities. That is to say, in this Biaoqing-making instruction community, besides learning and sharing knowledge about

¹²⁵ Usually, there would be more comments than saves. By saying ‘more saves than comments’, the participant indicated that the videos are of such high quality that viewers save them instead of only leaving comments.

¹²⁶ It means this tutorial covers every way of making Biaoqing.

¹²⁷ Tao refers to Huang Zitao (黄子韬), a Chinese rapper, singer-songwriter and actor. His facial expressions are frequently used in Biaoqing.

¹²⁸ Huaxiong is an app for making Biaoqing.

Biaoqing, participants are at the same time actively performing identities. Though second-level activities are not as robust as first-level activities in terms of volume and salience, they produce meta-knowledge about the community per se, for instance role relationships, the community environment and the quality of the knowledge products, which is an important part of the community of knowledge.

4.2.3 Third-level activities

Third-level activities, not relevant to the instruction, are 'off-topic' activities. Interestingly enough, this type of activities account for the overwhelming majority of *danmu* and comments. The characteristics of the instructor Xiaobai (for instance her voice, personality, gender, hometown, etc.) are the central themes of these activities.

The instructor has become the star in the community. Her audience expresses their admiration for her in *danmu* and comments. There are numerous praises for her, for instance 'cute', 'humorous', and 'good character'. Many followers go a step further, addressing her as 'my queen', leaving messages like 'I profess to you Xiaobai', 'please be my girlfriend'. Also her laughing, idiosyncratic expressions, and what she majors in in her studies, etc. all become topics for the audience.

Many participants like Xiaobai's voice and laughing, commenting 'cute Putonghua', 'so sweet', 'very cute', 'I like her voice', 'enigmatic', 'I repeatedly listen to her laughing 500 times', and 'the voice and tone make me laugh'.

In the tutorial videos, Xiaobai uses 'right?' very frequently, as if she were engaged in a conversation with her audience. This expression attracts viewers' attention and some even begin to count the frequency of her 'right?'.

In one of the episodes of the tutorial, Xiaobai invites her friend, a Tianjin¹²⁹ citizen, to read a short introduction to this tutorial in Tianjin dialect, as a negative answer to participants who suggested in the previous episode that she is from Tianjin. This triggers participants to guess at her hometown. Some viewers stray from the guessing-hometown topic and leave messages such as 'Tianjin citizen passes by', 'Tianjin citizens begin to laugh', 'Henan citizens begin to laugh'. By such messages, viewers are announcing their own hometowns, and they are expressing pride in their local identities.

Some participants are not sure about Xiaobai's gender and leave messages for clarification, for instance 'a boy or a girl?', 'a girl?'. There are two viewers who said, 'so cute, must be a boy', 'though I know the uploader is a girl, subconsciously I still think the uploader is a cute boy (receiver)'. These two messages are triggered by the discussion on the gender of Xiaobai. Both messages (either subtly or explicitly) convey positive opinion towards gay people, at least towards those who are cute receivers. In sharing their guessing and answers, the two viewers are actually alluding to their own micro-hegemonic

¹²⁹ Tianjin is a metropolis in northern coastal Mainland China and one of the five national central cities of the country. Tianjin dialect is highly recognizable for its peculiar tones. Thanks to many famous crosstalk artistic works performed in it, Tianjin dialect has acquired a humorous and comic flavor. Retrieved from <https://zh.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=天津话&oldid=45225378> on September 28, 2017.

identities, depending on their gender, as a gay or a rotten girl.¹³⁰ The actions of the two viewers point to two facts:

- In the community of knowledge, the actions are anonymous and identifiable at the same time. They are anonymous in the sense that they do not provide information about participants' appearance, gender, nationality, etc. They are identifiable in the sense that things like gender and nationality can be made relevant. This dual-status essence of online actions is the hard evidence for the action-centered perspective in the methodology for this study.
- Some participants show the tendency to make this light community more solid, personal and intimate. When there is demand or desire in a light community for the information (or knowledge) of a certain participant, the breeding ground for fandom is in position, though this community does not have to develop towards that direction. When the behavioral norms in the community of knowledge change, a new chronotope will be introduced into the current one, either replacing it, co-existing with it, or developing into a new chronotope. In such cases, the phenomenon of cross chronotope, which will be addressed in detail in Part IV, is in position.

One participant speculated whether the uploader majors in programming because she used specialized terminology, which aroused responses from other viewers (see Figure 4.5). These messages form a conversation with four distinct characteristics. First, the participants do not know and cannot see each other. Second, they do not indicate whom they are addressing. Third, their conversation is interspersed with other participants' messages, which are not relevant to their topic. Fourth, they might leave the conversation at any moment, and there is an element of contingency¹³¹ in the interaction.

1	Up 主要是学编程的吗 各种术语	Does the uploader major in programming? So many terminologies
2	这些术语不是基本么, 什么编程, , , ,	These are the basic, no programming,,
3	尼玛会点 PS 这就叫术语	WTF Are terms in PS terminologies
4	那算术语吗, 这些只是快捷键, 身为一个动画狗 ps 要考证心塞的不得了	Are those terminologies? Merely keyboard shortcuts. As a major in animation, I need to pass the exam on ps. So unhappy
5	弹幕别说的所有人都和你们一样厉害, 有好多人都不会 PS 的啊	Don't make it seem that all people are as good as you. Actually many people don't know PS at all

Figure 4.5 Examples of 'danmu' relevant to the message about programming

¹³⁰ Rotten girl is the literal translation of the Japanese word *fujoshi* (腐女子, ふじょし), which refers to females who are fans of manga and novels that feature romantic relationships between men. Retrieved from <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Rottengirl%28Fujoshi%29> on September 28, 2017.

¹³¹ The conversation is highly contingent on many factors, for instance, the *danmu* popping up on the screen of a participant who happens to be in the mood to respond and happens to have something to say in response to the *danmu*.

In this conversation, some participants comment on the question of the viewer who knows little about Photoshop and programming (see comments 2-4 in Figure 4.5). While doing so, they also allude to or explicitly mention their knowledge of Photoshop. Such actions are de facto performance of micro-hegemonic identities, i.e. an animation major or a person who knows something about Photoshop. A very interesting message is the one defending the participant who poses the question, arguing that not everyone knows so much about Photoshop (see comment 5 in Figure 4.5). This message reveals the inequality in this community. Though everyone has access to the tutorial, not everyone has the necessary expertise to apply the knowledge shared in the tutorial.

Besides the activities evolving around the instructor Xiaobai, some participants express their proudness of being among the first 100 who comment on the tutorial. They are proud of being early birds, which means superiority over 'late birds', i.e. social capital.

One of the most conspicuous results of the third-level activities is that the instructor Xiaobai is promoted to a very central position where she is not merely an instructor or knowledge producer anymore. She is being idolized by participants, or her followers. An inevitable result is that the structure of this community is being gradually re-constructed and reinforced. People's pride of being early birds, or a sense of belonging, testifies to this point.

To sum up, a wide variety of activities are conducted in this community. The three levels of activities produce knowledge of different relevance to Biaoqing-making. These activities, when performed by participants, produce intangible knowledge products and generate a Biaoqing-making instruction community.

Apart from learning, sharing, spreading and creating knowledge, which defines the community of knowledge, participants are also performing micro-hegemonic identities, for instance the identity of gay or rotten girl, of poor student, etc. In other words, they are orienting to multiple sets of behavioral norms, i.e. there is polycentricity (Blommaert, 2010, 2018a). In Bakhtin's words (1981: 252), a chronotope "can include within it an unlimited number of minor chronotopes". The polycentric characteristic of the actions performed in the community points to issues of cross-chronotopic and polychronotopic nature, which will be fully addressed in Part IV.

4.3 Biaoqing-making instruction community 2: Zhihu discussion thread

The Bilibili instruction community introduced above is only one example of numerous Biaoqing-making instruction communities. It is special in that it develops from a central star instructor, develops as a branch of an ICT tutorial community with a large fan base, and the tutorial is relatively professional. Many other Biaoqing-making instruction communities develop from scratch, without central star instructors or fan bases. In such communities, various idiot-proof apps for Biaoqing-making are shared, and thus they are more friendly for laypeople and the general public who do not know much about Photoshop. One example is an instruction community emerging on Zhihu, a Q&A forum.

To have a clear picture of the structure of this instruction community, the answers and their comments are closely analyzed to find out the actions performed in this community. Similar to the Bilibili instruction community, the Zhihu instruction community also presents three levels of activities.

In the analysis of this instruction community, we are moving straight into one of the essential points of our study, one that has remained in the background until now. As I said in Chapter 1, Biaoqing is an algorithmically mediated knowledge product, and its participants, modes of action and types of communities are all profoundly influenced by algorithmic operations performed in the backstage of online action. In what follows, we shall see some ways in which algorithms structure and shape the knowledge activities performed within the community of knowledge: by means of the ranking of questions and other kinds of post, creating superior visibility for specific bits of knowledge work, by providing specific algorithmically organized Q&A platforms-within-platforms enabling participants to judge what is most 'normal' in terms of usage norms of specific items. Thus, the different kinds of activities that I shall discuss in what follows must all be set against the background of algorithmic operations shaping the chronotopes in which they are deployed, and defining the affordances for assuming particular participant roles and role relationships within the community of knowledge (Hanell & Salö, 2017).

4.3.1 First-level activities

Zhihu user JPIA posted the question 'how to make Biaoqingbao' on August 3, 2015, and by August 31, 2017, the question was answered by 28 repliers, followed by 1,123 Zhihu users, and viewed 267,355 times.¹³² The question-editing log shows that on August 3, 2015 and April 10, 2017, JPIA edited the question to make it more concise and precise, added some topic tags and deleted others. The purpose of topic tags is to make it easier for people to access the question and more efficient for Zhihu to connect the questions with users who have the expertise to answer the question, which works through the algorithms of Zhihu (Zhihu, 2017, 2019). The practice of question editing indicates that people, at least in this case Zhihu user JPIA, are aware of the working of algorithms and consciously regulate their actions to achieve desired results in an algorithmically configured chronotope.

The most common first-level activities are viewing and following, and the audience of this community is much larger than that of the Bilibili instruction community (played 80,000 times, saved by 9,337 Bilibili users).

The second most common first-level activity is to up-vote answers. The more an answer is up-voted, the more to the front it will be promoted, and the more visible it will become to potential audience, which is a frontstage presentation of one of the results of backstage algorithmic actions. The top-two answers accumulated 846 and 112 up-votes respectively. The up-voting functionality endows participants the power to influence the value or visibility of answers in the community, which is in essence a very subtle and

¹³² Retrieved from <https://www.zhihu.com/question/33983730> on August 31, 2017. By July 26, 2019, when I revisited this Q&A thread, the number of follows and views rose respectively to 1,242 and 434,265.

inconspicuous way of instructing through the mediation of algorithms that shape the chronotope through backstage actions.

The third most common first-level activity is sharing resources of Biaoqing, which may be performed through providing answers to questions, or through commenting on the answers. Some instructors introduce apps and provide operating instructions. For instance, Zhihu user Shenweien demonstrated how to make Biaoqing through the combined use of three picture processing apps (VSCO, LINE BrushLite, and LINE Camera), and shared where to download them. Zhihu user Xiaobai shared URL links to her Biaoqing-bao-making Photoshop tutorial videos on doyoudo.com. It is worth mentioning that Xiaobai is the same instructor as in the Bilibili instruction community described in the previous section, which points to the trans-media nature of what we see here, involving overlaps between different sub-communities of knowledge of Biaoqing. Some instructors introduce apps designed specifically for making Biaoqing, for instance FaceKing, Huaxiong (花熊), i Biaoqing (i 表情), Biaoqing Kingdom (表情王国), etc. Some recommend websites for finding and/or making Biaoqing. In comparison with viewing and up-voting answers in the thread, sharing resources is an activity of providing information and thereby contributes more concrete knowledge to this community of knowledge.

There are also instructors who provide alternatives to making Biaoqing. These alternatives are about the sources of Biaoqing in general. The most popular Biaoqing on Chinese social media are spawned by pictures of real people, especially celebrities, screenshots of TV dramas or films (see 1 in Figure 4.6). A more grassroots version is Biaoqing made from pictures of common people, which would be more meaningful among people who know the person (see 2-3 in Figure 4.6), but can have more limited purchase for the general public. In spite of the limited purchase of such alternative resources, they still have the potential of going viral in specific communities. Other first-level activities include seeking clarification for certain steps of Biaoqing making and asking for sources to download apps.

1	事实上，表情包可以直接去 tvb 上自截。真的很多 甚至不用自己配字 台词很到位	In fact, you can screen shot tvb. ¹³³ There are so many. You don't even need to add your own texts. The actors' lines are quite precise
2	其实我比较喜欢把身边的逗比做成表情包，比较独特，哈哈哈~	Actually, I prefer to make the pictures of my funny friends into Biaoqing. More unique. Hahaha~
3	帮基友们拍了一系列黑照，做成表情包在恰当的时候发出来，然后她们就骂着用起来了，而我就静静看着她们偶尔用对方的互相攻击，她们表示很欠揍但是异常好用	I take a series of funny silly pictures of my friends, make them into Biaoqing, and use them when I see fit. Then my friends would use the Biaoqing and scold me at the same time. I would just enjoy watching them bicker, using each other's Biaoqing. According to them, the Biaoqing are mischievous, but super

Figure 4.6 Examples of alternatives to making Biaoqing provided by answerers

¹³³ Television Broadcasts Limited, commonly known as TVB, is the first wireless commercial television station in Hong Kong, which is Asia's largest commercial television production centre. Here the instructor is referring to TV dramas by TVB.

When instructors provide answers, they often state the advantages and/or characteristics of the resources they share. Some instructors focus on pragmatic aspects, for instance, 'easy', 'convenient' (see 1-3 in Figure 4.7). These descriptions point to different needs of different participants, which boil down to two words: convenient and comprehensive. Some instructors emphasize the idiosyncratic features of the resources they share, for instance, 'funny', 'hilarious', 'cute', etc. (see 4-5 in Figure 4.7). It is quite obvious that the instructors are not only sharing the resources, but also sharing their tastes and evaluation criteria for Biaoqing, which is in nature the production of norms in the community. What is more, some instructors directly connect their resources with Doutu (see 3 in Figure 4.7). This reflects the fact that for some people an important purpose of Biaoqing is to participate in Doutu, a ludic practice of Biaoqing usage, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

1	我来一个简单的表情教学	Let me give you an easy and simple Biaoqing tutorial
2	花熊, 这个 app 超好用	Huaxiong. This app is super convenient
3	gif 喵 斗图达人爆爱的表情包搜索平台—gif 喵 我想、骚年、你需要一个海量表情包网站、随取随用, 还用制作个毛线啊! 拿走不谢!	gif 喵, a Biaoqing forum loved by Doutu gurus. I think, young people, you need a website which provides millions of Biaoqing that you can use whenever you want. No need to go through all the troubles of making Biaoqing yourselves. Take it, and you're welcome!
4	一个完全逗比的系列!	A hilarious and funny tutorial series!
5	不知道有没有人喜欢这样萌萌哒表情包~	Not sure if anyone likes cute Biaoqingbao like these ~

Figure 4.7 Examples of instructors' descriptions of their resources

The statistic information of some first-level activities in the Zhihu instruction community (e.g. count of up/down-vote, views, following) are part of the design structure of the platform, and algorithm is an inevitable part of it. The mediation of algorithm enables people to judge what is the most 'normal' in terms of practice norms. On the whole, the first-level activities in the Zhihu instruction community is more diversified than the Bilibili community, which is determined by the way this community emerges (i.e. question-initiated) and the algorithms that structure and shape the knowledge activities in the community (Gillespie, 2014; Pariser, 2011; Zhang Jun et al., 2007).

4.3.2 Second-level activities

In the Zhihu instruction community, second-level activities are conducted through comments on the answers. The most common second-level activity is expression of gratitude to instructors (see comments 1-4 in Figure 4.8). Some comment on the quality of the knowledge (see comments 5-9 in Figure 4.8), and some state the (expected) results of acquiring the knowledge produced in the instruction (see comments 10-11 in Figure 4.8).

1	超级感谢答主，v 信给你花红包	Thank the answerer a lot. Let me give you a red envelope on WeChat ¹³⁴
2	答主好人，新技能 get ✓	The answerer is a good person. New skill acquired
3	好棒啊 鼓掌	Super Applause
4	下了好用，谢谢	I have downloaded the app. It's good. Thanks
5	这才是好答案，没有赞，心疼。	This is what a good answer should be like. There is no up-vote for it. So sad.
6	哈哈哈哈哈笑出声	Hahahaha, make me laugh out loud
7	可爱的软妹表情包。	Cute Biaoqing for lovely girls.
8	VSCO 果然神应用。以前用毁图溴溴和天天 P 图，做出来的效果都极其糟……	VSCO is indeed an awesome app. The apps I used before only produced very poor-quality results……
9	收费不？	Is the app free?
10	用很久了 我简直 无敌 酷！	I have used it for a long time. I am almost invincible. ¹³⁵ Cool!
11	学会这个技能之后，我朋友圈毒瘤的身份终于可以做实了	After getting this skill, I finally can materialize the identity of tumor in WeChat Moments ¹³⁶

Figure 4.8 Examples of second-level activities conducted through comments

On the surface, comment 9 'Is the app free?', is a question about the Biaoqingbao-making tools. On a deeper level, it points to the issue of (e-)inequality. Though the internet is accessible to all internet users, not all internet users are equal in online spaces (Dewan & Riggins, 2005; DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001; Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008). There are various reasons for the inequality. A very simple example is that some apps are not free, and for people who do not have the money to pay for the apps, there would be disparity in resources, as reflected in comment 9 in Figure 4.8. Besides this, there are other disparities, for instance the affordability and quality of networks. The internet is not as equal as it seems.

Comments 10 and 11 in Figure 4.8 are people's feedback on the effects of the resources produced by instructors. At the same time, they provide information about people's online activities with Biaoqing, for instance being 'invincible' in Doutu, or being a 'tumor' in WeChat Moments, i.e. being innovative or mischievous in deploying Biaoqing in updating posts.

In comparison with the Bilibili community, the second-level activities in the Zhihu community are quite limited in number. The commonalities are that the activity types are the same, and the results are the same, i.e. participants are producing meta-knowledge about the community environment, the knowledge products and role relationships in the community, and thereby actively performing micro-hegemonic identities.

¹³⁴ Red envelope, also known as red packet, is a monery gift. On WeChat people can send digitalized red envelopes. For more information, see Section 8.2.

¹³⁵ Invincible in Doutu (Biaoqing fights). For detailed discussion, see Chapter 6.

¹³⁶ WeChat Moments is the functionality on WeChat where users can update posts.

4.3.3 Third-level activities

The overwhelming majority of third-level activities revolves around instructors. For instance, in comments to Xiaobai’s tutorial, Zhihu users recognize her and begin to express their admiration, and one even comments that ‘hearing her voice can give me an orgasm’. For the instructor who demonstrates how to make Biaoqing through stick figure drawing, participants express their amazement at her drawing (see comment 1 in Figure 4.9). The instructor who suggests using a selfie as an alternative to making Biaoqing, triggers comments from other Zhihu users, and thus an instance of teasing emerges in this community (see comment 2 in Figure 4.9). One instructor shares the link to the search results of ‘how to make Biaoqing’ on the search engine bing.com (see 3 in Figure 4.9). This answer triggers a participant to leave a comment ‘earnestly boycotting Baidu’, the top one search engine in China.

1	这是一位艺术家，doge	The answerer is an artist, doge ¹³⁷
2	你可以试试自拍 ‣ 同学，来一张啊（阴险 ‣ 可惜评论区不能上图	You can try selfie ‣ Hi, please upload one (sly ¹³⁸ ‣ Pity that pictures cannot be used in comments
3	cn.bing.com/search?... 点这里 ‣ 真•身体力行抵制百度	cn.bing.com/search?... Click here ‣ Earnestly boycotting Baidu

Figure 4.9 Examples of third-level activities through comments

As demonstrated in the comments, the third-level activities in this community are highly contingent on the interests of instructors and commenters, and on specific (social) back-grounds, and thus are highly unpredictable. The activities per se show clear shifts in genre, for instance, the shift from giving a suggestion to teasing in comment 2 in Figure 4.9.

4.3.4 Summary

To sum up, the activity types in the two instruction communities are basically the same, including seeking clarification for operational procedures, suggesting alternative operations, sharing other resources, commenting on the instruction, sharing meta-comments on the knowledge and role relationships in the community. At the same time, there are great differences in the number of certain activity types between the two communities. Their similarities and disparities are determined by the nature of the community (i.e. community of knowledge), the way the community is constructed (i.e. instructor-centered or question-centered), and the algorithms shaping and structuring the chronotopes back-stage.

¹³⁷ Doge refers to the Biaoqing 🐶, whose meaning is highly dependent on the chronotope. On Zhihu, doge Biaoqing is not available, and users resort to the text description of the Biaoqing as a substitution.
¹³⁸ The word sly here refers to this Biaoqing: 😏.

The three levels of activities in both communities show different relevance to Biaoqing-making, and thus bear differential relevance to Biaoqing resources. In spite of disparate relevance to Biaoqing knowledge, all activities are building blocks of the community of knowledge. It should be pointed out that Biaoqing-making is the overarching topic in the two communities of knowledge. Alongside this, there are numerous other (related) topics. Two of them are the most prominent. One is the disparities between participants in terms of the economic and cultural capital they possess, even though they all have access to the community, and this points to inequality in communities of knowledge. The other one is the demonstration of personal traits, preferences, tastes, value or moral judgements of Biaoqing, which point to the fact of people's non-stopping performance of micro-hegemonic identities.

4.4 Biaoqing-making instruction community 3: Biaoqing-making app Huaxiong

When I was doing research on the Bilibili and Zhihu instruction communities, the app Huaxiong was recommended so many times that I decided to check out how it works. After exploring its functionalities, I found that it is not merely a Biaoqing-making app, but more a forum for a Biaoqing-making community. In this section, I will discuss in detail the app Huaxiong and the community around it.

Huaxiong is developed by a team of 11 members. Huaxiong for Android system was launched in October 2014, and Huaxiong for iOS system was launched in 2016. By October 2017, 1.3 million Android system users have downloaded Huaxiong through Baidu cellphone assistant,¹³⁹ and 582 iOS system users have rated Huaxiong on iOS app store.¹⁴⁰ The actual number of Huaxiong users might be much bigger because not all Android users download through Baidu cellphone assistant, and not all iOS users rate the app. Huaxiong is an app, which provides templates and models for users to make Biaoqing with raw material of their own choice. It is at the same time a social media for users to communicate with each other through sharing the Biaoqing they have created.

On Huaxiong, all the Biaoqing are referred to as 'sticker'. Huaxiong consists of three function zones: Bubble, Biaoqing-making, Circusee. Circusee, a blend of 'circus' and 'see', is my translation of the Chinese neologism 围观 (*wéi guān*), literally meaning 'surround to watch'. Circusee is used to describe the phenomenon of a large number of people following or participating in the discussion of some events not relevant to themselves, or people standing by and looking on. On Huaxiong, the function zone Circusee is where users can view various Biaoqing shared by others.

The functionalities of the three zones are different yet closely related. In the Bubble zone, there are nine sub-sections (Chatroom, Sticker Exchange, Beautiful Texts, How-to Space, Sticker Gallery of Master Ba, Huaxiong Sticker Gallery, Huaxiong Stickers, Private

¹³⁹ Retrieved from <http://shouji.baidu.com/software/11160827.html> on October 4, 2017.

¹⁴⁰ Retrieved from <https://itunes.apple.com/cn/app/hua-xiong-tu-kai-xin/id917617928?mt=8> on October 4, 2017.

Chat, Notice. See 1 in Figure 4.10) which serve to engage Huaxiong users to interact with each other, especially in Sticker Exchange, where users can share Biaoqing, up-vote, and leave comments. The sub-section Huaxiong Sticker Gallery is worth mentioning. There, different Biaoqingbao, usually featuring a certain figure, are shared (see 2 in Figure 4.10). Huaxiong users can find what they want by clicking on the type of stickers (static or animate) or the characteristics (e.g. mischievous, cute, etc.). More interestingly, in the section of 'Artists' (see 3 in Figure 4.10) the Weibo accounts and/or WeChat accounts of the artists are provided, providing the possibility for participants to know more about and follow the artists they are interested in on more influential social media which have different affordances than those offered on Huanxiong. The 'Artists' section seems very simple, but its purpose is far beyond simply sharing the Biaoqing figures. In this section, Biaoqing artists share the Biaoqing figures they have created as the raw material for Huaxiong users to further edit to make their own Biaoqing. It addresses copyright issues, which is usually not paid attention to in the field of Biaoqing, and contributes to nurturing fandom for the artists and the figures they have created. This function provides a solid supporting infrastructure for the development and prosperity of the community, which again points our attention to the inestimable importance of infrastructure in the community of knowledge.

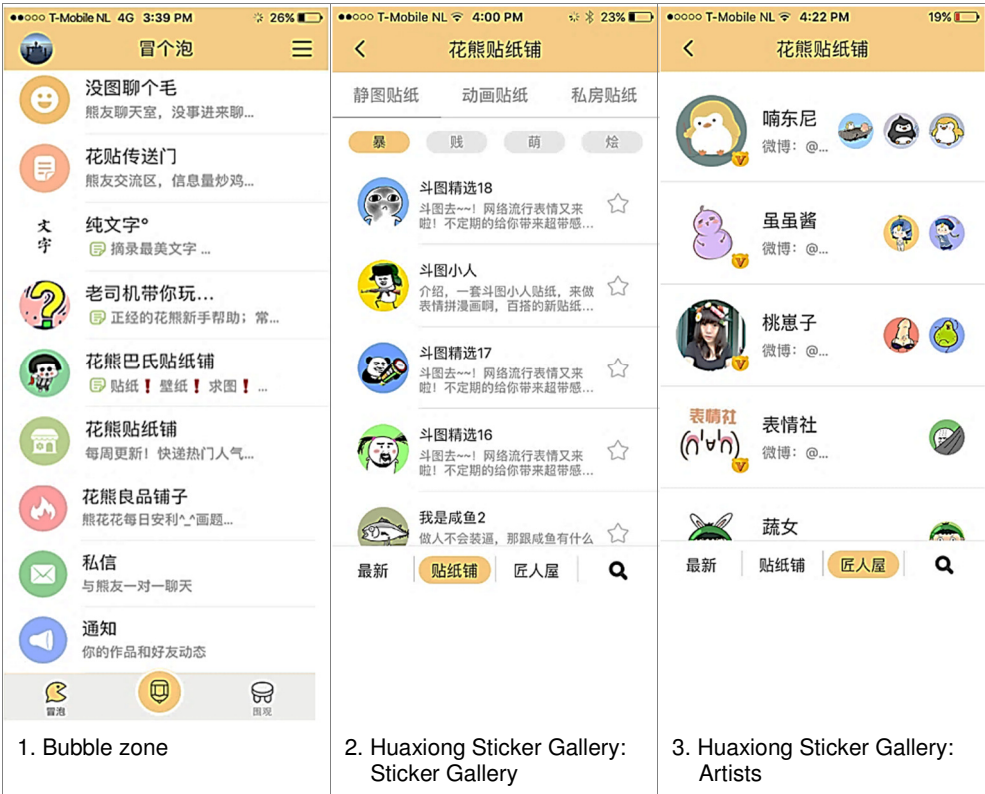


Figure 4.10 Bubble zone and its sub-section Huaxiong Sticker Gallery

In the Biaoqing-making zone, Huaxiong provides options for making different types of Biaoqing (i.e. static, animate/GIF), and for editing existing Biaoqing (see 1 in Figure 4.11). A prominent feature of this zone is the interconnectedness between different ways of making Biaoqing, which enables users to conveniently find raw materials from different sources on Huaxiong when they are creating their own Biaoqing. After choosing a way of making Biaoqing, for instance 'Making GIF' (玩动图), instructions would be shown in a popup page, which users can easily follow to make a GIF of their own choice (see 2 in Figure 4.11). After a Biaoqing is created, the next step is to export the Biaoqing. Huaxiong provides choices for users to share the Biaoqing on Huaxiong, to export it to the most popular social media in China, including QQ, WeChat and Weibo¹⁴¹ (see 3 in Figure 4.11). Besides this, Huaxiong users can also tap on the Biaoqing to save it on their cellphones. This transmedia feature integrates various social media into this instruction community and greatly expands the potential audience scope of Huaxiong.

The Biaoqing-making zone provides users with a wide range of choices and elbow room to add their personal touch to the Biaoqing. And the transmedia exporting function makes it convenient for users to show and demonstrate their own Biaoqing. These two functions together provide users a means to showcase their Biaoqing resources and thereby their ability to go above the common. These two factors greatly boost the user-friendliness, or the value of the Huaxiong app for its users.

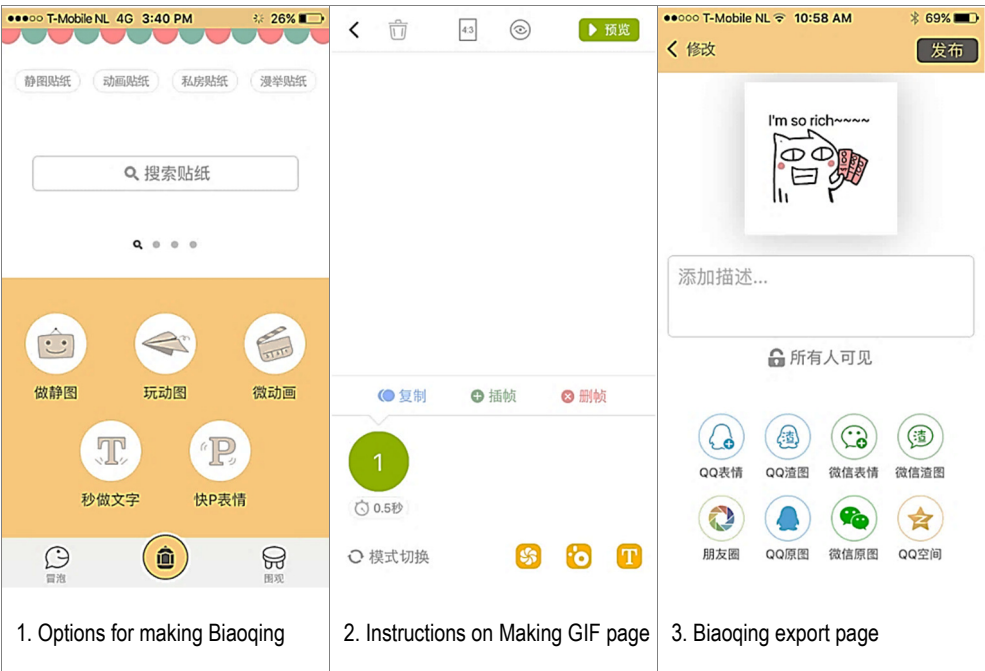


Figure 4.11 Biaoqingbao-making zone

¹⁴¹ The choice exporting to Weibo is available after tapping on the Biaoqing.

The Circusee zone has three sub-section: Follow, Hot Stickers, Topics. In the Follow sub-section, users can view the posts of other Huaxiong users whom they have followed. In the Hot Stickers sub-section, user-made Biaoqing that have accumulated the most up-votes are presented. For the Biaoqing demonstrated in the Hot Stickers sub-section, Huaxiong users can comment on, up-vote or edit them, or export them to other social media by tapping on the 'forward' icon (see 1 and 2 in Figure 4.12). In the Topic sub-section, Huaxiong moderator regularly posts topics for users to create Biaoqing, which will be showcased in the topic space (see 3 in Figure 4.12). Users can *circusee* the Biaoqing created by others, or participate in the topic by tapping on the 'participate' icon in the topic space to make and share their own Biaoqing. The topics are highly relevant to the real-time events going on in society, for instance national or traditional holidays, social incidents, or currently popular neologisms. The Circusee zone is for users to see what others have posted, and what Biaoqing are currently popular, but the ultimate purpose is to encourage users to make their own Biaoqing and be active in the Huaxiong Biaoqing-making community. Here we can see that the algorithms are shaping and structuring the knowledge activities in this community through the ranking of Biaoqing and the visibility of the knowledge work.

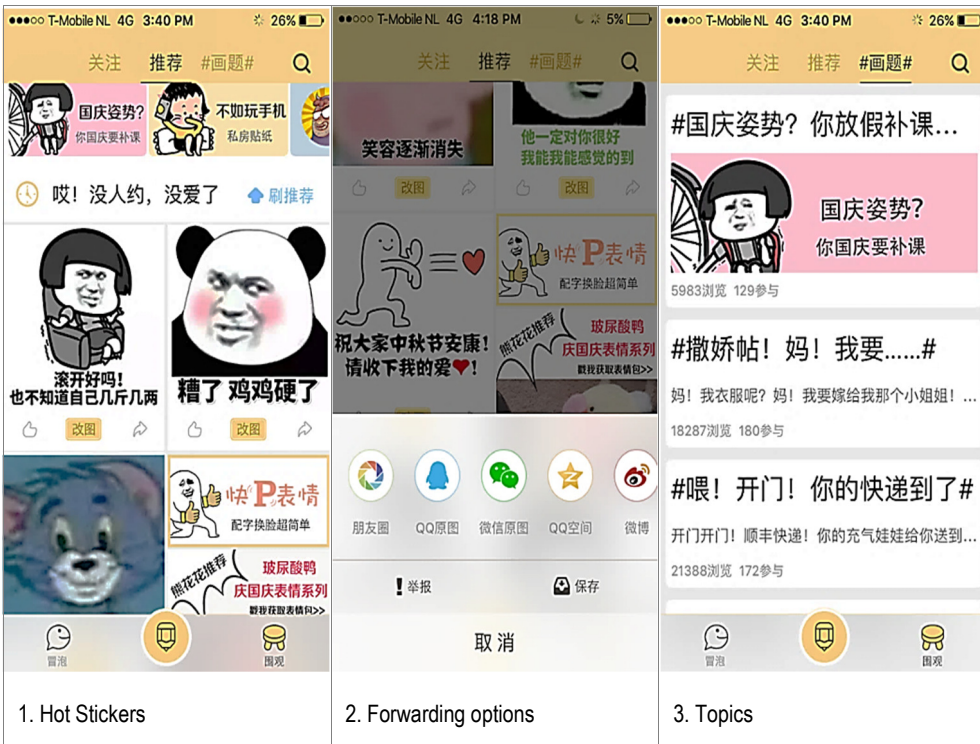


Figure 4.12 Circusee zone

There are multiple activities that users can engage in on Huaxiong: to create Biaoqing through the raw materials, technical tools and templates provided by the app; to share their creations; to comment on or up-vote the Biaoqing shared by others; to edit others' Biaoqing to add some personal touch/accent; to follow others; to participate in Biaoqing topics, etc. All the activities performed in this community make Huaxiong users both learners and instructors. And the app Huaxiong is not only a Biaoqing-making instruction community, but a community of knowledge of Biaoqing. In all the three function zones (Bubble, Biaoqing-making, Circusee), the working of algorithms is involved in one way or another, for instance, through the ranking of the Biaoqing uploaded by users, through the number of up-votes, and through some backstage actions which are not directly observable to users.

There are many similar apps, for instance FaceKing, i Biaoqing (i 表情), Biaoqing Kingdom (表情王国), etc. The Biaoqing-making instruction is encoded in the user-friendly icons and instructions on these apps. As Huaxiong is an app designed more for making Biaoqing for communication than for sharing them for publicity, the actions on the apps might not be as eye-catching as those on other social media such as Weibo, Zhihu, Bilibili, but they are a highly dynamic force in the community of knowledge of Biaoqing, and the results of these actions are what is used on a daily basis in communication by people and what are the knowledge products in the community of knowledge.

4.5 Biaoqing-usage instruction community: Nonlinear transformation of Biaoqing

In the community of knowledge of Biaoqing, apart from Biaoqing-making instruction communities, there are also communities featuring Biaoqing-usage instructions, which might happen on miscellaneous forums in various forms, for instance on Q&A forums, during Doutu, in Biaoqing spreading and sharing communities. Biaoqing-usage instruction is in essence sharing and spreading the indexicalities and norms of Biaoqing. In this section, I will discuss the usage instruction community of two Biaoqing: 😊 and 🙋.

4.5.1 Two examples

Most Chinese social media provide official descriptions of the Biaoqing according to their intended usages. Thus, we can see how the platform infrastructures (including its algorithmic actions) affect the work performed by participants, the normative order within which they operate, and the patterns of interaction within the community of knowledge. For example, the official description of 😊 is 'smile', and of 🙋 'wave', the former designed as an expression for friendliness, and the latter an expression for goodbye, which are in line with the Chinese social norms emphasizing harmony, politeness and friendliness. The two Biaoqing, as well as many others, were intended to convey a friendly tone in online communication, and designed to be culturally neutral (Danesi, 2017). However, on Chinese social media, a very different way of using them has been interactionally established among some internet users, as illustrated in the two anecdotes in Figure 4.13.

<p>Anecdote 1¹⁴²</p> <p>头段时间男票跟我聊天老发 😊 这个表情。我看着觉得分分钟要撕逼的感觉，终于有一天我忍不住了，问他：你为什么老发 😊 这个表情，我看着觉得特别怪。他说：😊 代表我诚恳啊，换成呲牙笑觉得是在逗别人。他是个不怎么玩微博，不说段子，不玩游戏，不懂网络词汇，不更新一切社交软件，不用表情包的 90 后 😊 他要是多点文化绝对是现在小姑娘特别迷恋的老干部型。😊（我特别诚恳 😊😊）</p>	<p>Recently my boyfriend was frequently sending 😊 to me when we were chatting, which made me feel that he was about to start a bitch fight with me. Finally, I could not take it anymore and asked him why he always used this Biaoqing 😊, for it made me feel very weird. He replied “😊 represents my sincerity. If I use the grin Biaoqing, it feels like I am teasing others.” (He is a boy born in the 90s, but he rarely browses Weibo, doesn't talk dirty or play video games, knows little about neologisms, refuses to update any social media app, and doesn't use Biaoqing 😊) If more knowledgeable, he is definitely the cup of tea of young ladies who are attracted to mature men with high social status and power. 😊 (I am very sincere 😊😊)</p>
<p>Anecdote 2¹⁴³</p> <p>刚刚和母上聊天，快结束的时候她说：“去睡午觉吧”然后发了一个 😊 的表情，我就跟她说，这个表情的意思是：你走吧我不想跟你说话。她于是回我：“知道了 😊”。</p> <p>我又说，这个微笑的表情其实有高冷、嘲讽的意思在里面。然后她说：“你们太矫情了。”然后我无奈地说晚安，她回我：“再见。”……我要不要再跟她说“再见。”是什么意思呢？</p>	<p>Just now I was chatting with my mother. At the end of the conversation, she said, “go and take a nap” and followed it with a 😊 emoji. I told her, the meaning of it is: go away, I don't want to talk to you. Then she replied, “got it 😊.”</p> <p>This time, I explained that this smile Biaoqing has a proud, aloof, contemptuous flavor. And my mother said, “you guys are so affected.” Not knowing how to response, I said good day, and she replied, “goodbye.”</p> <p>.....should I tell her the meaning of “goodbye”?¹⁴⁴</p>

Figure 4.13 Weibo users' posts about disparate perception of 😊 and 😊

The above anecdotes are pertinent to different interpretations of the smile and wave Biaoqing on Chinese social media. As shown in Anecdote 1, the boyfriend interprets the smile Biaoqing as a friendly marker of sincerity. However, the girlfriend perceives it as a prelude to a nasty fight, which is blatantly contrary to its originally designated function, i.e. to express friendliness. In Anecdote 2, the mother uses the wave and smile Biaoqing in their original meaning, which is contrastive to the daughter's usage, i.e. to express contempt and aloofness. Obviously, the meaning and function of the two Biaoqing have undergone tremendous changes. During my data collection, the friendly smile and wave Biaoqing are repeatedly spotted in contexts of ridicule, contempt, and despise. They indexically create such contexts together with other elements in the situation, for instance

¹⁴² Retrieved from https://www.weibo.com/3212850514/DCVjY8OvX?refer_flag=1001030103_&type=comment on July, 3 2017.

¹⁴³ Retrieved from https://www.weibo.com/1560559414/Dy44rDlqA?from=page_1005051560559414_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment on July 7, 2017.

¹⁴⁴ In popular online culture 'goodbye' has gained the meaning of 'end of friendship'.

verbal expressions, events, etc. They are serving as alerts and boosters of irony. For example, they are being used between friends for teasing, bantering, and mocking ridicule. They are being employed in online debates (or quarrels), for instance between fans and anti-fans, to convey real contempt and/or hostility. That is to say, there exist different, or conflicting to be more precise, norms of using the two Biaoqing on Chinese social media. Such conspicuous incompatibility prompted me to collect more information and data about their usage. I resorted to Baidu Knows to find out more about people's discussion of the two Biaoqing for two reasons.

First, when I tried to find out more about the meanings of the two Biaoqing on search engines, the algorithmically generated search results led me to discussions on collaborative Q&A forums, blogs, and various other social media. Among the search results, the most visible and easily accessible ones are the Q&A threads on Baidu Knows. It is obviously a huge algorithmic mediator for what happens (and can happen) within the community of knowledge.

Second, my interest lies in people's collective construction and negotiation of the meanings of the Biaoqing, i.e. metapragmatic discourses of the two Biaoqing. For this purpose, Baidu Knows, one of the most influential collaborative Q&A forums in China, is an ideal forum to follow people's actions.

I went through the first ten pages (i.e. 100 results) of the 75,000 search results on the site, and picked two that accumulated the most likes from participants. The two entries happen to be from different times, one from October 2014, the other from June 2015, and thus the discussions of the meanings of the two Biaoqing constitute a quasi-diachronic observation.

4.5.2 Nonlinear transformation of the smile and wave Biaoqing

In the 2014 entry (see Figure 4.14), the wave Biaoqing was either explicitly or implicitly connected with *youjin* (友尽, end of friendship), frustration in communication, speechlessness, reluctance to communicate, etc., and such transformed usages have been amply observed in common social media communication. In other words, the wave Biaoqing indexically shapes specific actions, and its presence in the conversation is an alert to the genre related to these specific actions.

The indexical signal 'end of conversation' is metaphorically explored by people to indicate their reluctance to continue the current topic, which is in fact a euphemized expression of disagreement, dissatisfaction, or upset. This transformation is collectively constructed and spread. People gradually connect end of friendship, frustration in communication, speechlessness and reluctance to communicate to the wave Biaoqing. But the transformation does not stop here. In the process of further spread, meanings such as despise, contempt, etc. gradually seep in.

<p>② qq表情里的“再见.拜拜”符号除了这个意思外还有什么意思? ? 把所有意思列举出来! 🌟 5</p> <p>匿名 浏览 2864 次</p> <p>最佳答案 发布于2014-10-30 09:21</p> <p>“呵呵”“发尽”“不知道怎么说你你快滚”“看不起你”“丢脸”</p> <p>本国首肯提问者推荐</p> <p>评论 38 12</p> <p>其他回答</p> <p>不高兴的时候, 滚</p> <p>追答 再也不想看到你, 断交</p> <p>knjqw (LV5) : 发布于2014-10-30 09:19</p> <p>评论 4 1</p> <p>举手....</p> <p>梦里的JJ (LV5) : 发布于2014-10-30 09:18</p> <p>评论 0 6</p> <p>也有对对方说话的不认同, 是一种调皮活潑的方式, 类似于翻白眼, 不跟你讲了之类的</p> <p>热心的网友 : 发布于2014-10-30 09:18</p> <p>评论 5 0</p> <p>现在有人喜欢表示无爱, 发尽, 不, 还有奇葩表示你好, 我的网友就是这样用的</p> <p>见到橙子逗口水 (LV4) : 发布于2014-10-30 09:18</p> <p>评论 7 0</p> <p>发尽</p> <p>Lucifernatani (LV5) : 发布于2014-10-30 09:17</p> <p>评论 1 1</p>	<p>What's the meaning of the “goodbye” emoticon in QQ?? Please list all the meanings!¹⁴⁵</p> <p>Best Answer</p> <p>“Hehe”¹⁴⁶ “End of friendship” “No comment Fuck off” “Despise you” “Shame on you” (2014-10-30)</p> <p>Other Answers</p> <p>When upset, it means fuck off</p> <p>Don't want to see you anymore. Break up a friendship (2014-10-30)</p> <p>Raise hand.... (2014-10-30)</p> <p>Also to express disapproval in a mischievous vivacious way, similar to rolling eye or don't want to talk to you (2014-10-30)</p> <p>Now some people use it to express no love, end of friendship, and rejection. Some weirdos use it to say hi. Some of my net-friends do so (2014-10-30)</p> <p>End of friendship (2014-10-30)</p>
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Figure 4.14 The Baidu Knows entry in 2014

After the ‘end of friendship’ meaning was more widely accepted, the meaning of the wave Biaoqing is further explored by internet users, which is another process of negotiation and co-construction. As shown in the top-two most liked answers in the 2015 entry in Figure 4.15, the answerers first provided the ‘end of friendship’ meaning, and went a step further to provide examples of potential situations to use it. In this co-construction and negotiation process, the ‘end of friendship’ meaning is precipitated on the wave Biaoqing (Squires, 2014), with specific contexts of usage presupposed for it (for instance ‘when the sender is angry or thinks you are stupid’, ‘you are impossible to chat with’), and thereby triggering specific chronotopes. Consequently, the wave Biaoqing gradually take on the sense of contempt and ridicule.

¹⁴⁵ The icon of gold coins at the end of the question represents the value of credits rewarded to the best answer on Baidu Knows.

¹⁴⁶ ‘Hehe’ is an onomatopoeia of laughter, often used as a response to some information regarded as stupid and ridiculous to indicate speechlessness, contempt, despise, etc.

<p>① QQ表情再见和微笑是什么意思?</p> <p>好吃不过饺子... 浏览 44718 次</p> <p>最佳答案 发布于2015-06-20 20:33</p> <p>现在的再见和微笑已经不是原意了 现在的再见是绝交或者友尽 (一般都是生气或者觉得你好傻逼的时候发的) 微笑现在是草泥马意思 也有的是郁闷的意思 看你怎么理解</p> <p>本团音乐网推荐 评论(3) 809 128</p> <p>林会旺 (LV4) 采纳率: 41% 擅长: 暂未定制</p> <p>其他回答</p> <p>热心网友: 发布于2016-10-08 19:38 评论 27 27</p> <p>不同情景不同理解, 微笑这个表情可以有不开心, 不愿意, 别再惹我, 呵呵, 你有病啊, 我不想说话等很多意思。大部分是不高兴的意思, 再见这个表情代表绝交, 友尽, 不管用哪个词形容基本都是没法聊了的意思, 但也看跟谁, 取决于关系好不好</p> <p>爱看奇葩说的我 (LV1): 发布于2016-09-09 00:57 评论 86 11</p> <p>再见就是拜拜 微笑就是礼貌</p> <p>追问 不是 回答 那是什么, ?</p> <p>热心网友: 发布于2015-06-20 20:29 评论(2) 43 628</p> <p>这动画给我吧 2016-7-25 09:33 这个是啊呵呵!! 回复</p> <p>Ehtgao: 2016-2-17 11:16 那是傻 逼 你这个大傻 逼 回复</p>	<p>What's the meaning of the goodbye and smile Biaoqing in QQ?</p> <p>Best Answer</p> <p>Nowadays goodbye and smile are not their original meanings anymore. Now, goodbye means break off relationship or end of friendship (usually used when the sender is angry or thinks you are stupid). Smile now means WTF, and also means gloomy, depressed. All depends on how you interpret them (2015-06-20)</p> <p>Other Answers</p> <p>😏 (2016-10-08)</p> <p>The meaning differs with the context. The smile can mean unhappy, reluctance, don't piss me off, hehe, you are sick, I don't want to talk with you, and so on. Mostly it means unhappy. Goodbye Biaoqing means end of relationship, end of friendship. Whichever meaning, it means you are impossible to chat with. But it also depends on with whom and their relationship (2016-09-09)</p> <p>Goodbye is bye-bye Smile is polite (2015-06-20)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — It's not — Then what is it? <p>It means hehe!!! (2016-07-25)</p> <p>It means shithead, you big shithead (2016-02-17)</p>
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Figure 4.15 The Baidu Knows entry in 2015

The smile Biaoqing goes through similar resemiotization processes, and has been assigned new meanings such as speechlessness, reluctance to communicate and contempt. As illustrated in Figure 4.15, the smile Biaoqing is connected with 'unhappy, reluctance, don't piss me off, hehe, you are sick, I don't want to talk with you', and 'shithead'. And interestingly, when the answer 'smile is polite' is provided, it accumulates 43 likes, but gets 628 down-votes. Two internet users also commented on this answer, stating that it conveys contempt and ridicule, as illustrated by 'hehe' and 'shithead'. Through the like and down-vote function, participants in this community of knowledge are policing the process of meaning negotiation and construction, and at the same time learning and enhancing specific indexicalities and usage norms through the ripple effect of backstage algorithmic actions. What participants do (including learning, discussing, policing, innovating meanings) is knowledge work. It is obvious that the smile Biaoqing is already a visual version of 'hehe', a neologism derived onomatopoeically from the kind of dis-

missive or contemptuous laughter. Consequently, it transforms from a marker of friendliness to a marker of irony, contempt, spite, mocking, etc. On Chinese social media, calm smile images are to some extent connected to negative attitudes,¹⁴⁷ and have the potential to be resemiotized. Both the smile and the wave Biaoqing are frequently used to convey dissent, spite, unpleasantness and aggression. The case of collective construction and negotiation of the meanings of the smile and wave Biaoqing is an example of the knowledge work in the community of knowledge.

What we observe here is how Baidu Knows algorithmically mediates the normative order of usage of specific Biaoqing, using crowdsourced data as input but ordering them in a kind of value hierarchy, determined by the volume of traction generated by different posts and answers from participants. The fact that just six answers (one of them with a follow-up response) are listed in the Baidu Knows window suggests wide consensus about the normative meaning of the specific Biaoqing about which I inquired. And not only that: it suggests a preference by participants (ratified algorithmically by Baidu Knows search engines) for a vernacular, colloquial indexicality for the particular Biaoqing, for instance the top answer contains the rather rude 'fuck off' and is preferred over more neutrally stated responses.

For the smile and wave Biaoqing, the meaning transformation from a marker of friendliness to a conduit for hostility is not predicable in the sign per se, nor in their further use or derivation, and thus such transformation is nonlinear (Blommaert, 2015b). It is the result of collective construction and negotiation of participants in the Biaoqing-usage instruction community, mediated by algorithmic operations performed backstage by platform providers. On the surface, it is the connotational/expressive meaning of the two Biaoqing that is transformed. But close scrutiny reveals a deeper layer of this nonlinear transformation, which points to the indexicality of the two Biaoqing, i.e. the norms of usage. Though these norms seem light, they are strong and define users as in-fashion or old-fashioned. This deliberate collective norm making process is what Garfinkel (2002: 46) calls "congregational work".

The indexicalities of the smile and wave Biaoqing, when invoked in situated communications, are signals for participants to retrieve specific genres and to follow specific behavioral norms. The communications thus fold out in specific chronotopes. For instance, in the case presented in Anecdote 2, the mother does not know the indexicalities of the two Biaoqing and their entailed behavioral norms, and consequently would not be able to recognize or deploy related genres, and thus is excluded from corresponding chronotopes. The indexicalities of the two Biaoqing simultaneously create chronotopes where actors are defined by their conformity to the norms, which govern the chronotopes. As has been explained in Chapter 2, indexicalities, genres and chronotopes belong together.

The Biaoqing-usage instruction community might take shape in the public sphere (as in the Q&A threads on Baidu Knows), and it might also happen in the private sphere. For example, in Anecdote 2, an instance of instruction is happening between the mother and the daughter during their private chatting. This anecdote points to the fractality of

¹⁴⁷ Retrieved from <https://www.zhihu.com/question/36159588> on March 8, 2017.

the Biaoqing-usage instruction community. To be more specific, discussion of Biaoqing meanings and spread of the meanings through actual usage are actions of instruction, and thus are a chunk of the Biaoqing-usage instruction community. The community of knowledge of Biaoqing is operating on every level, from communications which involve massive collective work of hundreds or even thousands of participants to more private and restricted communications.

The structure of this Biaoqing-usage instruction community is highly unbalanced. There are only a handful of questioners and instructors (1 and 4 respectively in the entry of 2015). The overwhelming majority of participants in this community are viewers (89,636 in the entry of 2015) and up-voters (1,075 in the entry of 2015). This community is stratified in terms of the information or resources participants possess. Some are instructors who provide answers and impart Biaoqing-usage information, though their answers and information are not always accepted; some are learners who ask for information or instruction. The most common activities in this community are viewing and up-voting, and there is very limited interaction among participants, especially between viewers. The community is extremely loose. However, its influence is potent, even binding for participants, for the actions performed in it feed into the platform algorithms that 'codify' the normative orders within the community. In this community, participants are collectively constructing and negotiating the indexicalities of Biaoqing, and in so doing, they are at the same time spreading and instructing the Biaoqing usage norms.

4.5.3 Sociocultural reasons behind the transformation

As shown in Anecdote 1 in Figure 4.13, the girlfriend's post on Weibo indicates that her audience are people who perceive the smile Biaoqing as irony or as a prelude to a nasty fight. In contrast, her boyfriend is constructed as a 'mature' man (or a nerd) who 'rarely browses Weibo, doesn't talk dirty or play video games, knows little about neologisms, refuses to update any social media app, and doesn't use Biaoqing'. In Anecdote 2 in Figure 4.13, the daughter is also orienting to an audience who use the two Biaoqing in a similar way to her. And at the same time, the mother is classified as belonging to a different group, i.e. people who regard young people as 'so affected' and use the two Biaoqing in the old-fashioned way. Both anecdotes point to identities indexed by the two Biaoqing, i.e. the 'affected' young generation who openly express their sarcasm, contempt and hostility in a euphemized way.

To understand the oxymoron of the identities indexed by the two Biaoqing among different groups and audiences, some sociocultural background information is required. With the reform and opening up policy in China since 1978, the influx and acceptance of western culture, changes in the economy and organization of the society and transformation in interpersonal relations result in increasing attention to individual well-being, both materially and spiritually, growing eagerness to express individual opinions (Hansen & Svarverud, 2010; Kleinman et al., 2011; Rofel, 2007), and increasing need to express negative emotions and attitudes such as disagreement, contempt, frustration and reluctance to continue communication (Bian Yanjie, 2002; Hansen & Svarverud, 2010; Kleinman et al., 2011; Wu Zhongmin, 2004). Against such a social background, on Chinese

social media the 'bitch fight' (撕逼) subculture flourishes, featuring nasty fighting or hostile quarrels between opposing sides resulting from hot-blooded adherence to and defense of their own opinions and values, especially among strangers in online spaces (Dafei, 2017).

However, traditional Chinese social norms which emphasize harmonious interpersonal relations and politeness are deeply rooted in Chinese culture and society, and play an important role in regulating a person's behavior (Hwang Kwang-kuo, 1987; Wang He, 1986). These norms are too influential in Chinese culture to be changed within decades of the reform and opening up policy. The desire and need to present at least a polite well-mannered surface persist. Consequently, rising individualism causes anxiety in handling interpersonal relations, especially on the internet, and in people's self-regulation of online behaviors (Liu Min & Xu Shuai, 2016). The indexicality changes of the two Biaoqing are actually a compromise between the need to vent dissatisfaction and the restriction of social norms to be polite and friendly. The changed indexicalities of the two Biaoqing serve two contradictory pragmatic functions. On the one hand, they serve as ideal semi-otic resources for expressing dissatisfaction, despise and contempt in a seemingly polite well-mannered way. On the other hand, their superficial politeness actually amplifies the tone of contempt, irony and hostility.

The nonlinear transformation of the connotational/expressive meanings of the two Biaoqing is concurrent with the nonlinear transformation of indexicality, which originates from the change in social ethos, especially the increased legitimacy of individualism in Chinese society. Nonlinear transformations of friendly Biaoqing, or the knowledge of such nonlinear transformations, is interactionally constructed, negotiated, shared and spread on various social media. The online and offline spaces perpetually influence and feed back to each other, and eventually form an integrated whole, i.e. an online-offline nexus. The nonlinear transformation of the two Biaoqing is a typical example of the complexity and influence of the online-offline nexus.

4.6 Discussion and conclusion

The community of knowledge of Biaoqing is extremely loose and light and it can only be observed through its actions, which I have announced in Chapter 2.

Biaoqing-making instruction communities, where strongly structured actions are performed, are layered and stratified in terms of resources and roles. The participants in the community possess uneven resources and play different roles (e.g. instructor, learner, advisor). What is more, these roles are dynamic in the sense that participants can be instructors at one moment and learners at another moment. The instruction community fuels the dynamism of Biaoqing on Chinese social media.

The Biaoqing-usage instruction community, though loose and light, gains solidity from the algorithmic mediation performed by the platforms, by means of which normative patterns of usage are laid down and circulated among participants. The essential activity, teaching and learning of emotional vectors, may happen on certain social media as an event per se, as in the Baidu Knows entries. It may be interspersed in other types of

communication, as in the chat between the daughter and her mother in Anecdote 2 in Figure 4.13. It may also happen through immersion in and witnessing of usages of the transformed Biaoqing. In Biaoqing-usage instruction communities, the teaching and learning might happen so naturally that the participants may not even realize they are conducting such an activity.

The Biaoqing-making and Biaoqing-usage instruction communities are only two types of sub-communities in the grand community of knowledge of Biaoqing. There are numerous other types of communities, for instance Biaoqing sharing and spreading communities. All these sub-communities are about teaching, learning and sharing meanings and information, i.e. first-level activities. Second- and third-level activities, though not directly relevant to the theme of Biaoqing, cannot be ignored for three reasons. First, they, in some cases, account for the overwhelming majority of the activities going on in the community. Second, they index to the micro-hegemonic identities of participants and the qualities they value, which reveal the social capital normatively preferred in the community. Third, these activities have the potential to generate new sets of behavioral norms and thus introduce new genres and chronotopes.

Through the close analysis of the activities performed in the Biaoqing instruction communities, some conclusions can be drawn about the community of knowledge of Biaoqing. First, it is loose and tight at the same time. It is loose in terms of both the participants who do the knowledge work and the building blocks of the community (i.e. knowledge products and knowledge practices). On the one hand, people become participants in the community simply by clicking and watching/viewing (Goffman, 1981). There is no entry bar. Besides this, there is limited communication between participants, as the most common activity is viewing or up-voting – the input data for algorithmic ordering operations within the platform. On the other hand, the activities in the community generate an enormous amount of knowledge, which is differentially related to the central topic of Biaoqing and thus is highly stratified. The community of knowledge of Biaoqing is tight in the sense that its influence is potent, even binding for participants. In this community, participants are exposed to knowledge, which is presented with highly accented diacritics. These diacritics, though personal in the sense that they are demonstrated by individuals in the community, are in fact collective, because their uniqueness is shared knowledge in the community. Demonstration of these diacritics in the community is on the one hand a reinforcement of the accents, and on the other hand an extended spread of them. Inevitably, these diacritics are shared collectively. These diacritics are the light and banal norms in some light and banal segments of people's life, and in these segments, people conduct themselves in accordance with these norms, i.e. micro-hegemonies.

Second, the community of knowledge of Biaoqing is algorithmically mediated on the basis of the activities performed in the community. In this community some activity types are patterned and stable to some degree, including seeking clarification for operational procedures, suggesting alternative operations, sharing other resources, commenting on the tutorial, and expressing affection for tutors. But some activities in the community, especially the third-level ones, are highly contingent. What participants do and say

is highly dependent on their interest and knowledge structure and on the mutual influence among participants in the community. No matter how patterned or standardized, all the activities are data, are algorithmically converted into normative orders of usage for Biaoqing, and at the same time feed back to the algorithms.

Third, different communities, loose and light in general, present different degrees of density. For instance, in the case of the Bilibili instruction community, most activities evolve around the instructor and her followers who already know her. Xiaobai is a member of a team, which specializes in sharing ICT tutorials, and its account on Bilibili has 200,000 followers. Many participants in the Bilibili Biaoqing-making instruction community are followers of the team. Even when Xiaobai is filming the videos, she assumes her audience to be familiar with her team. But this does not mean this community is exclusive to outsiders. Actually, there are quite a few participants who are obviously not familiar with Xiaobai nor her team. In this sense, there are different levels of attachment in terms of familiarity with the community. By contrast, the Zhihu instruction community is much more open and flexible. There are no star instructors and no fan base. It is to a great extent constructed and connected by the central theme of Biaoqing-making.

Fourth, the resources possessed by participants in the community are highly uneven. Some people have a solid knowledge of Photoshop, some have some primary training, some have little knowledge about it, some even do not know the existence of it; some know where to find the Biaoqing they want, and some do not even know where to download certain apps. Besides this, the knowledge structures of the participants are highly diversified: for instance, some are capable of suggesting other apps for Biaoqing making, some have information of the Biaoqing battle on Facebook and some know a lot about neologisms.

So far, the formation of the community of knowledge of Biaoqing has been depicted. It is time to look at specific actions now, because specific actions will provide an increasingly precise idea of the structure of the community. The following two chapters will zoom in specific forms of action for more detail and more precision about how to imagine this community.

Community of knowledge in action I: Posh Biaoqingbao

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the case of posh Biaoqingbao (Biaoqing made from paintings) will be used to demonstrate the sharing and spreading of meanings in the community of knowledge of Biaoqing. This case is chosen for several reasons. First, it is a hit on social media, accumulating millions of views/shares and arousing heated discussion among participants, spurred on by the algorithmic mediation discussed in the previous chapter. Second, the form of Biaoqing shared in this community is quite different from the currently prevalent ones, i.e. the cute, mischievous or violent ones (for more see Chapter 3). Behind the qualities and novelties advocated in this community is a certain hidden texture of the society, which will be discussed in what follows. Third, the actions performed in a community in shaping are ideal for observing the establishment of new norms and the forces and counterforces behind these new norms.



Figure 5.1 Screenshot of the Weibo post of BiaoqingDemon¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ Retrieved on October 30, 2016. The URL was no longer retrievable on Weibo when I tried to revisit the post in July 2019.

I came into this case when I was browsing Sina Weibo. The post of BiaoqingDemon on October 29, 2016 (see Figure 5.1) greatly interested me because the Biaoqingbao in the post was so different from the currently dominant Biaoqing as introduced in Chapter 3.

When the keyword 'oil painting Biaoqingbao' (油画表情包) was typed on Weibo, the website recommended the following three related keywords: posh Biaoqingbao (高逼格表情包), Middle Ages Biaoqingbao (中世纪表情包) and Classical Biaoqingbao (古典表情包), which I made use of to retrieve more related posts. Here the algorithms of the social media are playing a role, crowdsourcing data such as search histories on the media platform to influence content visibility to users and thus influence or even regulate and structure user actions on the medium.

In the overwhelming majority of the search results, the phrase 高逼格 (*gāo bī gé*) was used to describe such Biaoqingbao. The phrase 高逼格, a neologism on Chinese social media, literally means high (高) cunt (逼) style (格). Here we need to hold a bit to explain this Chinese neologism. The character 逼 (cunt) is so frequently present in popular online culture in China that the derogatory meaning in it gets gradually diluted and even bleached, and in many cases, it becomes neutral, with a tint of bantering, teasing, or humor. The neologism 高逼格 refers to extraordinary (literary or artistic) taste which is above that of the ordinary or the plebeian (Shang Yang, 2017). It can be used to describe people, objects or events. In the case of oil painting Biaoqing, 高逼格 orients to the high culture in the Biaoqing and/or the funny effects of using them in communication.

However, this phrase per se, with a character 逼 (cunt) in it, smacks of vulgarity. When the neologism 高逼格 is used, there is often a sense of joking and oxymoron in it. On the one hand, the high taste and style are appreciated. On the other hand, the same taste and style are described in such a profane way as to avoid being perceived as arrogant or highbrow. The derogative element in the description protects the oil painting Biaoqingbao from being perceived or criticized as pretentious and beyond-the-plebeian (even though the purpose of such Biaoqing is to be different from the ordinary). There are many adjectives which can be used to describe the oil painting Biaoqingbao, for instance, posh, genteel, classy, high-end, etc. Posh is perhaps not the most precise translation of the neologism 高逼格, but it is so far the closest one I can find. Hereafter 'posh' will be used to describe the type of Biaoqingbao under discussion in this chapter.

The keyword search results on Weibo and the internet turn out to be fruitful. It not only reveals the origin of these Biaoqingbao, other similar ones, articles introducing them, but also brings to surface a community of knowledge where extensive instruction and learning activities are performed.

According to the search results, the Biaoqingbao in Figure 5.1 originates from Weibo user SingingClaiire who made a post on August 29, 2016, releasing a Biaoqingbao made by superimposing a description of the facial expression on oil paintings, for example 'Rembrandt style fright', 'Dutch mannerism onlooking' (see Figure 5.1 and 5.2). After that she posted several more similar-fashioned Biaoqingbao. Her posts have been reposted by Weibo influencers (Weibo users who have large numbers of followers), making oil painting Biaoqingbao a hit.

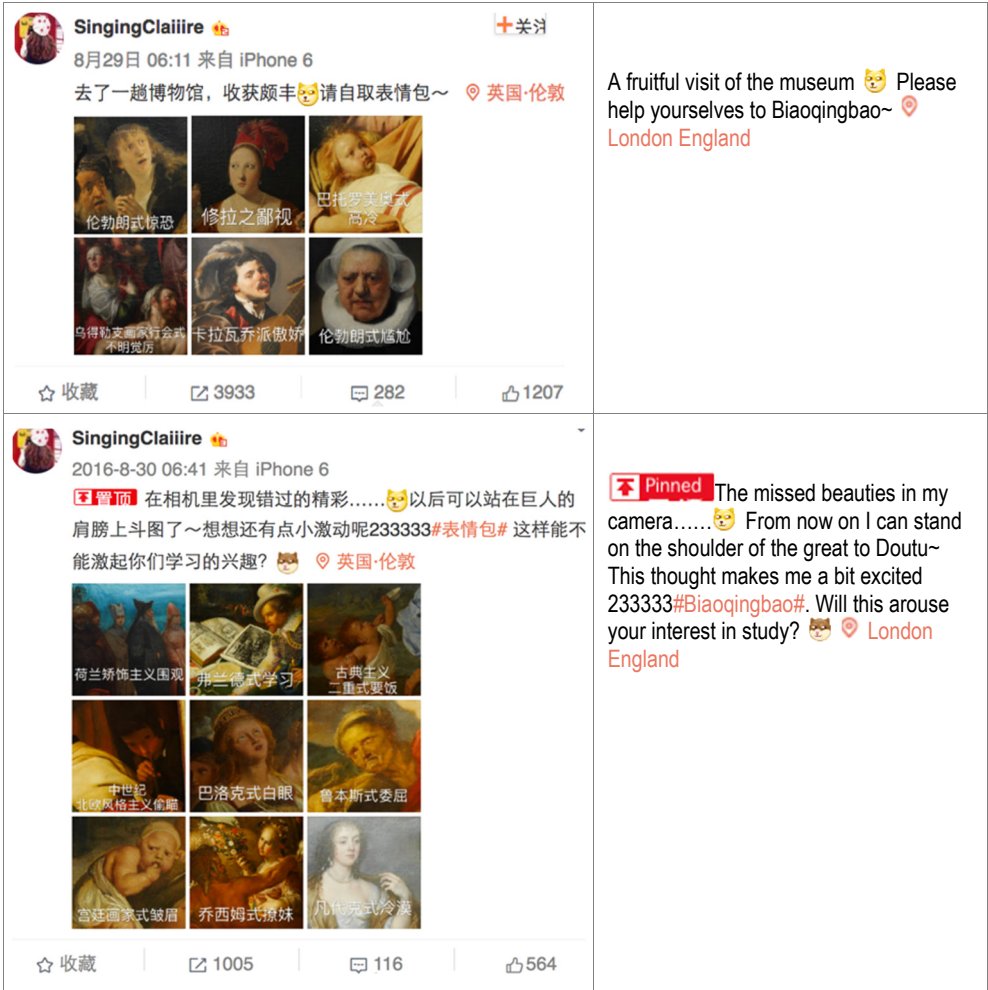


Figure 5.2 Weibo posts of SingingClaiire on August 29 and 30, 2016¹⁴⁹

Like the Biaoqingbao of SingingClaiire, other similar Biaoqingbao are also based on classical artistic or literature works. But different from hers, the texts on them are not simply descriptions of facial expressions, but are the emotions and attitudes the authors¹⁵⁰ want to express through the Biaoqing (see Figure 5.3). For instance, the author PDB, who will be introduced in the next section, explains that the texts in the Biaoqing she creates are inspired by her daily emotions and the manuscripts of the Middle Ages happen to be ideal carriers for her emotions.

¹⁴⁹ Retrieved from https://www.weibo.com/u/1989529421?refer_flag=1001030103_&is_all=1 on November 9, 2016.

¹⁵⁰ The terms designer and artist can also be used. It is good to keep in mind that these authors are in a way designers and artists, because what they do as an author is to design Biaoqing, to create artistic work.

Some of the posh Biaoqingbao are spread further beyond Weibo by the authors. For instance, the author of the Biaoqing in Figure 5.3a not only shares her creations on Weibo, but also contributes them to WeChat Sticker Gallery, making them accessible to all WeChat users.

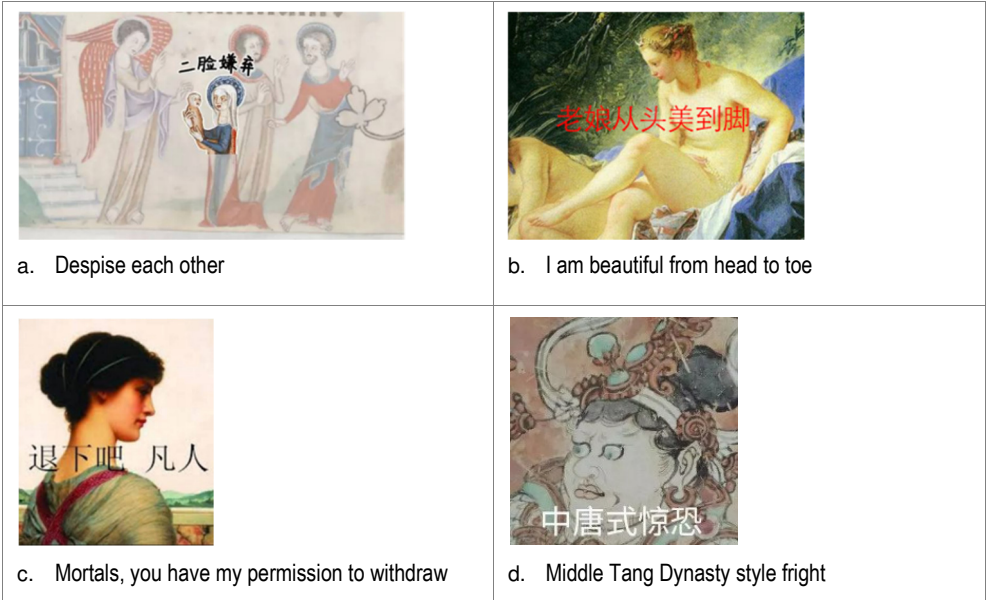


Figure 5.3 Examples of posh Biaoqing conveying certain emotions and attitudes

Behind the sharing of the posh Biaoqingbao, there is a community connected by posh Biaoqing. The most proximate connection in this community is Biaoqing, but in reality, it is far more complicated. Participants in this community may be connected by offline life relations – they can be friends, colleagues, couple, student and teacher – or may be connected by common interests in online life. However, they may also be connected by nothing besides the posh Biaoqing.

This community is fluid and elusive, platform-specific, and algorithmically mediated, as discussed in the previous chapter. It is not sure who the participants are, or whether they are aware of such a community, let alone whether they think of themselves as participants of such a community. In this sense, it is impossible to approach this community the same way in which offline communities are approached. In spite of all these uncertainties, there are elements that are crystal clear, i.e. actions and activities, the knowledge products generated through these actions, and the roles of participants. It is a community defined by knowledge, knowledge practices and knowledge relationships, not by people. In the following sections, I will go a step further to introduce the community of knowledge behind the posh Biaoqingbao through the analysis of the knowledge products, actions and roles.

5.2 Roles and relationships in the community of knowledge of posh Biaoqingbao

In a community of knowledge, one of the most important elements and the starting point of the community is the knowledge products. Revolving around the knowledge, community participants play different roles according to their resources, actions and attitudes towards the knowledge. There are *instructors* who produce knowledge of Biaoqing (e.g. usage norms, origination, etc.), and *followers* who inquire and learn the knowledge, or approach it with criticism. In this section, the three most important elements in this community of knowledge will be introduced in detail: knowledge product, instructor and follower.

5.2.1 Knowledge products

The knowledge generated in the posh Biaoqingbao community mostly concerns information of the raw materials for Biaoqingbao.¹⁵¹ Some instructors give very brief information, only the family name of painters, as in the posts of SingingClaiire (see Figure 5.1 and 5.2). Some instructors give much more detailed information (e.g. title of the manuscripts/paintings, author, museums where the manuscripts are collected, production time of the manuscripts) and also a brief summary of the stories where the materials are taken from, as in the articles of CloudBeauty¹⁵² and PBD.¹⁵³ Some participants summarize the Biaoqing potential of paintings (see comments 1-2 in Figure 5.4), and some suggest painters whose works are good material for posh Biaoqing (see comment 3 in Figure 5.4). Some share very basic information of the Biaoqing, for instance explaining the origin of the Biaoqing (see comment 4 in Figure 5.4).

Apart from such general information, participants also share more specific knowledge related to painters, schools of painting, etc. In the comment section of SingingClaiire's posts, one follower corrected her mistake (see 5 in Figure 5.4), which SingingClaiire briskly admitted and replied that she had already corrected it. One follower suggested that SingingClaiire left out a Biaoqing (see 6 in Figure 5.4). To this comment, SingingClaiire expressed her surprise, and explained that the painting under discussion was not in the museum she visited. One follower challenged the use of the term Caravaggio,¹⁵⁴ to which SingingClaiire provided an explanation (see 7 in Figure 5.4). These three comments are examples of the production and negotiation of knowledge in the

¹⁵¹ When I browse the posts of some of the Weibo users, I found that they may share much more knowledge and information when they repost posh Biaoqingbao on their own Weibo homepages than in the comment section of others' posts. To follow all of the reposts would theoretically mean checking the whole Weibo community, which makes it un-researchable. For this reason, I focus on the posts of Weibo influencers to observe the posh Biaoqingbao community. Limitations are an inevitable price for research-ability.

¹⁵² Retrieved from <http://collection.sina.com.cn/cqyw/2016-09-02/doc-ifxvqctu5958577.shtml> on December 13, 2016.

¹⁵³ Retrieved from <https://www.digitaling.com/articles/30628.html> on January 10, 2017.

¹⁵⁴ The text on the Biaoqing is 卡拉瓦乔式傲娇, which might mean Caravaggio style proud, or Caravaggio proud.

community. The actions generating such knowledge are first-level activities as discussed in Chapter 4.

Note that SingingClaiire is not the only one who produces knowledge and that the followers are not always in a learner position. The roles of participants are not static. In a community of knowledge, a participant may be an instructor who provides knowledge at one moment, and a follower who receives knowledge from others at another moment. In sharing and/or producing knowledge, people are simultaneously negotiating their authority. For instance, in comments 6 and 7 in Figure 5.4, SingingClaiire and followers are correcting the information provided by each other, which are demonstrations of knowledge (or, to be more specific, of the kind of knowledge often described as cultural capital) and thus lead to the gaining of authority.

1	😂 其实大多数油画都是表情包	😂 Actually, most oil paintings are Biaoqingbao
2	用我在外国看的画也做了表情包 当时没有想法, 早知道应该拍下诡异的中世纪风格 😂 那个绝对每张都是表情包 🐱	I also made Biaoqingbao out of the painting I saw abroad. Back then I didn't have the idea. I should have taken pictures of the weird Middle Ages style 😂 Absolutely all are Biaoqing 🐱
3	好想整理一个古典油画表情包 卡拉瓦乔一定是好素材	I want to make a classical oil painting Biaoqingbao. Caravaggio is for sure good raw material
4	李蒙蒙 Lim: @女神朵朵 Eve 😂😂 以后你可以发这个给我 女神朵朵 Eve: 🤔 他们是谁 😂 李蒙蒙 Lim: 回复@女神朵朵 Eve: 以前是世界名画里的人物, 现在成表情包了。	Lim: @Eve 😂😂 You can send me these Biaoqing from now on Eve: 🤔 Who are they 😂 Lim: reply to @Eve They were characters in world famous paintings, but now they are Biaoqingbao.
5	WOODY: 图二应该是拉图尔之鄙视吧 😂 SingingClaiire: 是的! 我写错了~又发了个微博改掉…… 😂😂 免得误人子弟	Woody: the second should be la Tour style despise 😂 SingingClaiire: you are right! I got it wrong~ Posted the right one already…… 😂😂 Not to spread wrong information
6	Fanfanyang 在魔都: 好像少了一个无语问苍天表情, 达芬奇那副素描, 圣母的妈妈手指着天 SingingClaiire: 呀……这幅貌似不在国家博物馆 🤔	Fanfanyang: The helplessness Biaoqing is missing, the one made from the sketch of Saint Mary pointing to the sky by da Vinci SingingClaiire: Ya……it seems it's not in the national museum 🤔
7	都说我是精神病: 图2 并不是卡拉瓦乔的作品, 再仔细看看吧 SingingClaiire: 写的不是作者, 是卡拉瓦乔画派, 卡拉瓦乔主义的意思~ 🤔	Psychic: Picture 2 is not the painting of Caravaggio. Please check carefully SingingClaiire: It doesn't refer to the painter, but Caravaggisti. It means Caravaggism~ 🤔

Figure 5.4 Examples of Biaoqing-related knowledge shared in the community

There is also knowledge loosely related to Biaoqing. Some participants share how or where to find no watermark Biaoqing on the internet (see comment 1 in Figure 5.5). One participant shares his experience in an exhibition (see comment 2 in Figure 5.5). According to him, in spite of the exhibition clerks' repeated reminder of the no picture policy, a

group of ‘ill-bred’ people are still taking pictures and using flashlights. He is sharing his personal experience, which is the basis for his negative opinion towards the posh Biaoqingbao. His information is part of the knowledge circulated in the community, though the information might not be applicable in all exhibitions and might not be recognized by all participants. Such knowledge is meta-information concerning the quality or moral judgement of posh Biaoqing. Such knowledge is generated through second-level activities as discussed in Chapter 4.

Some participants who are offline friends share information between themselves, though the information is accessible for the general public. For instance, in example 3 in Figure 5.5, a participant, triggered by the topic of ‘Baroque style rolling eye’, begins to joke about his friend’s awkward situation of having bought a car in Shanghai two years ago but thus far still not having been able to get a license plate.¹⁵⁵ Such information is intended for themselves and their mutual offline friends, but its presence in a chronotope related to posh Biaoqingbao makes it part of the knowledge in the community. Though this information is not relevant to Biaoqing, it presents the community some knowledge of certain social facts in Shanghai. This instance of exporting Biaoqing to offline groups is an instance of cross-chronotope, which will be addressed in greater detail in Part IV of the dissertation.



1	以图搜图，将图片保存下来，然后打开 360 或者百度搜索，在搜索图片功能里上传你保存的那个图即可搜索相同或类似的图片	Use pictures to search for pictures. Save the picture and upload it to picture search on 360 or Baidu search engine, and you'll get the same or similar pictures
2	 古典油画展览，全场就听见工作人员一直喊不要拍照请不要拍照，然而就是一群没素质的人一直照，还各种闪光灯。居然现在还有表情包了，科科	 In an exhibition of classical oil paintings, you could hear the clerks asking people not to take pictures all the time. However a bunch of ill-bred people just kept on doing so, and using flash light. Now there are even Biaoqingbao. Hehe
3	Captain 哲宇儿 ：巴洛克白眼？？？那我是什 么 中华套路王 ：@Captain 哲宇儿买车两年都拍 不到车牌式尴尬	Captain : Baroque style rolling eye??? ¹⁵⁶ Then what am I Zhong : @Captain Having bought a car two years ago but thus far still no success in bidding a license plate style embarrassment

Figure 5.5 Examples of knowledge not directly related to Biaoqing in the community

Knowledge in this community is not only about posh Biaoqing. It also includes information loosely related to, or even irrelevant to, Biaoqing. This community of knowledge is a messy marketplace where all participants have something to offer or to receive, where the commodities are differentially evaluated and reacted to by different participants. The pieces and parts of miscellaneous knowledge keep the community alive and keep people acting and reacting to the information.

¹⁵⁵ In Shanghai, license plates are acquired through a bidding system the success rate of which is around five percent. Retrieved from <https://www.kk1688.com/sh/1231.html> on November 7, 2019.

¹⁵⁶ For this Biaoqing see Figure 5.1.

5.2.2 Instructors

In the search results, PDB (植梦书), SingingClaiire and CloudBeauty (云姣)¹⁵⁷ stand out as instructors in the sense that they either have attracted a large audience or have produced meticulous detailed knowledge of posh Biaoqing.

They all share Biaoqingbao they have made, explain why they create the Biaoqing, where they get the raw material, and how to use them.

PDB, a former designer turned self-media (also known as we-media) (Yu Ivy, 2018) editor, designs the Middle Ages Biaoqingbao for her own use. She gives detailed explanation of the process of creating the Biaoqing in two articles: *Why there is murderous aura in Middle Ages Biaoqingbao? The correct way of understanding Middle Ages Biaoqingbao*¹⁵⁸ and *The second package | My Biaoqingbao has something to say. Help yourselves, and you are welcome.*¹⁵⁹

The Biaoqingbao of PDB are based on Middle Ages manuscripts. In both articles, PDB provides the sources, including titles of the manuscript, author, museums where the manuscripts are stored, production time of the manuscripts, and a brief summary of the stories where the illustrations are taken from, sometimes with short (humorous) comments of her own. In sharing and spreading the knowledge behind the Biaoqing through articles, PDB clearly identifies with her mostly unknown audience, and at the same time positions herself as an instructor and a generous knowledge provider, as manifested by what she writes in the articles:

Making these Biaoqing is a bonus (for you guys) and also a breakthrough for myself ... Experience the correct way of understanding Middle Ages Biaoqingbao, and you will know the answer (why there is murderous aura in Middle Ages Biaoqingbao).

My Biaoqingbao has something to say. Help yourselves and you are welcome.

Repeat the slogan of this series of Biaoqingbao: I think we are all common people with emotions. In the era of Doutu, these elegant Biaoqingbao make you transcendent and outstanding.

In so doing, PDB invites or creates a node in the posh Biaoqingbao community whose participants are distinguished as transcendent and of high taste, i.e. identity icons.

Different from PDB, SingingClaiire does not share detailed knowledge concerning the sources of the Biaoqing, but only superimposes the name of the painter on the picture together with her own interpretation of the emotion of the characters in the painting, as

¹⁵⁷ PDB and CloudBeauty are literal translations of their Weibo profile names. PDB is the initials of plant, dream, book, the translation of the instructor's profile name 植梦书.

¹⁵⁸ Chinese title: 为什么中世纪表情包中带着杀气? 中世纪表情包的异 (zheng) 常 (que) 打开姿势. Retrieved from <https://www.15yan.com/topic/bian-ji-tui-jian/bqUfH1RBcw5/> on December 12, 2016.

¹⁵⁹ Chinese title: 第二弹 | 我的表情包有话要说, 拿去不谢. Retrieved from http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzA3NDQwNDg0Ng==&mid=2649623063&idx=1&sn=db724054a198e8275bee47650d0c2e77&chksm=871aec96b06d658044d684ff03037c1f33f0c9c43a785f6f67834b8a14b3127e42b431fb03b8&mpshare=1&scene=2&srcid=1010mn3dFWw3C1hQKcVNjev9&from=timeline&isappinstalled=0#wechat_redirect on December 12, 2016.

in 'Rembrandt style fright'. The same with PDB, SingingClaiire presents herself as a generous knowledge provider, as stated in her Weibo post: *Visited the museums, fruitful. Help yourselves to Biaoqingbao.*¹⁶⁰ When sharing the Biaoqingbao, SingingClaiire employed the location mark function of Weibo to indicate that she went to a museum in Great Britain (as shown in '📍 London England' in Figure 5.2). This small maneuver is not only to tell her audience subtly that the museum is in London, but also serves to announce the authenticity and poshness of the Biaoqingbao she made, and to flag her authenticity as a Biaoqingbao sharer and a knowledge producer.

SingingClaiire's Biaoqingbao inspires CloudBeauty to write an article to share some knowledge of classic oil paintings. In her article *Must-pass program for elegant Doulu: oil painting master shows you how to keep up with the latest trend of Biaoqingbao*,¹⁶¹ CloudBeauty comes up with her series of posh Biaoqing, introducing the painters, telling the stories in the painting, and explaining the origin of the texts in the Biaoqing. What CloudBeauty does is much like PDB, but the former is more assertive. CloudBeauty claims to be an 'oil painting master', which is an attempt to give authenticity to herself and her knowledge sharing practice; she describes her Biaoqingbao as 'profound', which makes her Biaoqingbao appealing to others. Both strategies greatly boost the value and purchase of her knowledge products.

Instructors in this community have the expertise and resources in the field of fine arts, art and culture. Consciously or subconsciously, purposefully or unintentionally, they claim and attain authority in the community through the knowledge products they generate and share in the community.

5.2.3 Followers

Followers in this community consist of lurking ones, devoted ones, producing ones and critical ones. They 'follow' through various activities, for example liking, reposting the Biaoqingbao, forwarding them to friends, commenting on posts, sharing them, asking for high definition or no-watermark Biaoqing, or using them in online communication.

The majority are lurking followers who leave no or minimum traces, e.g. viewing, liking and/or reposting these Biaoqingbao on their social media, without any comment (see example 1 in Figure 5.6). For example, the post of Funny Weibo Ranking, who reposted SingingClaiire's Biaoqingbao, accumulated 34,508 likes, 11,744 reposts,¹⁶² but only 3,929 comments by January 12, 2017. This means that, of the followers who leave observable traces, around 90% follow through the action of clicking on the thumb-up icon to express their like for the Biaoqingbao. There are more followers who simply view the post without liking, reposting or commenting.

¹⁶⁰ Retrieved from http://www.weibo.com/1989529421/E5KcA0r6i?ref=collection&type=comment#_rnd1484140757642 on December 12, 2016.

¹⁶¹ Chinese title: 优雅斗图包教包会: 油画大师教你紧跟表情包新潮流. Retrieved from <http://collection.sina.com.cn/cqyw/2016-09-02/doc-ifxvqctu5958577.shtml> on December 12, 2016.

¹⁶² Most Weibo users just click the repost icon, without adding any information. But a handful of reposters would write several words relevant to the post before they post it on their own Weibo homepages.

Reposts	1	转发微博	转发 20	Repost Weibo post ¹⁶³	Repost 20
	2		转发 39 23		Repost 39 23
	3	就缺这种艺术风的了	转发 26 77	I'm missing this type of artistic Biaoqing	Repost 26 77
	4	高逼格	转发	Posh	Repost
Comments	5	哈哈哈哈哈！好用~		Hahahahahaha! They're handy~	
	6	刚想发条“关我屁事”的说说，表情包就送到		I was considering updating a post titled “none of my business”, and then I got this Biaoqingbao	
	7	这创意好		Good creative idea	
	8	简直不要更酷		Cannot be any cooler	
	9	很好，我就喜欢这种高 B 格的表情包		Very good. I just like posh Biaoqingbao like this	
	10	和它一比，wuli 韬韬的法式头痛都降低逼格了		In contrast, even the Biaoqing of my Tao ¹⁶⁴ seems less posh	
	11	太好了终于有我们艺术生用的表情包了哈哈		Great. Finally, there is Biaoqingbao for art students. Haha	

Figure 5.6 Examples of texts in followers' reposts and comments on posh Biaoqingbao

Apart from lurking followers, there are also followers who leave comments or comment while they repost. They insert text and/or Biaoqing to express their attitudes toward the posh Biaoqingbao (see examples 2-4, 7-9 in Figure 5.6). In comments and reposts, the most frequently seen Biaoqing are the laugh-crying face , doge and cat . As the interpretation of the three Biaoqing is highly contingent on the context, the emotional vectors conveyed by them may range from positive to negative (as in the case of some critical followers, which will be discussed in what follows), and consequently the attitudes conveyed are not exactly the same among all followers. Since reposters are actively sharing the posh Biaoqingbao on their own Weibo homepages, they in general can be assumed to hold a positive opinion towards the Biaoqingbao. With these Biaoqing, reposters convey the message that they regard the posh Biaoqingbao as funny, hilarious, amazing, or cool, or a mix of several of these attitudes. Followers' reposts might be further reposted by their Weibo friends, which makes the community of posh Biaoqingbao extremely large.

According to the comments, followers like the posh Biaoqingbao for various reasons. Some think it is funny, original, creative, practical and very useful in communication or perfectly suits their needs (see comments 5-7 in Figure 5.6). Some are attracted by the indexicality of the Biaoqing style, for instance cool or posh (see comments 8-10 in Figure

¹⁶³ When a Weibo user does not type any text when reposting, 'Repost Weibo post' (转发微博) will automatically show up in the repost.

¹⁶⁴ Tao (Huang Zitao) is a Chinese singer, songwriter, rapper, actor and model. Pictures of his exaggerated facial expressions are made into Biaoqing and spread virally on Chinese social media.

5.6). Some are happy to have Biaoqingbao relevant to their major (see comment 11 in Figure 5.6).

For lurking followers and followers who leave comments, posh Biaoqingbao is a resource to indicate their uniqueness, and to announce their extraordinary (artistic or literary) taste. In this posh Biaoqingbao community, participants are also alluding to various segments of their life, for instance, their preferences, idols, their majors (see comments 9-11 in Figure 5.6), which are performances of micro-hegemonic identities.

There is no substantial demarcation between devoted and producing followers, both embracing this genre with open arms, and both taking them as a means of marking their high taste. Devoted followers often repost posh Biaoqingbao, connect it with some valuable traits (e.g. 'cute', 'so my style', 'awesome', etc.), express their enthusiasm to add the Biaoqing to their collection and use them. Weibo user ZBeauty is a typical devoted follower: reposting the posh Biaoqingbao as it is, regarding it as beyond 'mediocre' and 'ordinary'. She is at the same time a producing follower: adding her own text to spell out the context of her repost to allude to her extraordinary knowledge of posh Biaoqing. She does this not merely to share the posh Biaoqing to announce her high taste (see Figure 5.7). In her Weibo post, what she is doing bears some resemblance to the actions of real instructors. She is trying to get to the higher status in the community and assume the role of instructor herself. The actions presented in the post of ZBeauty project her identity, at least the identity she aspires to.



Figure 5.7 Weibo repost of ZBeauty¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁵ Retrieved from http://www.weibo.com/u/3909433289?from=feed&loc=nickname&is_hot=1 on December 13, 2016.

Producing followers also connect this series with distinctive taste, but they add more personal accents to the original Biaoqing to emphasize their own personalities. For example, when Weibo user Lin reposts the posh Biaoqing, she substitutes one of them with a Biaoqing related to her city. Lin keeps most of the original Biaoqing, but frames it as a sub-series of the original Biaoqingbao by replacing one of them with a Biaoqing made of a picture of the model moon in Fuzhou, and positioning it in the center (see Figure 5.8). Though Lin claims that it is a sub-series of the posh Biaoqingbao, the local landmark Biaoqing, i.e. the crying model moon, is by no means similar to the posh ones (not an oil painting, no similar color, no texts on the Biaoqing). The addition of a local landmark to her post adds her own specific accent and highlights her local identity, but this is not the only purpose. Her post is also an attempt to employ the posh Biaoqingbao and the artistic aura to promote her profession (an art teacher) and her taste.



Figure 5.8 Weibo post of Lin¹⁶⁷

Critical followers hold a neutral or negative opinion towards posh Biaoqingbao. They voice their opinions in comments to Weibo posts or reposts. Some critical followers hold a neutral attitude towards the Biaoqingbao. The adjective 'neutral' is used on the basis that followers do not say whether it is good or bad, but only suggest what they think outperforms posh Biaoqing, for instance the smile or Shiba Inu Biaoqing (see comments 1-4 in Figure 5.9). The attitudes of such followers, neutral on the surface, are negative in essence, because by suggesting different types of Biaoqing, they are refusing to accept the posh value of the Biaoqing. Through the actions of announcing their own tastes and

¹⁶⁶ Meranti was one of the most intense typhoons on record impacting Fuzhou in September 2016. The baby Moon was a model moon set on a square in Fuzhou for the celebration of Mid-Autumn Festival.

¹⁶⁷ Retrieved from https://www.weibo.com/2219862264/E8fbfEQNj?from=page_1005052219862264_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1564166879774 on December 13, 2016.

preferences, followers are, through congregational work (Garfinkel, 2002), ostensibly establishing micro-hegemonies within a chronotope (Blommaert, 2010, 2018a).

1	应该开个葛优式的	There should be a Ge You ¹⁶⁸ style
2	Wuli 涛涛表情最棒	Biaoqing of my Tao is the best
3	表情包之王只有一——😏	The king of Biaoqingbao is ——😏
4	然而我只会柴犬式微笑➡	However I only use Shiba Inu style smile ➡
5	逼格太高，我一个都不认识🐶🐶🐶🐶	Too posh for me. I know none of them🐶🐶🐶🐶
6	我怕别人不能理解我的艺术气息！	I'm afraid people won't be able to perceive my artistic aroma!
7	逼格太高，怕对方一脸蒙蔽😏	Too posh. Others might be discombobulated😏
8	冷场王专用表情包😏	For the special purpose of creating awkward silence in a conversation😏
9	自从用了这个表情包，女朋友都把我拉黑了➡	My girlfriend blacklisted me for using this Biaoqingbao➡
10	有点恐怖有点瘆人	A bit creepy
11	这样反而更 low 了。。	This is even lower..
12	很智障😏	Very retarded😏
13	装。。专用 ¹⁶⁹	For the special purpose of being pretentious
14	西方文化=高逼格？😏	Western culture=posh?😏
15	中国式恶搞	Chinese style prank
16	名画就这样被现代一些不知道尊重的人亵玩了	Master paintings are thus blasphemed by people of no respect
17	中国的杜甫李白被你们玩坏了，现在连别人都不知道是谁就打算来做表情包，你不觉得对欧洲的文化是一种亵渎吗？	Du Fu and Li Bai ¹⁷⁰ from China are turned into a travesty, and now you want to make people who you don't even know into Biaoqingbao. Don't you think it's blasphemy for European culture?
18	😏	😏

Figure 5.9 Examples of comments by critical followers

The majority of critical followers focus of the usability of the posh Biaoqing. The posh Biaoqing are based on paintings from western culture, and they (including the paintings themselves, their painters, countries of origin, schools of painting, etc.) are quite unfamiliar for many Chinese, which would result in considerable problems when they are made

¹⁶⁸ Ge You is a Chinese actor. The picture of his performance in a TV drama is a popular material for making Biaoqing. For more information see discussion in Section 3.2.3.

¹⁶⁹ This is a euphemized way to say 装逼专用. 逼, which means cunt, is substituted by the commenter with two full stops to avoid typing this vulgar expression. This is a common practice among some internet users on Chinese social media. For more information see footnote 110 and Section 5.1.

¹⁷⁰ Du Fu and Li Bai are Chinese poets from the Tang Dynasty. They are regarded as one of the greatest poets in China. Images of the two poets have been made into Biaoqing by some internet users.

into Biaoqing. On the one hand, followers themselves might not know the posh Biaoqing well enough (see comment 5 in Figure 5.9). On the other hand, followers are worried that their interlocutors might not be able to understand the Biaoqing (see comments 6-7 in Figure 5.9). Because of their poshness and exoticism, their functionality as Biaoqing could be greatly eclipsed, and might even cause serious consequences (see comments 8-9 in Figure 5.9). An interesting action of this type of critical followers is that they have doubts about the usability of the Biaoqingbao, but still they proactively repost the posh Biaoqingbao on their Weibo accounts. In their repost, they either state that this Biaoqingbao would induce awkward silence, or use some Biaoqing to indicate their conservative attitudes, such as laugh-crying 😂 or doge 🐶 both of which in general indicate a tint of distancing (Barbieri, Ronzano, & Saggion, 2016; Dun Xinhui, Zhang Yunqiu, & Yang Kaixi, 2017; Xie Ruobing, Liu Zhiyuan, Yan Rui, & Sun Maosong, 2016).

The criticism by some followers focuses on the moral and aesthetic value of the Biaoqingbao. Some followers think such a style has nothing to do with high taste, but is creepy and low (see comments 10-12 in Figure 5.9). Some regard posh Biaoqing as affected and pretentious, and question the equation of western culture and being posh (see comments 13-14 in Figure 5.9).

Apart from the usability and aesthetic value of posh Biaoqingbao, critical followers also criticize the practice of making Biaoqing out of master paintings. According to them, superimposing funny texts on classic paintings is blasphemy of culture and art (see comments 15-17 in Figure 5.9). Besides these, there are also followers who simply use a Biaoqing as a comment to indicate their criticism of the posh Biaoqingbao (see comment 18 in Figure 5.9).

One more thing to point out about the critical followers is that many of them are passive followers, which means they do not proactively go out to find the Biaoqingbao, but are forwarded these Biaoqingbao by their friends who think they might be interested. Even if they hold negative opinions, they are still part of this community of knowledge. Through criticism, they elevate themselves even higher than others, and make it clear that they are different from most followers. Criticism is not a rejection of the community of knowledge, but an accent that is voiced by individuals, an acclamation of superiority within the community.

In this posh Biaoqingbao community, there are both instructors and followers. The majority of them applaud and welcome the Biaoqingbao, and they do so for various reasons, the majority for the indexicality of high tastes and uniqueness, some for the communicative effectiveness of the Biaoqing, and some for its originality. Critical followers hold a negative opinion towards the Biaoqingbao, some doubting its usability, some suspecting its aesthetic and moral value. Whatever their attitudes are, and whatever they do, followers, besides being participants and playing their roles in this community, are at the same time through their expressions and actions demonstrating various segments of their life, which are in fact instances of micro-hegemonic identity performance.

There exist numerous disparities among the followers, for instance, pre-existing competence to understand the Biaoqing based on oil paintings, evaluation of the posh Biaoqing, moral judgement towards the practice of making Biaoqing from classic paint-

ings, etc. These disparities, on the one hand, point to the inequalities between participants in terms of the cultural capital they possess, and on the other hand, point to the dynamics and polycentricity in the posh Biaoqingbao community. In essence, the posh Biaoqingbao community is highly stratified.

5.3 Actions in the community

The previous section has already discussed some of the actions conducted in the community. These actions are approached with the perspective of analyzing the knowledge products, roles and relationships in the community of knowledge. In this section, actions will be approached with the purpose of deciphering the structure of the community. As the activity types in posts are blatantly different from those in comments and reposts, this section will be organized according to the locations of actions, i.e. in posts or in comments.

5.3.1 Actions in posts

In this section, the actions of both instructors and followers will be analyzed. Some instructors are simply using posh Biaoqingbao as a tool to attract more followers to their own Weibo accounts. In example 1 in Figure 5.10, a posh Biaoqingbao is posted, which is an action of sharing resources, an action of an instructor. This is in fact a public Weibo account specializing in sharing all sorts of Biaoqing, as suggested by the profile name: Wonderful Biaoqing. At the same time, this post is a repost of the Biaoqingbao made by SingingClaiiire, which is an action of followers.

The posts of some instructors, though related to posh Biaoqingbao, are about other types of Biaoqing. For instance, one instructor introduces a Dunhuang mural¹⁷¹ Biaoqingbao as a counterpart or competition of posh Biaoqingbao (see example 2 in Figure 5.10), which is an attempt to claim a place for Chinese cultural heritage in the Biaoqing cultural system.

The instructor in example 2 is adding new (competing) information to the knowledge reservoir of this community. The examples in Figure 5.10 reflect the fact that knowledge circulating in this community is differentially related to the central theme of posh Biaoqingbao. Some knowledge is closely relevant, some distantly related, and some complementing to or competing with the central theme of the community. The differential relevance of the knowledge products is one aspect of the stratified nature of the community. From the actions of instructors, we can see different strategies revealing different ambitions for acquiring specific positions within a stratified community.

¹⁷¹ Dunhuang murals are the Buddhist paintings in Mogao caves, which were grottoes located on the ancient Silk Road for Buddhist meditation and worship. The Buddhist art and murals in Mogao caves are now protected as culture heritage.




























1	<div><div></div><div><p>精彩表情君 2016-11-27 10:00 来自 微博 weibo.com</p><p>#搞笑表情动图#来一组高逼格表情包? 关注我获得更多表情包</p></div><div><div><p>伦勃朗式惊恐</p></div><div><p>伦勃朗式尴尬</p></div><div><p>修拉之鄙视</p></div><div><p>巴洛克式白眼</p></div><div><p>卡拉瓦乔式嫌弃</p></div><div><p>古典主义 二重式要饭</p></div><div><p>中世纪 北欧风格主义偷窥</p></div><div><p>鲁本斯式委屈</p></div><div><p>凡代克式冷漠</p></div></div></div> <td><div><p>Wonderful Biaoqing</p><p>2016-11-27 10:00 from weibo.com</p><p>#funny Biaoqing and gif# Do you want posh Biaoqingbao? follow me for more Biaoqingbao</p></div></td>	<div><p>Wonderful Biaoqing</p><p>2016-11-27 10:00 from weibo.com</p><p>#funny Biaoqing and gif# Do you want posh Biaoqingbao? follow me for more Biaoqingbao</p></div>
2	<div><p>你们以为，一组油画表情包就结束了？ 太天真了。 ——朋友，你知道敦煌壁画吗？</p><div><div><p>西魏式冷漠</p></div><div><p>中唐式惊恐</p></div><div><p>中唐式尴尬</p></div><div><p>隋式鄙夷</p></div><div><p>隋唐过渡式厌恶</p></div><div><p>张义潮式反虐狗</p></div><div><p>晚唐式安详</p></div><div><p>五代十国式委屈</p></div><div><p>宋式冷漠</p></div></div></div> <td><div><p>Do you think an oil painting Biaoqingbao is the only one? Too naïve. --Friends, do you know Dunhuang murals?</p></div></td>	<div><p>Do you think an oil painting Biaoqingbao is the only one? Too naïve. --Friends, do you know Dunhuang murals?</p></div>
3	<div><p>2016-1-29 06:33 来自 iPhone 6 Plus</p><p>#Art Freak 专用表情包# 今天参观了佩鲁贾博物馆，里面满满中世纪的作品，大拜占庭威武！！主要是满满都是表情包，各位喜欢可以拿走，麻烦署个名感谢</p><p>意大利</p><div><div><p>笑死宝宝了</p></div><div><p>看他又在装逼了!</p></div><div><p>我都没脸看了</p></div><div><p>贱开心</p></div><div><p>一脸嫌弃</p></div><div><p>赶快把他拖到水里去!</p></div><div><p>约吗?</p></div><div><p>叔叔我们不约!</p></div><div><p>Ignore..</p></div></div><div><div>收藏</div><div>1</div><div>7</div><div>12</div></div></div> <td><div><p>2016-1-29 06:33 from iPhone 6 Plus</p><p>#Biaoqingbao for Art Freak# Today I visited Perugia Museum, full of medieval works. Great Byzantine! Full of Biaoqingbao. If you like just take it, but please refer to my name, thanks</p><p>Italy</p></div></td>	<div><p>2016-1-29 06:33 from iPhone 6 Plus</p><p>#Biaoqingbao for Art Freak# Today I visited Perugia Museum, full of medieval works. Great Byzantine! Full of Biaoqingbao. If you like just take it, but please refer to my name, thanks</p><p>Italy</p></div>

Figure 5.10 Examples of Weibo posts of different types of instructors

One instructor politely requests that anyone reposting the post should refer to the original author of the Biaoqing (see example 3 in Figure 5.10). There are some social reasons behind such requirements from instructors. On Chinese social media, even in Chinese society, digital products are to some degree not regarded as commodities (Chen Zhuowei & Tang Ying, 2019; Wang Qun & Deng Shibao, 2013; Xie Huwei, He Zheyue, & Wang Zhuo, 2019). The situation of Biaoqing and Biaoqingbao is even worse in the sense that they are regarded as trivial by many people, let alone regarding them as commodities. Consequently, due respect for the copyright of Biaoqing and Biaoqingbao is yet to be established.

What is more interesting in this post is the time it was posted. This post was published in January 2016, six months earlier than that of SingingClaiire. Judging from the limited number of reposts (1), comments (7) and likes (12), it is not likely that SingingClaiire has seen it before. It is hard to say whether the instructors in the community of knowledge are inspired by each other’s creation. What is more, there is very likely to be far more instructors and followers than what I have found through Weibo and internet keyword search. What I have retrieved is a synchronic presentation of the accumulation of knowledge in a certain period of time. However, the time dimension in the community of knowledge cannot be ignored, which points to the less visible connections of different strength among the constituting segments in the community, and thereby to the patched nature of the community.

Most of the retrieved posts are reposts of the original posh Biaoqingbao by SingingClaiire and PDB, emphasizing the high taste of the Biaoqingbao with descriptions such as posh, high end, artistic aura, trendy. Some followers repeat the texts on specific Biaoqing in their reposts to put the spotlight on this specific Biaoqing (see example 1 in Figure 5.11). Besides the poshness, followers also repost for other characteristics of the Biaoqingbao, for instance, dirty, unique, or special effects in Doutu, etc. (see examples 2-3 in Figure 5.11).

1	油画表情包，巴洛克式白眼~	Oil painting Biaoqingbao. Baroque style rolling eye~
2	【不正经福利】你的表情包已经用烂了？试试高逼格有文化的中世纪表情包吧！艾玛，说到中世界，图片都略污啊，我就不放大图啦，大家悄悄戳开看就好啦。	【Dirty perks】Are your Biaoqingbao much too used? Try this posh literate Middle Ages Biaoqingbao! Ah, when it comes to Middle Ages, the pictures are a bit dirty, so I won't put the big images here. You can secretly click open and have a look. ¹⁷²
3	优雅斗图：油画大师教你紧跟表情包新潮流	Doutu elegantly: oil painting master shows you how to keep up with the latest trend of Biaoqingbao

Figure 5.11 Examples of texts in reposts of posh Biaoqingbao

¹⁷² Images posed on Weibo can be collapsed in smaller size, which can be clicked on to zoom in.

Weibo users usually do more than one thing in their posts. Besides sharing the Biaoqingbao or showing their high taste, they also communicate other information.

For some participants, the main purpose of their posts is to share the posh Biaoqingbao as an announcement of their distinguished taste and uniqueness. While posting the posh Biaoqingbao, they are simultaneously demonstrating segments of their personal life. For example, SiningClaiire shares her visit to museums through both text information and the location marker function of Weibo (see Figure 5.2). Weibo user ZBeauty shares her student identity and the fact that she has to stay at school during Halloween (see Figure 5.7), and Lin alludes to the city she lives in (see Figure 5.8). As they are users whose Weibo friends are mainly their acquaintances, their (imagined) audience is very likely people in their own circles. But at the same time the posts are open to the general public, unless set otherwise. This points to the fact that when (some) people post online, they are not only being open to and expect to be seen by their profile friends, but also expect to be seen by the public (which is why the instructor in example 3 in Figure 5.10 requested 'please refer to my name'). In other words, they have an expectation of publicity (boyd, 2010).

For some participants, sharing the posh Biaoqingbao is not the primary purpose of their posts, but something done by the way. As shown in the example in Figure 5.12, a Weibo user updates a post to say something about her personality, which is like a soliloquy of self-reflection. After the most important content of the post text is finished, she puts the text 'share a posh Biaoqing' in brackets to indicate the inferior status of this information. However, the Biaoqing are not reduced to smaller size, but constitute the most salient component in the whole post. In this example, the participant does not post specifically for the posh Biaoqingbao, but shares it as an optional dressing to her main dish. This practice to some degree indicates the participant's ludic attitude towards the posh Biaoqing, claiming the posh character as what she already possesses, instead of what is enthusiastically chased after. This practice points to the stratified feature of the community. Among followers of posh Biaoqingbao, some are enthusiastically trying to reach and attain the resource, some leisurely mark them as what they already possess, while some criticize or question the appropriacy and legitimacy of the Biaoqingbao. And some are capable to present themselves as higher than others in the community, playing or claiming the role of instructor; however, some can only follow.

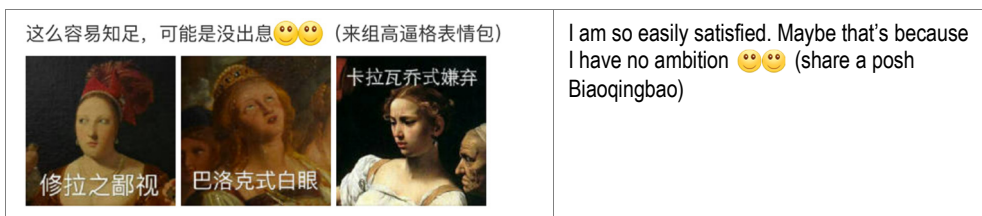


Figure 5.12 Sharing of posh Biaoqing in a by-the-way manner

For some participants, their posts are not about the posh Biaoqingbao per se, but about how their life relates to the Biaoqing, or the other way around. For instance, one participant shares a picture of her gathering with friends. In this picture, she, instead of posing for the group picture as her friends do, is holding a doll, which makes her resemble one of the Middle Ages Biaoqing (see example 1 in Figure 5.13). Whether the participant is deliberately imitating the posh Biaoqing, or notices the similarity between her picture and the posh Biaoqing afterwards, she enthusiastically updates a post about this similarity, and in so doing connects her offline life with the posh Biaoqingbao.

1	<p>……你们说的熟悉感就是这个了吧。我们中间出了一个画风不一样的人。不要拿去做 QQ 表情。PS 对比图源自@中世纪动物数据库 的中世纪表情包。@手中折扇_不减肥不改名 @完颜宝赫 @小餐会流年顺心遂意 @薄荷_好多计划还没拍啊啊啊 @Another 摔_下定决心用绳命减肥</p> 	<p>…… this must be the so-called sense of familiarity. One of us is of a different style. Please don't make it into a QQ Biaoqing. PS the picture for comparison is from @ the Middle Ages Biaoqingbao by Data Base of Middle Ages Animals @手中折扇_不减肥不改名 @完颜宝赫 @小餐会流年顺心遂意 @薄荷_好多计划还没拍啊啊啊 @Another 摔_下定决心用绳命减肥</p>
2	<p>厉害了，我的油画哥。🐱我们即将出炉（上任😂）的电台主播——广把几张图片做成了表情包。可能这是她送给大家的见面礼吧。😂（图片来自“万星人”）</p> 	<p>Wonderful, my oil painting bro. 🐱 (our soon-to-be 😂) broadcast host Guang made a Biaoqingbao out of oil paintings, maybe this is her first meeting gift for all. 😂 (pictures reposted from 万星人)</p>

Figure 5.13 Posts about spill-over effects of posh Biaoqingbao

What is more, when updating the post, she notifies all her friends in this gathering through the @ function of Weibo. The participant is not focusing on the posh Biaoqingbao per se, but on the connection between segments of her life and the Biaoqingbao. Similar things are observed in Example 2 in Figure 5.13. The participant accredits the posh Biaoqingbao to her new colleague, and reposts the Biaoqingbao as a means to introduce this new colleague, connecting what is happening offline with what is happening online.

The actions in both cases point to the porous feature of this community, i.e. the knowledge or resource shared in the community spills over, either from online to offline and vice versa, or to other communities. The online and the offline spaces are influencing and shaping each other through the online-offline nexus configured by the internet.

5.3.2 Actions in comments

To have a clearer picture of what is happening in the community, the top 15 out of the 101 posts retrieved through Weibo keyword search are picked for further scrutiny. The ranking of the posts is based on the number of reposts, comments and likes they have accumulated (see Table 5.1). The more reactions they attract from participants, the more prominent and visible the posts are in the community, and the more revealing they are of the structure of the community. Among the top-15 Weibo profiles, SingingClaiire is a personal profile, and all the rest are theme profiles or official profiles of an institution with large numbers of followers, making these profiles Weibo influencers. The most popular profile, Funny Post Ranking, has 35.99 million followers, and Data Base of Middle Ages Animals, the least popular among the non-personal profiles, has 17,345 followers.

In the comment section of a post, Weibo users can leave comments, or make use of the @ function to notify their Weibo friends of the post, either with or without additional text.

Table 5.1 Top-15 posts in Weibo keyword search results

	Weibo accounts ¹⁷³		Repost	Comment	Like	Total
1	微博搞笑排行榜	Funny Post Ranking	11,699	3,929	34,496	50,124
2	SingingClaiire	SingingClaiire	3,906	282	1,210	5,398
3	一只学屌	A Loser Student	2,718	297	969	3,984
4	腐女大本营	Rotten Girl Camp	652	57	1,082	1,791
5	新周刊	New Weekly	276	99	475	850
6	带你去看展览	Take You to Exhibitions	349	66	326	741
7	学生那些小事	Student Life	210	25	354	589
8	美术生都关注	Wonderful Biaoqing	214	29	287	530
9	美术生都关注	Fine-arts-students-all-follow	245	22	216	483
10	Fashion-Planet	Fashion-Planet	79	0	260	339
11	表情狂魔	Biaoqing Demon	70	18	161	249
12	美术教育联盟	Union of Fine Arts Education	99	16	87	202
13	环球杂志	GlobalMagazine	63	17	93	173
14	中世纪动物数据库	Data Base of Middle Ages Animals	109	13	7	129
15	奔乐计划	Music Plan	63	6	11	80

¹⁷³ The left column is the original Weibo profile name, and the right column is translation provided by me.

Communication with Weibo profile hosts

Communication with Weibo profile hosts mostly happens in theme or official profiles, and occasionally in personal profiles. In quite many cases, the hosts do not reply to every comment, especially in non-personal profiles. Followers might not be offline friends with the profile hosts, but close relationships are often assumed by followers. For instance, many followers of Funny Post Ranking nickname her Big Sister Ranking.¹⁷⁴ When Big Sister Ranking explains that she forgot to upload Biaoqing without watermark, one follower comforts her warmly (see comment 1 in Figure 5.14). Besides this, followers regard it as an honor if their comments are replied to by Big Sister Ranking, and many of them try hard to lure a reply from her (see comment 2 in Figure 5.14). One follower, in protesting against the posh Biaoqing, uses a very intimate tone (see comment 3 in Figure 5.14). This tone is very personal and assumes an intimate relationship with Big Sister Ranking. It even impresses as bickering between young couples. The practice of assuming close relationships is only spotted in the comment section of public Weibo profiles, which are often devoted to a certain theme and have many followers. These profile hosts play an important role in the rapid development of the community of knowledge of posh Biaoqingbao. With large numbers of followers on their Weibo profile, they are in a superb position to be instructors even if they do not produce any posh Biaoqing. What they need to do is simply to repost posh Biaoqingbao created by other instructors. By reposting, they are sharing and spreading the knowledge products in the community.

Weibo influencers and their followers are participants of the community of knowledge of posh Biaoqingbao, and at the same time participants of other communities of knowledge. Their actions in this community are transient and even highly contingent, but at the same time robust because through these actions transient information circulating on the internet is converted into intangible knowledge products which are preserved in aspic in the community. This fact illustrates the elastic nature of a community of knowledge and the polycentricity of the actions performed in the community.

One of the most common practices is to express gratitude towards the hosts' sharing of Biaoqing (see comments 4-6 in Figure 5.14), which is related to people's increasing awareness of copyright, at least in this community of knowledge. For instance, Funny Post Ranking informs the source of the posh Biaoqingbao, and her fans go to the Weibo homepage of SingingClaiire to express their gratitude (see comment 3 in Figure 5.14). Besides the respect for copyright from followers, instructors are also trying to protect their copyright. For instance, instructor PDB reminds New Weekly, who reposts her Biaoqingbao, to refer to her as the author (see comment 7 in Figure 5.14; Example 3 in Figure 5.10). The fact that participants active in some communities may as well become participants of other communities (as indicated in comments 6-7 in Figure 5.14), reveals the mobility of people online, which underlies the weak, contingent yet robust and dynamic connections between different segments in a community of knowledge.

¹⁷⁴ The nickname is 榜姐, literally meaning ranking big sister. In China, it is quite common to address a female senior to oneself as big sister, usually with her full name, family name, given name, or one character in her given name, followed by 姐 (big sister).

1	哦呦我这么爱你不要紧的 🍷 来抱抱 🌹	ha, I love you so much, so it doesn't matter 🍷 come and give me a hug 🌹
2	榜姐你敢不敢再翻我牌!!!!!! 🐱	Big Sister Ranking I dare you to reply to me again!!!!!! 🐱
3	榜姐我恨你, 学了美术好多年, 一直都是信仰, 今天你给我好好说说这些图怎么个意思 🤔🤔🤔	Big Sister Ranking, I hate you. I have learnt fine arts for many years and it is my belief. Today you need to give me an explanation for these Biaoqing 🤔🤔🤔
4	原来来源于你! 好人!!!! 	You are the origin! Good person!!!! [Text on Biaoqing: Bro! Harbin beer ¹⁷⁵]
5	已收 谢谢 po 主	Already saved. Thank you
6	你好我是榜姐那里过来的观光团, 谢谢你的表情包 🐱	Hello, I got to know you from Big Sister Ranking. Thanks for the Biaoqingbao 🐱
7	植梦书的鱼: 麻烦@我一下, 我就是那个创作者植梦书 🐱 新周刊: 感谢作者@植梦书的鱼!	Fish of PDB: Please @ me, and I am the author PDB 🐱 New Weekly: Thanks to the author @ Fish of PDB!

Figure 5.14 Examples of communication with profile hosts in comments

A very popular topic arising from the post of Funny Post Ranking concerns the watermark on the Biaoqing. Some request for Biaoqing without watermarks, while some flatly say: 'with watermark, negative comment',¹⁷⁶ 'garbage', 'not authentic', 'stupid', 'awkward'. Some participants reply to the requests and share how to find no-watermark Biaoqing on the internet. SingingClaiire also replies to several comments asking for no-watermark Biaoqing, saying that she is the creator of the posh Biaoqing, and that they can go to her Weibo homepage for no-watermark Biaoqing.

Besides directly addressing profile hosts, followers also share their own creations and add to the reservoir of posh Biaoqingbao. For instance, in the comment section of SingingClaiire, her peers share more similar style posh Biaoqing as a response to her post (see Figure 5.15). In a community of knowledge, followers have differential capital. Some are receivers only, while some are receiver and contributor (or instructor) at the same time, which points to the stratified structure of the community.

¹⁷⁵ The text '哈啤' on the Biaoqing literally means Harbin beer. Its pronunciation, *hā pí*, resembles the pronunciation of 'happy'. This Biaoqing can be received as a humorous word play.

¹⁷⁶ Negative comment is a neologism derived from online shopping. It is a category of valuation for both buyers and sellers. But it matters more to sellers, because for each negative comment, one point will be docked, and this will drag down the credit of the online store.




<p>何映萱哈: 必须把我的席勒贡献出来了 查看图片</p>  <p>普通</p>	<p>I must contribute my Schiele</p> <p>[Text on the Biaoqing: Surprised to dumb]</p>
<p>淼沂-BOBO: 好玩啊这个 查看图片</p>  <p>扬凡·艾克式 木器</p>	<p>It's so funny</p> <p>[Text on the Biaoqing: Jan Van Eyck style unhappy]</p>
<p>假艺术节: 哟, 太好玩了, 来跟个风, 假装也是中二“知识分子”。Wallace Collection也有很多素材的朋友们 (只是好像不能拍照), 遗憾脸。 查看图片</p>  <p>雷诺兹式眺望</p>	<p>Yo, so funny. Follow the trend, and pretend to be a funny stupid “literate”. There are many raw materials at Wallace Collection (but it seems that it's not allowed to take pictures), facial expression of pity.¹⁷⁷</p> <p>[Text on the Biaoqing: Reynolds style lookout]</p>

Figure 5.15 Examples of followers' contribution of Biaoqing in comment section of SingingClaiire's post

Small talk

Besides communication with profile hosts, participants also enthusiastically conduct small talks with their own Weibo friends (who are often offline friends) in the comment section of other Weibo users' posts. Small talks frequently follow the pattern that participants forward the post to their friends through the @ function on Weibo, and their chat goes on for several rounds, mostly on the topic of posh Biaoqingbao, and sometimes diverting to their offline life. In cases where the topic is closely related to Biaoqing, the content of the conversation would mostly be about their attitudes towards the Biaoqingbao. The majority of participants forward posts to friends who they see connected to the Biaoqing, for instance friends who might like the Biaoqingbao, whose temperament suits the high taste, or whose behaviors resemble that in the Biaoqingbao. It should be noted that 'posh' is not necessary always a complimentary term. Depending on the context, it might be neutral or slightly jokingly derogatory. As to the friends to whom the posh Biaoqingbao are forwarded, some embrace it with open arms, some ask for more similar Biaoqing, and some do not accept them for various reasons (see conversations 1-2 in Figure 5.16, and also Figure 5.9). In small talks which are not relevant to Biaoqing, participants often divert to their offline life (see conversations 3-4 in Figure 5.16), and consequently it is not possible to summarize the theme. But one thing for sure is that this process involves networking and conviviality, i.e. low-intensity social engagement with others through signs that are primarily relational (cf. Varis & Blommaert, 2015).

¹⁷⁷ By the text 'facial expression of pity', the Weibo user is describing the Biaoqing intended to be used here.

1	<p>azurebelieber: @大大椰子椰子 你喜欢吗😄</p> <p>大大椰子椰子: 😄 这种表情包 你做给我看就好了</p> <p>azurebelieber: 回复@大大椰子椰子: 翻白眼.JPG</p>	<p>azurebelieber: @Coconut Do you like them😄</p> <p>Coconut: 😄 For this type of Biaoqingbao, you acting them out for me will be enough</p> <p>azurebelieber: reply to @Coconut Rolling eye.JPG¹⁷⁸</p>
2	<p>杨羨鱼: @leviral 留给你提高逼格</p> <p>leviral: 我的最爱是拉瓦锡的回眸😄😄</p> <p>杨羨鱼: 回复@leviral: 理科生就是不一样</p>	<p>Yang: @leviral For you to improve your taste</p> <p>leviral: My favorite is the glance of Lavoisier😄😄</p> <p>Yang: reply to @leviral: A science student is indeed different</p>
3	<p>CositantoFe: @别踢我脚蹻 @陈远方啊</p> <p>CositantoFe: 回复@Chen: 我还没去拍照</p> <p>陈远方啊: 回复@中指们伸手: 哈哈哈哈哈毛子呢</p> <p>CositantoFe: 回复@Chen: 她手机欠费并且不想充, 怪说不得联系不到。我发了十几个短信! 妈蛋</p>	<p>CositantoFe: @Kick @Chen</p> <p>CositantoFe: reply to @Chen: I haven't gone for pictures yet.</p> <p>Chen: reply to @Hand: Hahahaha, how about Hairy</p> <p>CositantoFe: reply to @Chen: Her cellphone bill is overdue, and she doesn't want to renew it. No wonder I couldn't reach her. I sent her a dozen text messages! Damn</p>
4	<p>雨欣阿嬷: @neptune_2h</p> <p>@neptune_2h: 我明天和学长去广东了</p>	<p>Rain: @neptune_2h</p> <p>neptune_2h: Tomorrow I will go to Guangdong with academic big brother¹⁷⁹</p>

Figure 5.16 Small talk in comments

Both types of small talk reveal the polycentricity in the community. Not all actions and information in this community are about posh Biaoqing. Many of them are side-plays (Goffman, 1981). A consequence of these side-plays is the meshing of the public and the private spheres through the embedding of information and knowledge from both spheres; the connection of different patches within a community; and the connection between different communities of knowledge.

No-clear-target comments

In many cases, followers simply leave a comment for a post, not clearly addressing anyone, and not intending to provoke any further conversation. Some of the comments are suggestions (see comments 1-2 in Figure 5.17), some are attitudes towards the post through texts or Biaoqing (see comments 3-6 in Figure 5.17), some are participants' actions towards the Biaoqing (see comment 7 in Figure 5.17), and some are advertisements (see comments 8-9 in Figure 5.17). There are also actions totally irrelevant to Biaoqing. For instance, Weibo user Faux Pas Collector shares a joke in the comment section, trying to attract more followers to his own Weibo profile (see comment 8 in Figure 5.17).

It should be pointed out that participants' attitudes towards the posh Biaoqingbao are messy, some positive (see comment 3 in Figure 5.17), some negative (see comments

¹⁷⁸ By text message 'Rolling eye.JPG', Weibo user azurebelieber means a rolling eye Biaoqing as a reply to Coconut.

¹⁷⁹ In China, it is quite common to use brother and sister as address terms among friends. Students address senior ones as academic big brothers/sisters.

10-18 in Figure 5.9), and some opaque (see comments 5-6 in Figure 5.17). The equivocality is twofold. On the one hand, some comments are open to interpretation, and thus it is difficult to tell the attitudes conveyed in them, as in comments 5-6 in Figure 5.17. On the other hand, some participants indeed have an ambiguous attitude towards the posh Biaoqing. For instance, in this community of knowledge, especially among followers, the laugh-crying and doge Biaoqing are frequently used. The meaning of the two Biaoqing per se is highly dynamic and uncertain. There is no way of telling for sure what attitudes are conveyed through the two Biaoqing. For this reason, many followers make use of them to express their attitude, which may range from fondness, like, neutral, to dislike. Most often, it is a blend of different attitudes, for instance appreciation of the novelty with a tint of shock, or a smack of shyness to applaud such avant-garde material.



1	建议新浪出一个一键保存原 po 所有图都功能	I suggest Sina ¹⁸⁰ to install a function on Weibo to save all the pictures in a post with only one click
2	希望是动图	It would be better if they were GIF
3	完美地装 B 是此生必学要务之一😎	To be a perfect poser is one of the must-get skills in your whole life😎
4	哈哈哈哈哈 	Hahahahahaha [Text on the Biaoqing: Could do. This is very pure and real] ¹⁸¹
5	马克思主义乖巧 	[Text on the Biaoqing: Marxism style smart and cute]
6	主席式腆肚	Chairman style beer belly
7	毕加索式转发，莫奈式存图	Picasso style repost, Monet style saving Biaoqing
8	囡事大搜罗：一个大肚婆上了公交车站在一个小姑娘身边。司机说：姑娘给孕妇让个位子吧！姑娘犹豫了一下没起身。司机 hold 不住了说：现在的女孩子漂漂亮亮的怎么这么没有公德心！坐着的姑娘也 hold 不住了泪奔道：我也怀孕四个月了啊。大肚婆也 hold 不住了怒吼：我也不是孕妇！！（每日更新）	Faux Pas Collector: A big-belly woman gets on a bus and stands beside a girl. The driver says: Lady can you give your seat to the pregnant! The girl hesitates a bit and does not stand up. The driver cannot hold it and says: nowadays beautiful girls don't care about others! The girl also cannot hold it anymore and cries: I'm also pregnant. The big-belly woman also cannot hold it anymore and says angrily: I'm not pregnant!!! (daily update)
9	美瞳买一送一👁️	Cosmetic contact lenses, buy one get one free👁️

Figure 5.17 Comments with no specific target addressee

¹⁸⁰ Sina (Chinese: 新浪; pinyin: xīn làng) is a Chinese online media company. It owns Weibo.

¹⁸¹ Pure and real is literal translation of 清真, which also means Muslim.

Apart from expressing their attitudes, participants also relate to social facts reflected in certain posh Biaoqing. One follower is amazed by the vividness of a Biaoqing about the situation of a single young person who is faced with the New Year festival (see comment 1 and the first Biaoqing in Figure 5.18). In Chinese society, parents regard it as their responsibility to help their children build their own families. The marriage of a young person is the concern not only of his/her parents, but of the whole family, including grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc. Consequently, during the New Year festival, when families gather together, unmarried eligible young people will be repeatedly asked if they have a boyfriend or a girlfriend. This Biaoqing strikes a chord with young people in such situations. It becomes a tool for self-mocking, and at the same time a tool of resistance against the inconvenient situation caused by the conflict between the traditional value of ‘standing firm at thirty’ (for more detail see discussion in Section 3.2) and the social fact that more and more people tend to marry late.

1	妈的智障哈哈哈，那个回家过年的太生动	Damn retarded hahaha. The one about going back home for New Year festival is so vivid
2	我也是醉了～！就是“关我屁事”	Oh my god~! Exactly, “none of my fucking business”
3	刚想发条“关我屁事”的说说，表情包就送到	I was considering updating a post titled “none of my fucking business”, and then I got this Biaoqingbao

Figure 5.18 Examples of participants’ reflection on social facts and the Biaoqing under discussion

Some participants applaud the attitude conveyed in certain Biaoqing. In comments 2 and 3 in Figure 5.18, participants express their strong identification with the attitude of non-chalance. These comments are reactions of people whose experiences lead them to regard such indifferent attitude as acceptable and even welcomed. These Biaoqing and comments emphasize the feelings or benefits of the self, and are clear signs of the rising of individualism in Chinese society.

All the comments in Figure 5.18 project people's reflections on their life and social facts. In these examples, the posh Biaoqing are regarded by participants as projecting their thoughts, understandings, and expectations, which are reflections on their life. Such information about their life world, when presented on social media, becomes knowledge products that project certain social facts, and consequently constitute data which are part of the mediascape, i.e. the images of the world created by media (Appadurai, 1996).

5.4 Discussion and conclusion

The community of knowledge of posh Biaoqingbao is extremely complicated and dynamic in three aspects: (1) the knowledge circulated in it and the intensity of knowledge practices deployed by participants, (2) the roles of participants and (3) the structure of the community.

The information and knowledge shared in the community is highly stratified and at the same time highly unpredictable. The knowledge products are generated by the knowledge practices performed by participants. The actions in the community are performed in different locations, in different genres and for different purposes. Consequently, the resulting knowledge is of different relevance to the central theme of posh Biaoqing. This makes the knowledge as well as the knowledge practices stratified. At the same time, it is highly contingent as to what information gets shared, especially when it comes to knowledge loosely related to or irrelevant to Biaoqing, resulting in the unpredictability of knowledge work in the community. In what has been observed, we repeatedly see the spilling over of knowledge between online and offline spaces. The two spaces project, influence and shape each other. The line between them is disappearing and the two spaces are integrating into an online-offline nexus, which will be a new and necessary ontological and epistemological perspective on modern society.

The major roles in the community of knowledge are those of instructor and follower, depending on whether a person is a provider or receiver of information. Through discussing, creating, innovating, refining, spreading and learning information, both instructors and followers conduct knowledge work, which brings the community of knowledge into being. However, the roles of participants are not constant. At one moment, a person might be a follower who applauds the novelty of the posh Biaoqing, and at another moment, the same person might be an instructor who introduces the painter of a painting. A participant might be a follower who criticizes the practice of making fun of famous paintings, and at the same time be an instructor who shares information about oil painting exhibitions.

The complex structure of the community of knowledge is reflected in the actions performed by participants. The most common practice is reposting, which is followed by liking and commenting.¹⁸² The majority of reposts are conducted by followers of Weibo

¹⁸² These practices are confined to what is observable in the public sphere of this community of knowledge. Participants' usage of posh Biaoqing in the private sphere, which is not accessible to me as a researcher, is not included in the discussion in this chapter.

influencers. These reposts are mostly flat copy of the original posts. Some Weibo users repost with comments, which might provide some insights into why they repost the posh Biaoqingbao. They explicitly express their orientation to the artistic or extraordinary style, funny and humorous flavor, or usefulness of the Biaoqing. It should be clarified that in most reposts, the extraordinary taste and/or artistic aura are emphasized, either through explicit or implicit verbal expressions, or through the Biaoqing of laugh-crying or doge. Most participants in the community of knowledge are attracted by the description(s) of the posh Biaoqing in the Weibo posts, either the funny part, or the high culture part, or both. Through the action of reposting, participants are enhancing and spreading these value judgements: the indexicalities of the posh Biaoqing. To a great extent, the popularity of the posh Biaoqing is a result of the overt integration of the Biaoqing with these indexicalities. This is the centripetal feature of the community structure. To put it more specifically, the indexicalities of the posh Biaoqing are what causes this community to emerge and develop. The commonality between the participants in this community is their interest in the indexicalities of posh Biaoqing. These indexicalities are accents for participants to perform certain micro-hegemonic identities.

A second structural feature of this community of knowledge is stratification, which is reflected in two aspects. First, participants in this community possess unequal cultural capital. Some provide rich information, some follow but are at the same time capable of contributing some knowledge (which is differentially relevant and valued in the community), while some can only follow. Second, the community is normatively polycentric. There are different reactions towards the posh Biaoqing, some participants embracing them with open arms, some leisurely enjoying them, and some criticizing them. In each category of reaction, participants have (minute) different reasons to react in such a way, i.e. they orient to different sets of norms.

Segmentation is a third structural feature of this community, which is caused by three factors. First, there are multiple instructors in the community, each being a node of a sub-community. These sub-communities do not always develop simultaneously and some of them might come into being far earlier than others. Some of the instructors get their knowledge from the same source, but some from quite different sources. As a result, there exist differential connections between the sub-communities, some of which are closely related and some are loosely connected, and thus the patched structure of the community takes shape. Second, small talk and side-plays by participants literally insert private online communication into the public sphere of the community of knowledge. And this results in a patchwork of different spheres in the community. Third, through the information they share and the actions they perform in the community, participants are constantly revealing various segments of their life, i.e. performing micro-hegemonic identities. That is to say, the resources and actions in the community result in a patchwork of different micro-hegemonic identities, among which the identity of posh Biaoqing user is the most salient one.

Though the structure is segmented and stratified, it is at the same time robust. The most important reason is its centripetal feature. The indexicalities of the posh Biaoqing (e.g. vanguard, young, unique, high taste, etc.) attract people to the community, where travel between different communities and insertion of private in public spheres happen.

Moreover, participants use the posh Biaoqing in their private communication, as reported in comments, which de facto spreads the knowledge and further expands the community of knowledge. The traveling and insertion stitch different patches into a single community.

The community of knowledge of posh Biaoqingbao is a light community with miscellaneous knowledge and dynamic roles in a stratified and segmented structure. This community is one of the numerous on Chinese social media. It is a new perspective on communities in an online-offline nexus, i.e. knowledge centered, which is revealed here for the first time in the study of Biaoqing.

CHAPTER 6

Community of knowledge in action II: Doutu

6.1 Introduction

Most of the ways in which Chinese people use Biaoqing can also be found in the use of emojis elsewhere in the world. However, in China there is something very peculiar for which I have seen no equivalent in the literature: Doutu. Doutu (斗图, *dòu tú*, literally: fight image) means to fight with images. In Doutu contexts, 'images' refer to Biaoqing. Doutu is in fact the practice of communicating with a string of Biaoqing, which will be introduced in detail in Section 6.2.

The word 'fight' in Doutu is a war metaphor. In Chinese culture, war metaphors are omnipresent (Han Chong, 2011; Yuan Ying, 2004). People can be in war with not only other people (for example their competitors/rivals), but also with abstract concepts (for example their aims/goals, or their laziness/arrogance, etc.). In the business world, a person's career and various activities are frequently compared to a war (Su Lichang & Chang Hongling, 2007). Similarly, a war metaphor is invoked to describe the communication mode Doutu on Chinese social media. A very close analogy for Doutu is cockfight, which is not a fight, but a competition for the resources one possesses (i.e. cocks or Biaoqing). Similar to a cockfight (Geertz, 2005), Doutu is not simply a game, but a form of cultural activity. It is a grassroots activity that is elastic and highly variable in form, and has much greater potential for influencing interpersonal relations than the general way of using Biaoqing (Liu Min & Xu Shuai, 2016; Liu Shujie & Liu Yixuan, 2019).

This chapter will unravel Doutu on Chinese social media from three perspectives: Doutu as a genre of social action, Doutu weapons, and sociological reflections on Doutu.

6.2 Doutu as a genre of social action

As has been laid out in Chapter 2, a genre is a cultural object that intrinsically entails behavioral norms as well as a cluster of formal features, which makes a communicative event recognizable as an instance of socially and culturally established categories, such as a lecture or a novel (Blommaert, 2008, 2018a; Lillis, 2013). Doutu is an immediately recognizable communicative practice with strings of Biaoqing used during communication on Chinese social media, regardless of where it happens between whom in what

situation. The presence of strings of Biaoqing at the same time triggers relevant chronotope(s) suggesting behavioral norms for participants. In this sense, Doutu is a genre of social action.

Iterativity and creativity are two crucial dimensions of a genre, the former pointing to the structural aspect of social action, and the latter pointing to the diversity aspect of social action (Blommaert, 2018a). In the genre of Doutu, the iterativity is embodied in the usage of strings of Biaoqing by participants, and the creativity is embodied in multiple aspects, for instance, the type of Biaoqing used, insertion of non-Biaoqing turns, usage of texts to represent Biaoqing, locations (or platforms), participants, etc.

It should be pointed out that Doutu is a grassroots concept, which emerged in recent years with the popularity of the practice of communicating with strings of Biaoqing on various social media, especially QQ and WeChat.¹⁸³ It falls in the range of folk culture, and there is no official or academic definition of this genre. My work in this chapter constitutes an introduction to and a holistic description of the genre of Doutu. In this section, three aspects of Doutu, including forms, platforms and scenarios, will be introduced in detail to present a full picture of this grassroots genre.

6.2.1 Forms of Doutu

By 'form', I mean the turn-taking organization of Doutu that is the relative ordering of participants and/or turn construction units (Schegloff, 2007). Turn is a concept from conversation analysis, the building block of which is a turn-construction unit, the basic forms being sentences, clauses, phrases, or lexical items (*ibid.*). In the case of online communication, for the convenience of description, I will define a turn, or turn-construction unit, as an entry of a message, be it a sentence, clause, phrase or lexical item, or a Biaoqing, voice message or short video.

There is no rigid template of turn construction for Doutu, and the mediation of the internet complicates the issue of turn-taking in online communication. As interlocutors are connected through the internet, there might be message lag during communication for various reasons (Herring, 1999; Woerner, Yates, & Orlikowski, 2007). Also because of the mediation of the internet, participants are endowed more freedom to send messages even though the floor is supposed to be given to other participants. Consequently, multiple messages might be sent at the same time. What is more, participants can be easily distracted from the communication by offline activities (for example to answer the door, and then return to the conversation) or other simultaneously happening online activities (for instance browsing other social media). More extreme cases would be that the conversation is disrupted and then resumed days later. What is more, the number of participants also has great influence on the turn-taking in Doutu. There are numerous disruptive factors for the turn-taking organization in online communication, and they in one way or another result in the dynamics of Doutu.

Doutu might follow a neat one-participant-one-turn pattern (see Figure 6.1). In the example in Figure 6.1, two female friends are bantering with each other through Doutu

¹⁸³ Retrieved from <https://baike.baidu.com/item/斗图/17491392> on October 25, 2017.

which proceeds in a neat one-participant-one-turn pattern. In other cases, one participant may send Biaoqing for several turns on end, and sometimes, there might be occasional text messages interspersed in a string of Biaoqing (see Figure 6.2).

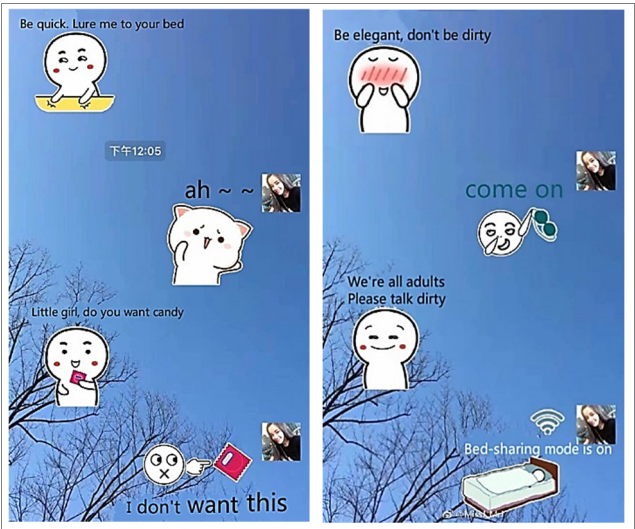


Figure 6.1 An example of one-participant-one-turn form¹⁸⁴


	1	JS: [Text on the Biaoqing: Thanks a lot]
	2	SS: [Text on the Biaoqing: Shake hands]
	3	JS: [Text on the Biaoqing: I have the hunch that you are an interesting person]
	4	JS: I am impressed
	5	SS: [Text on the Biaoqing: Please don't talk anymore]

Figure 6.2 An example of text message interspersed in Doutu¹⁸⁵ (Note: JS is the junior student, and SS is the senior student)

¹⁸⁴ Retrieved from <http://weibo.com> on August 14, 2017. Translation of the original Chinese texts on the Biaoqing is provided by the author.

¹⁸⁵ Different from turn 4, which is a text message as indicated by the speech balloon, the turns 2, 3 and 5 are Biaoqing consisting of text only, i.e. text-Biaoqing. As a sub-category of Biaoqing, text-Biaoqing share the characteristics of Biaoqing, and the most relevant ones are ludic and that hush, dirty, impolite expressions are tolerated (for more detailed discussion see Section 3.2).

Figure 6.2 presents a short excerpt from a long stretch of Doutu between a senior and a junior student. After the two of them conduct Doutu for several turns, the junior expresses his admiration of the senior's Biaoqing resources through a text message in turn 4, which triggers further intensive Doutu between them (for a full presentation of the interaction see Section 6.4.1).

In some rare cases, there might be two (or even more) storylines, one of Doutu and one of text communication, intertwined in one communicative event. Participants might conduct Doutu and talk about other business at the same time, as shown in the example in Figure 6.3. This is a conversation between a high school student and his chemistry teacher who is around 50 years old. In this example, when the student asks his chemistry teacher for help with the questions in an exam (turns 1 and 2), the teacher replies with a Biaoqing (turn 3), and then agrees to help (turns 4-6). After the student expresses his surprise that the teacher uses a Biaoqing often regarded as a specialty of young people (turn 7), the teacher is triggered to show off more Biaoqing resources (turns 10, 14), though the teacher still follows the topic of the exam (turns 9-10, 12-13). The communication continues between shifting between textual non-Biaoqing conversation (turns 15, 17, 18, 24, 25, 26) and Doutu (turns 14, 16, 23, 27, 28).

In this example, there are three storylines, one of Doutu, one of communication concerning the exam, and one of communication concerning Biaoqing. The three storylines are closely knitted together, and consequently, the Doutu turns (10-11, 27-28) are interspersed in text message turns. This is an example of the extremely loose form of Doutu. During communication, multiple genres can intertwine with or enclose one another, and participants may frequently shift out of and back to a genre. For instance, in this example, the student and teacher frequently shift into and out of Doutu in a short stretch of communication (for a full presentation of the interaction see Section 6.4.1).

A common characteristic in the three examples above is contingency. There is an element of contingency in participants' choice of message types (text, voice, Biaoqing, etc.) and message content. Consequently, it is highly unpredictable whether a conversation develops into Doutu and vice versa, though there is a much higher chance of Doutu in some situations than others, as will be illustrated in Section 6.4.1.

In the genre of Doutu, the basic unit is interaction, i.e. a stretch of communicative actions that consists of rounds of Biaoqing exchanges. Intuitively it is difficult to accept only one round of Biaoqing exchange as Doutu, as in turns 10-11 in Figure 6.3. When there is more than one round of Biaoqing exchange, the interaction will be more readily recognized as Doutu, though for some people this might still be too short. It is an idiosyncratic matter as to how many rounds of Biaoqing exchange count as Doutu. It is quite common in interaction in general to have one round of Biaoqing exchange with which participants do not intend to Doutu at all, for instance to respond to a Biaoqing out of the need for phatic communication. However, when Biaoqing exchanges go on for more than two rounds, it is not confined to the ritual type of Biaoqing exchange anymore, but more participants' initiative to go for more such rounds. Both the number of Biaoqing exchange rounds and participants' inclination to such exchanges are decisive factors to judge whether an interaction counts as Doutu. In this research, an interaction with two and more rounds of Biaoqing exchange by participants who show clear inclination to

extend such interaction will be regarded as a Doutu unit. As multiple stretches of interaction may intertwine with each other or embed in each other, Doutu units may be woven into other genres in communication. Different genres develop along or within one another and they are often inseparable, which will be discussed in Section 6.4.1.


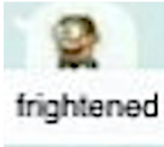





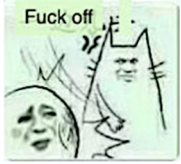

1	Teacher (...)	15	Teacher, where did you get so many Biaoqing!!!!
2	Do I still have any chance (.....)	16	
3		17	From my daughter
4	What the hell	18	They are interesting, so I saved them
5	Come earlier tomorrow	19	
6	I'll explain them to you	20
7	Teacher, you use this type of Biaoqing!!	21	Teacher, what would you do if I fail the exam (((
8	Can't I?	22	I would
9	Your performance in the exam	23	
10		24	Teacher, can I use Biaoqing with dirty words
11		25	No you cannot
12	Surprised by what?	26	?? Bully me!!
13	I'll let you know what surprise is when your grade comes out	27	
14		28	

Figure 6.3 An example of three-storyline communication (translated by the author)

6.2.2 Platforms for Doutu

The development of information technology and the launch of social media with various market positioning greatly enrich the diversity of online life. The advances in hard- and software constitute the infrastructures for Doutu. Though many social media are not developed for the purpose of Doutu, their user base and affordances of Biaoqing function/feature endow them the potential to serve as the site for Doutu. In this part, three

representative types of social media will be introduced to illustrate the platforms for Doutu: Baidu Post Bar, QQ and WeChat, and Weibo. Before the full analysis, it is necessary to point out that each social media has its own algorithms, interface organization, policies/regulations, user terms, affordances, limitations and target user/audience groups. In this light, each social media is a chronotope of its own.

Baidu Post Bar

As has been introduced in Chapter 2, Baidu Post Bar is the largest Chinese communication platform provided by Baidu, a Chinese web services company. Each Post Bar is a theme-based space for interested users. The activities in the Post Bars are sharing information, asking questions, providing answers and receiving information. In essence, each Post Bar is a community of knowledge about a specific theme. Each Post Bar can have up to three moderators (appointed by Baidu), thirty vice-moderators and ten video/image-editors (appointed by Baidu or moderators). Moderators and vice-moderators interfere when the policies of Post Bar are violated. Moderators can delete posts, forbid certain users from posting, and block IP addresses; vice-moderators can delete posts and forbid certain users from posting; video/image-editors are responsible for managing the uploaded videos and images in the Bar. The responsibilities of the moderators and editors are to police the actions and to maintain order in the Bar, which points to the normative chronotopic nature of social media.

Each post in a Post Bar is a thread, where replies to the post are entries in the thread, and replies to a reply are displayed under it. A metaphor is applied to naming the roles in a Post Bar. Each post/thread is compared to a building, the post host, i.e. the user who initiates the post, is *Louzhu* (楼主, *lóu zhǔ*, literally: building owner), and each entry is a floor (see Figure 6.4). *XX floor* is also used to refer to the user whose reply constitutes the named floor. Posts and replies can be texts, images, Biaoqing or videos, and replies to a reply can be in the form of text or Biaoqing. When a specific participant needs to be addressed, the @ function can be employed: participants whose profile IDs appear behind @ will receive a notification. When there is no specific addressee in a reply, the default addressee is usually *Louzhu* or the previous floor. Such interface organization provides an infrastructure for embedding communication within communication, and thereby provides the convenience for participants to shift between genres and chronotopes.

Each post is a social interaction space where participants can communicate with each other in a conversation-like manner. On Baidu Post Bar, Biaoqing are limited to the default Biaoqingbao provided by the platform. But the image feature, through which participants can add their customized Biaoqing, greatly makes up for the limitation of default Biaoqingbao. These infrastructures provide the potential for users to conduct Doutu, which might burst out between participants during the process of interaction in a post.



Figure 6.4 A thread in a Post Bar¹⁸⁶

QQ and WeChat

As introduced in Chapter 2, both QQ and WeChat have a large user base: by March 2019, there were 823 million active QQ users and over 1.1 billion active WeChat users. The large user base provides the precondition for the popularity of Doutu on the two instant messaging social media.

On both social media, the messaging function together with the Biaoqing feature provides a convenient space for Doutu. Both social media offer a wide range of Biaoqing

¹⁸⁶ Retrieved from <https://tieba.baidu.com/f?ie=utf-8&kw=%E6%96%97%E5%9B%BE&fr=search> on November 1, 2017.

and Biaoqingbao for users, which greatly contributes to the convenience in using Biaoqing during online communication. On both QQ and WeChat, there are default Biaoqing, customized Biaoqing added by users themselves, and Biaoqingbao which users can choose to download to their own accounts (see Figure 6.5). These infrastructures ensure that whenever users feel the need to mobilize their Biaoqing resources, they have easy access to them, and thus can engage in Doutu with great ease.

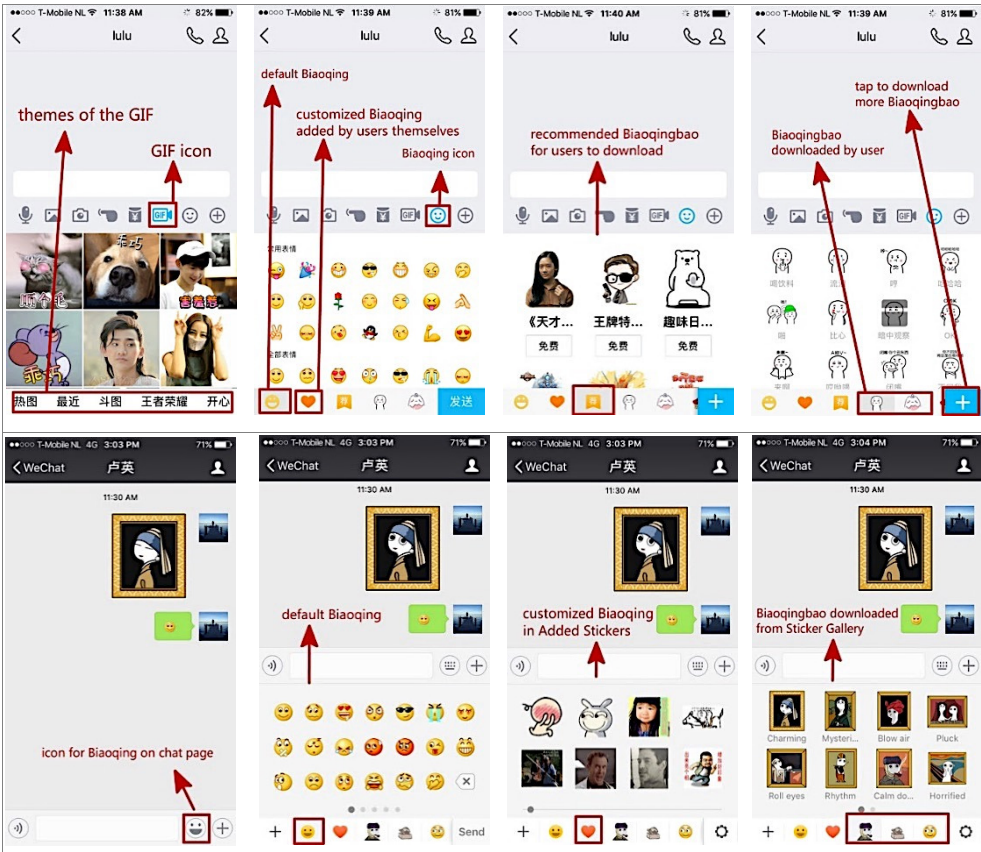


Figure 6.5 Biaoqing on QQ (top row) and WeChat (bottom row)¹⁸⁷

Sina Weibo comment session

Weibo users can comment on a post, or reply to a comment, which constitutes an interaction between and among post hosts and viewers (see Figure 6.6). Weibo has a feature of adding an image as a comment or reply, which provides the infrastructure for Doutu.

¹⁸⁷ Retrieved from the author's QQ and WeChat account on November 1, 2017.

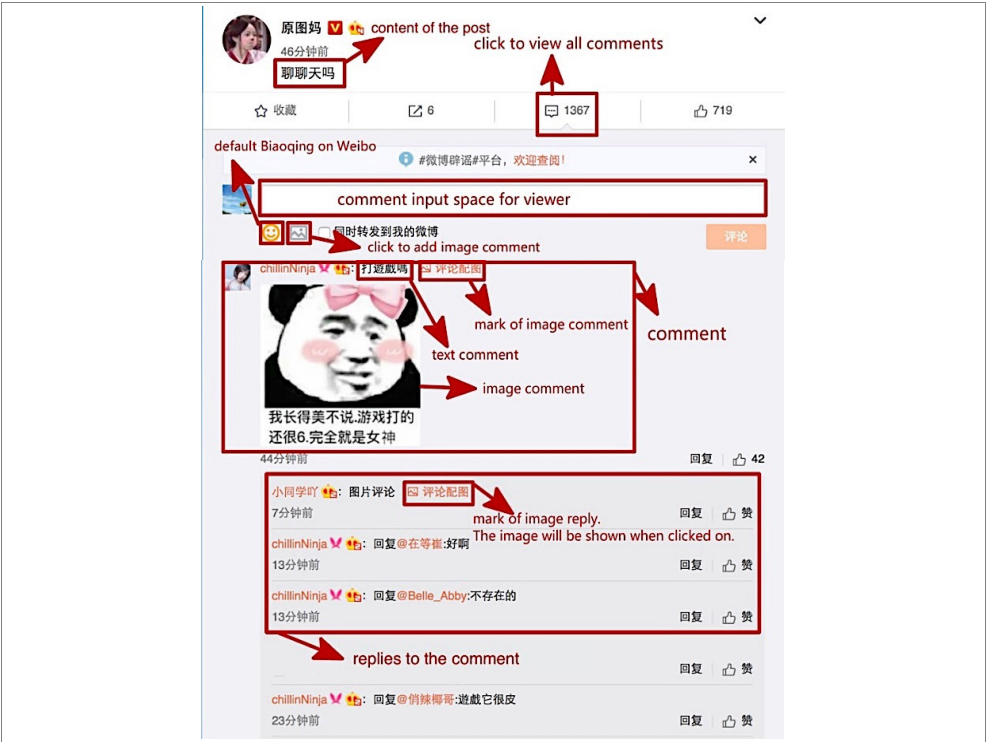


Figure 6.6 An example of comment session on Weibo¹⁸⁸

In Figure 6.6, the icon to add image comment is grey, meaning that this user has no access to this function. In March 2017, Sina Weibo canceled the adding image comment feature for ordinary Weibo users, and image comment became a privilege of Weibo club members, i.e. Weibo users who pay for membership. According to Sina Weibo, the purpose of this policy is to control illegal information in the system, and it is not sure yet when this function will be open to ordinary users.¹⁸⁹ This decision arouses great dissatisfaction among Weibo users, and quite many of them make posts claiming that they are forced to pay for Weibo club membership because they want to Doutu (see Figure 6.7).

如今我的朋友们都充了微博会员，谁都不想在这场斗图中输给对方，都是被逼的 🐼	So far, my friends have all paid for Weibo club membership, because nobody wants to be defeated in Doutu. All are forced by Weibo 🐼
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Figure 6.7 A post expressing dissatisfaction with the policy of Sina Weibo¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁸ Retrieved from https://www.weibo.com/5824051112/FtgTe1NHQ?filter=hot&root_comment_id=4169764609750447&type=comment on November 2, 2017.
¹⁸⁹ Retrieved from <https://www.anfensi.com/news/137522.html> on November 2, 2017.
¹⁹⁰ Retrieved from https://www.weibo.com/1739789331/FtcKs3GCK?refer_flag=1001030103_&type=comment on November 2, 2017.

The above-introduced platforms (Baidu Post Bar, QQ, WeChat and Sina Weibo) are currently the most-used Chinese social media, but they do not constitute an exhaustive list where Doutu may happen. These social media have a large number of commonalities in terms of their technical support of graphic semiotic signs. However, this does not mean the social media are exactly the same. The (subtle) differences in their interface organizations, affordances and platforms policies and user terms make each of them preferred by certain groups for certain types of activities. For instance, WeChat, instead of Baidu Post Bar, is preferred for communication between acquaintances; and Sina Weibo, instead of QQ, is preferred by celebrities for publicity. In other words, each platform is chronotopic in essence. On all these platforms, each conduct of Doutu is an instance of information sharing, an instance of learning, and a performance of knowledge work. Note that 'information' here refers not only to the knowledge shared as the subject or topic of social media contents, but also to relevant knowledge that can serve as tacit background of the contents.

To sum up, different social media, though not designed for the sake of Doutu, provide infrastructures for Doutu, including an online communication platform or space, Biaoqing/Biaoqingbao, and image uploading features, which open up the possibility for people to mobilize any Biaoqing they have and like. These social media play a crucial role in the development of Biaoqing and the popularity of Doutu, but their role is often neglected because they are too readily taken for granted.

Doutu is a grassroots genre of social action featuring the use of Biaoqing on Chinese social media. The layered nature of genre and the flexibility and diversity of location make Doutu a highly dynamic genre. In addition, the dynamic of Doutu is embodied in the weapons used, which will be introduced in Section 6.3, and the scenarios where it happens, which will be discussed in detail in Section 6.4.

6.3 Doutu weapons

Biaoqing are the weapons for Doutu. The characteristics of Biaoqing on Chinese social media have been discussed in detail in Chapter 3. In this chapter, I will only briefly summarize the popular facial expressions and figures and the major characteristics of Biaoqing to avoid repetition.

To recapitulate what has been discussed in Chapter 3, the most popular facial expressions originate from Chinese actor and singer Jacky Cheung, Chinese basketball player Yao Ming, Korean actor Choi Seong-guk, American professional wrestler D'Angelo Dinero, Japanese voice actress Hanazawa Kana (see Figures 3.1-3.5). Their faces are often extracted from the original pictures and imposed on various figures (e.g. Panda Man, Mushroom Hairstyle, pets, Well-Behaved Baby, cartoon images, etc.) to make new Biaoqing. These celebrity facial expressions are not the only ones. Nowadays more and more grassroots celebrities (or *wanghong*) are also becoming sources for popular facial expressions. Besides this, there are also numerous other Biaoqing which do not feature these facial expressions.

Biaoqing figures may be real people, cartoon images, animals, historical/cultural/political characters (see Figures 3.8-3.17). Figures are not only the carrier of facial expressions, appearance and demeanor, but also media of actions and events presented in Biaoqing. Consequently, figures are a crucial element for identity work for both the figures in Biaoqing and Biaoqing users, and in some cases, one Biaoqing might convey different identities on the two dimensions.

The characteristics of Biaoqing have been discussed in detail in Chapter 3, but it is useful to recapitulate them here. The most sought-after characteristics in Biaoqing are cute, mischievous and insulting, decadent, dirty, and violent (see Figures 3.18-3.25). In many cases, different characteristics are combined in one Biaoqing (see Figure 3.26).

The sharpness of the Biaoqing as Doutu weapons derives from the ludic nature in combination with their characteristics (especially mischievous, dirty, and violent) which work as people's challenge of and rebellion against certain traditional Chinese social norms (for instance the emphasis on harmony and politeness).

6.4 The social dynamics of Doutu

After detailed introduction of the genre of Doutu and a recap of Doutu weapons, this section will be devoted to the social dynamics of Doutu, and to be more specific, the reasons and purposes of Doutu. To achieve this end, several cases will be presented to illustrate the typical situations for Doutu, as well as the spill-over of Doutu to non-Doutu situations.

6.4.1 Scenarios of Doutu

People may conduct Doutu for the sake of Doutu. There are many Doutu groups on various social media, for instance WeChat and QQ, Baidu Post Bar, etc. Doutula, a website devoted to Doutu, has created 12 Doutu groups on WeChat and 5 on QQ by November 20, 2017.¹⁹¹ The WeChat QR code of the moderator is posted on the web page, and anyone can scan it to be randomly added to one of the WeChat Doutu groups, or by donating around ¥1 to be added to a group of one's choice. The ID numbers of the 5 QQ Doutu groups are listed on the web page, which QQ users can search and request to become group members (see 1 in Figure 6.8). I am in one of the WeChat groups, which has around 500 members, most of whom do not know each other.

On Baidu Post Bar, there is a Doutu Bar where Doutu lovers can Doutu, share Biaoqing, or ask for Biaoqing, all of which are defining actions of a Doutu community of knowledge. This Bar has 464,838 followers and over two million posts by November 20, 2017¹⁹² (see 2 in Figure 6.8).

¹⁹¹ Retrieved from <https://www.doutula.com/> on November 20, 2017.

¹⁹² Retrieved from <https://tieba.baidu.com/f?ie=utf-8&kw=%E6%96%97%E5%9B%BE> on November 20, 2017.



Figure 6.8 Doulu groups created by Doutula, and Doulu Bar on Baidu Post Bar

These Doulu forums are created for the purpose of Doulu. The slogan of Doutula is ‘Here you can explore the fun of Doulu, and experience a different type of happiness’,¹⁹³ and that of Doulu Bar is ‘Let’s Doulu, and show your style!’,¹⁹⁴ both of which perfectly illustrate why people Doulu: for fun. Though these spaces are devoted to Doulu, Doulu is not the only thing that goes on. Participants in these Doulu communities also share other information (some relevant to Doulu and some not), conduct phatic communication, gossip, seek advice, etc., which are interludes in Doulu.

¹⁹³ The original Chinese text is 在这里你可以发现斗图的乐趣, 感受一份不一样的快乐.


¹⁹⁴ The original Chinese text is 斗图吧, 斗出你的风格!

Besides on forums established for the sake of Doutu, Doutu frequently happen during online communications between people who know each other.¹⁹⁵ During the process of data collection on Sina Weibo (which I regularly visit for data collection as well as for getting information in general), I found many cases where Weibo users screenshot their Doutu on WeChat/QQ and post them on Weibo, and some of them give a brief description of their Doutu experience in their posts. Through sharing personal experiences and/or providing descriptions, they share information and knowledge, and thus de facto become instructors in the community of knowledge of Doutu.

Doutu between peers

Among the search results, one description stands out for its frequent presence, that is 'whenever there is disagreement, we begin to Doutu'.¹⁹⁶ There are other similar descriptions of the shift from conversation to Doutu (e.g. 'while we are chatting, the conversation strays to Doutu', 'I don't know how we begin to Doutu'),¹⁹⁷ but much less frequently used. On the surface, this description suggests that participants begin to Doutu in order to muffle the inharmony or conflict caused by divergence in opinions. But a close look at these posts reveals a different picture. First, the situations where Doutu happens are mostly non-business light-hearted chatting or when serious business has ended. Second, the occasions where Doutu begins are mostly when one participant teases or jokingly ironizes the other, but there is no real disagreement. Third, in quite many occasions, there is a matter of contingency as to whether participants stray to Doutu. The example in Figure 6.9 is a good illustration.

This is a Weibo post where the girl shares the record of WeChat chatting between her and her boyfriend. In this case, the conversation starts with the boyfriend sending a funny Biaoqing and the girl sending text message 'I'm off work'. The conversation continues with two storylines, one about the boy's Biaoqing usage, one about the topic of work and weekend.

Here we see message lag. Neither of the participants is replying to the latest message they receive, but to the previous message. For instance, the boy does not reply to 'are you a psycho', , but replies to the previous message from the girl, i.e. 'I'm off work'. Due to message lag, the two participants frequently shift between the two storylines and their relevant genres.

When the girl says, 'Let's have fun' and the boy replies with a Biaoqing barely relevant to their current topic, the conversation drifts to Doutu. In this case, Doutu is initiated through the couple's teasing each other. But there is no clue to indicate that Doutu is the only direction of development for this conversation. It is highly contingent on the context, including the participants and their knowledge (especially of Biaoqing), social relations, mood, etc.

¹⁹⁵ 'Know each other' in the online world is different from 'know each other' in the offline world. In the former case, they might not have met each other, not knowing each other's face, identity, etc., but are in each other's social media contact list.

¹⁹⁶ Original Chinese text: 一言不合就斗图.

¹⁹⁷ Original Chinese texts are respectively: 聊着聊着开始斗图; 莫名其妙开始斗图.



Figure 6.9 An example of 'whenever there is disagreement, we begin to Dou tu'²⁰⁵

Among the numerous contingencies, there are two factors for sure. First, close personal relations and equal social status between the two participants. Second, the non-serious

¹⁹⁸ Seckill, a term from online gaming, means to kill an enemy within seconds. Here it means to easily eclipse the opponent.

¹⁹⁹ Translation of the text: *I'm scared and pick you up quickly*. The dog is holding a pig, insinuating that the Biaoqing receiver is a pig.

²⁰⁰ Translation of the text: *Doctor, can I be cured*.

²⁰¹ Translation of the text: *Game theory style muddled*.

²⁰² Translation of the text: *Internet police has begun to surveillance the chatting record in this group*. This Biaoqing is made to imitate a WeChat system notice.

²⁰³ Translation of the text: *Ah ~~~~*

²⁰⁴ Translation of the text: *I feel that I'm a cutie*.

²⁰⁵ Retrieved from https://www.weibo.com/2624153251/Frgrr5vKB?refer_flag=1001030103_&type=comment#_rnd1511211067362 on November 20, 2017.

key of the conversation, or the ludic nature of the conversation. These two factors are common among most Doutu cases, but not for every instance of Doutu. Doutu might happen between people who are not so familiar with each other, or between people of unequal social status. Two cases will be invoked to illustrate the specialty of cases where either of the two factors is not present. The first case is Doutu between two participants who are not familiar with each other, in other words, they do not have close personal relations. The second case concerns Doutu between participants of unequal social status.

Doutu in the context of no close interpersonal relations

The case in Figure 6.10, collected from Weibo, is an instance of communication between two students (one senior and one junior) who have never met before. JS (junior student), consults SS (senior student) about an exam. In the first four turns, they keep to the exam topic and communicate through text messages. After that JS expresses his appreciation for SS's help with a Biaoqing, which provokes a stretch of Doutu. In these turns, the Biaoqing feature bright colors and formulaic polite texts, and they are classified as elder Biaoqing (for more detail see Chapter 7), which are imbued with positive energy but regarded as old-fashioned by the young generation (Chu Yanfang, 2018; Huang Zhongjun & Pan Lulu, 2018). The texts in the Biaoqing are not perfectly coherent, but they follow the same pattern, i.e. JS expresses his gratitude and good wishes to SS, and SS indicates that he treasures their (virtual) friendship and thanks JS back. This Doutu stretch ends when JS explicitly thanks SS with the 'Thanks a lot' Biaoqing, and SS officially accepts it with the text-only 'Shake hands' Biaoqing.

After this, JS sends another text-only Biaoqing, 'I have the hunch that you are an interesting person', immediately followed by a text message, 'I'm smashed', to express his surprise at the Biaoqing resources of SS. It should be mentioned that as text-only Biaoqing mostly consist of neologisms and are overwhelmingly used by young people, they are regarded by young people as markers of the young and/or neologism gurus. The text-only Biaoqing of JS ushers in another stretch of Doutu, which is dramatically different from the previous one. In the following Doutu process, they begin to use text-only Biaoqing, the texts in which are mischievous, insulting, decadent, rude, arrogant, and sometimes with a tint of cute. In this stretch of Doutu, they stop being polite with each other and begin to joke with teasing and insulting Biaoqing, which becomes increasingly biting with each turn (e.g. 'Please don't talk anymore'; 'I can't stand it if you say so'; 'You can redeem with red envelopes'; 'Beg me'; 'You're playing cute like beggars on over-bridges').

What is interesting in this case is what SS says about this experience, 'After he sent some Biaoqing familiar to me..... the horn for fighting was sounded.....'. Very obviously, SS does not regard the first stretch of Doutu in polite friendly manner with elder Biaoqing as decent Doutu. It is only after he sees really sharp Biaoqing, in this case text-only Biaoqing, when he begins to devote to it.

刚刚一位今年考我们实验室的学弟向我咨询一些关于复试的问题.....当他抛出一个我熟悉的表情之后.....战斗的号角吹响了.....

Just now a student who applies for a position in our laboratory consulted me on admission re- exam.....After he sent some Biaoqing familiar to me..... the horn for fighting was sounded.....

Is the exam only about evolution?

The questions are quite open.
Just answer as you see fit.

I am just afraid my performance is too much worse than the preliminary exam. I would humiliate myself 😊

No you won't.



206



208



210

努力做到心中的梦

207

网络一线牵 相逢在空间 真情连四海 牵挂过度使

209



212



214



215



216

我能隐约感觉到你是个有趣的人

217

I'm smashed

你可别说话了

218

你这样我受不了

219

友谊的小船说翻就翻

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Figure 6.10 An example of Douyu between people who are not familiar with each other²²⁸

²⁰⁶ Translation of the text: *It's good to know you. Acquaintance is a fate.*

²⁰⁷ Translation of the text: *Try your best [to achieve] your dream.*

²⁰⁸ Translation of the text: *Good attitude facilitates extraordinary life.*

²⁰⁹ Translation of the text: *The Internet is a thread. In the virtual space we meet. True feelings connect the world. Treasure that we know each other.*

²¹⁰ Translation of the text: *Wish you the best.*

²¹¹ Translation of the text: *We are a loving family. Let's work hard together.*

²¹² Translation of the text: *Cheers for our friendship.*

²¹³ Translation of the text: *Happy every day.*

²¹⁴ Translation of the text: *Hope you can achieve what you want and materialize your dreams.*

²¹⁵ Translation of the text: *Thanks a lot.*

²¹⁶ Translation of the text: *Shake hands.*

²¹⁷ Translation of the text: *I have the hunch that you are an interesting person.*

²¹⁸ Translation of the text: *Please don't talk anymore.*

²¹⁹ Translation of the text: *I can't stand it if you say so.*

²²⁰ Translation of the text: *The ship of friendship capsizes easily.*

²²¹ Translation of the text: *Your attitude [makes you] lose me easily.*

²²² Translation of the text: *Your baby is ready to leave. You can redeem with red envelopes.*

²²³ Translation of the text: *Do you want? Beg me.*

²²⁴ Translation of the text: *You're playing cute like beggars on overbridges. In some big cities in China, there are people who pretend to be homeless and beg for money on overbridges.*

²²⁵ Translation of the text: *I don't care. I am shameless anyway.*

²²⁶ Translation of the text: *Do you see this flower?*

²²⁷ Translation of the text: *I'd rather throw it away than give it to you.*

²²⁸ Retrieved from https://www.weibo.com/3227812037/Dmz8gfCe3?ref=collection&type=comment#_rnl1511259943393 on November 20, 2017. As the screenshots of the chatting record are too big and cannot

After the second stretch of Doutu, the interpersonal relation between them becomes tremendously closer than before, from strangers to acquaintances who make an appointment to have fun together and who are close enough to have rude, insulting or mischievous exchanges with each other. SS himself treats Doutu with JS as a competitive game, as indicated in his post ('the horn for fighting') and in the conversation ('Let's fight next time'). What he does not notice is that the possession of similar Biaoqing resources and command of similar Doutu strength becomes a point where they identify with each other. In this case, Doutu is not only for competition or for fun, but also works as a means for socialization and identification. In spite of the fact that they have never met each other, having similar Biaoqing makes them feel close to each other, and they even plan to make an appointment to have fun together. In this sense, it is a friendship. Though it might not be intended by the two participants as such, it turns out to have a tremendous effect on promoting the friendship between the two.














Doutu in the context of unequal social status

The third case, collected from Weibo where the chatting record between a student and his chemistry teacher is posted, is a typical and special example of Doutu between people of unequal social status (see Figure 6.11). It is typical because the two participants are teacher and student, the social relation of whom is clearly superior-inferior even in modern Chinese society, and thus can serve as a typical example of unequal social status. It is special for two reasons. First, the teacher in this case is quite an extraordinary one, and not so many teachers in China communicate with students in this manner. Second, there are three storylines in the conversation, one of exam, one of Biaoqing and one of Doutu, as has been discussed in Section 6.2.1. The intertwinement of the three storylines points to the layering of multiple genres within one communicative event.

As has been introduced in Section 6.2.1, this is a conversation between a student and his around-50-year-old teacher. When the student asks his teacher for help with the exam, the teacher replies with a Biaoqing usually used by young people, and then agrees to help. The teacher's Biaoqing induces an expression of surprise from the student, after which the teacher sends more Biaoqing, either insulting or violent. And the teacher also integrates Biaoqing into the topic of the exam, for example the text message 'Your performance in the exam' followed by a Biaoqing with the text 'At first sight, I can tell that people like you will be mediocre in the future' to express a whole meaning. In this conversation, the teacher impresses as purposefully demonstrating his possession of and ability to use young-generation Biaoqing, and he is using them as if he were a sharp young person.

be clearly presented, the chatting record is translated by the author. Messages on the left are from JS, and those on the right are from SS.

网络确实能打破 一些身份芥蒂！哈哈哈哈哈笑哭了
Internet can indeed break the constraints of social status! Hahahahahaha laughing to tears

<p>teacher(... Do I still have any chance(.....</p> <p> 229</p> <p>What the hell Come earlier tomorrow I'll explain to you once more</p> <p>Teacher, you use this type of Biaoqing!!</p> <p>Can't I Your performance in the exam</p> <p> 230</p> <p>What surprises you I'll let you know what surprise is when your grade comes out</p> <p> 232</p> <p>Teacher, where did you get so many Biaoqing!!!!</p> <p> 233</p> <p>From my daughter They are interesting, so I collected them</p>	<p> 234</p> <p>Teacher, what would you do if I fail the exam(((</p> <p>I would</p> <p> 235</p> <p>Teacher, can I reply with dirty-word Biaoqing</p> <p>No you can't</p> <p>?? Bully me!!</p> <p> 235</p> <p>Teacher, you're wrong saying so!!!!</p> <p>I'm only a bit weak in chemistry!!!</p> <p> 236</p> <p> 237</p> <p> 238</p>	<p>It's useless crying Go and do more exam papers</p> <p> 239</p> <p>OK, I'll do more Teacher, Please go to bed and rest.....</p> <p>I'm already in bed Chased about to turn off my phone And you sent me a message</p> <p> 240</p> <p>Chased???</p> <p>Just Teacher, you have hand cancer!! What's hand cancer</p> <p>Making typo!</p> <p>Oh All because you infected me</p> <p> 241</p> <p>Teacher, are you really a person nearly 50 years old????</p> <p>Your teacher is forever 18 Well, you go and make yourself busy I'm going to bed</p> <p>Ok Good night teacher!</p> <p>How can I have a good night Your performance in chemistry Would make me cry in my dream</p>
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229 Translation of the text: *Frightened.*

230 Translation of the text: *At first sight, I can tell that people like you will be mediocre in the future.*

231 Translation of the text: *Surprised!!*

232 Translation of the text: *Fuck off.*

233 Translation of the text: *I begin to feel flustered.* In Chinese, the character for flustered (慌 huāng) rhymes with that of square (方 fāng), which might be the pronunciation of toddlers, and thus the square figure.

234 The English text is "What could I say?". Translation of the Chinese text: *Considering your knowledge level, it is hard to communicate with you. The tag on the chest of the figure says "Professor".*

235 Translation of the text: *Why do you bully me? Simply because you like me?*

236 Translation of the text: *Fuck off. I'm stupid-cunt-phobic.*

237 Translation of the text: *Mind your words, silly cunt.*

238 Translation of the text: *Wa... This is an onomatopoeia of crying.*

239 Translation of the text: *In our Wuhan dialect, you're a Sháo Bī. Sháo Bī (勺逼) means stupid cunt.*

240 Translation of the text: *The handsome are about to sleep! The ugly are staying up late!*

<p>Teacher, I'll work hard!!!!</p>  <p>The B can also be 说的好像真的一样 241</p> <p>Teacher, can't you encourage me a bit????</p> <p>I've done nothing unfair to you, haven't I????</p>  <p>我们来听楼下怎么说 242</p> <p>Impossible</p> <p>Why!!</p>   <p>How dare you</p> <p>If you dare send a Biaoqing with dirty words to me</p> <p>I'll tell Sun</p> <p>Teacher?? Is it ok to be so scheming???</p> <p>It's none of your business</p> 	 <p>245</p> <p>Yohe Son</p>  <p>246</p>  <p>247</p>  <p>248</p>  <p>249</p> <p>Teacher, you even know jī lǎo²⁵⁰???</p> <p>Ah</p> <p>I don't</p> <p>I guess it's not a good word, so I use it on you</p>  <p>251</p>  <p>252</p>	 <p>253</p>  <p>我要告诉我妈妈 254</p> <p>What will you tell you mom</p> <p>I'll tell her my chemistry teacher curses me!</p> <p>Oh</p> <p>We'll see if she believes you</p> <p>Or believes me</p>  <p>我得让人心疼 255</p> <p>Stupid like shit</p> <p>...</p> <p>Teacher, why you are not sleeping yet!!!</p> <p>Preparing for your lecture tomorrow</p> <p>Thank you teacher...</p> <p>You're welcome</p> <p>Do you think I want it</p>  <p>你傻成这样 我毫无办法 255</p> <p>You stupid like this. I have no idea</p> <p>If it were not because of you</p> <p>I'd have been asleep far earlier</p>  <p>256</p>
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²⁴¹ Translation of the text: *You make it sound as if it were true.*

²⁴² Translation of the text: *Let's see what the next floor says.* 'Next floor' refers to the next speaker.

²⁴³ Translation of the text: *Who do you think you are.*

²⁴⁴ Translation of the text: *You forced me to hit you!*

²⁴⁵ Translation of the text: *How dare you send Biaoqing!*

²⁴⁶ Translation of the text: *I'm fucking handsome and confident. If you have a problem with it, come and hit me.*

²⁴⁷ Translation of the text: *Come on, don't be a coward. If you dare, chop me here!*

²⁴⁸ Translation of the text: *The consequence of talking back!!*

²⁴⁹ Translation of the text: *Fuck him till his chrysanthemum is on fire.* Chrysanthemum is a euphemism of ass. In this Biaoqing, only the text in the middle of the Biaoqing is recognizable.

²⁵⁰ jī lǎo (基佬) is a derogative reference to gay in Chinese.

²⁵¹ Translation of the text: *Let's perish together.* In Chinese culture, the colour green is connected with being cuckolded, especially when used in 绿帽子 (green hat). Also when a person is extremely angry, the color of the face might be described as green.

²⁵² Translation of the text: *So strong hostility!*

²⁵³ Translation of the text: *Fuck off!*

²⁵⁴ Translation of the text: *I'll tell my mom.*

²⁵⁵ Translation of the text: *You're so stupid that there is nothing I can do to help.*

²⁵⁶ Translation of the text: *Go die.*



Figure 6.11 An example of Doutu between people of unequal social status²⁶⁴

As the teacher is superior to the student, he has much more freedom in using violent, insulting or dirty Biaoqing. While for the student, it is very thorny in deciding what Biaoqing to use. Biaoqing which are not violent, insulting or dirty would not be sharp enough, and those which are would be inappropriate in conversation with his teacher. But the problem is that the teacher himself is using such Biaoqing, which would be deemed inappropriate for a teacher according to traditional ethics (Zhao Yufei, 2011). Consequently, the student is faced with a totally new situation and caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, he is restrained by the traditional moral scripts to respect teachers. On the other hand, he is faced with a teacher who does not perform in accordance with traditional moral scripts. In this situation, the student begins to tentatively ask his superior, as in 'Teacher, can I reply with dirty-word Biaoqing'. On the surface, the student is seeking the teacher's opinion, but in reality, he is informing the teacher that he will do so. By asking this question, he is seeking absolution for himself. After that, the student gradually begins to use violent and dirty Biaoqing, as if the person were not his teacher, but his peer. It seems like this communicative event is breaking out of the chronotope related to communication between the hierarchically superior and the inferior, but in fact it does not. Respect for the superiority still imbues the student's text messages, and the transgression of social status is confined to the genre of Doutu. Here we see the intertwining of different chronotopes, which results in a new chronotope related to Doutu.

²⁵⁷ Translation of the text: *You always have loads of nonsense.*

²⁵⁸ Translation of the text: *Stirring shit stick. Today, if I don't hit you and make you covered with shit, I'm not giving you face.* 'Stirring shit stick' (搅屎棍) is a Chinese metaphor for troublemaker.

²⁵⁹ B pronounces similar to Chinese character 逼 (cunt).

²⁶⁰ Translation of the text: *Stupid cunt.*

²⁶¹ Translation of the text: *Did I give you permission to speak.*

²⁶² Translation of the text: *Pa. Revenge on you for hitting me repeatedly.* 'Pa' (啪) is the onomatopoeia of slapping.

²⁶³ Translation of the text: *Shut up!!*

²⁶⁴ Retrieved from https://www.weibo.com/1625152340/FoW44uyqo?refer_flag=1001030103_&type=comment#_rnd1511275007483 on May 2, 2017. As the original images of the chatting records are too big and cannot be clearly presented, the contents in the conversation are translated by the author a. Messages on the left are from the teacher, and the ones on the right are from the student.

This case is loaded with defining actions of a community of knowledge of Doutu, i.e. knowledge work. First, the teacher who has acquired some Doutu knowledge from his daughter is conducting Doutu with his student, and at the same time learning more about it. Here we see the actions of learning.

Second, the student's negotiation on whether he can use dirty and violent Biaoqing with the teacher is in fact the establishment and negotiation of behavioral norms when Doutu is conducted with one's superior. This is the creation of knowledge in a community of knowledge of Doutu. This negotiation incident takes place because there are no clear norms that the student can follow when it comes to Doutu with his teacher to whom he is expected to show great respect according to traditional Chinese etiquette. In this sense, this negotiation points us to the *anomie* (Durkheim, 2012) in online spaces and the influence of the online-offline nexus.

Third, the practice of sharing personal experience per se is sharing information in the community of knowledge. Through the chatting records, the behavioral norms discussed in the previous point are shared. In the text of the Weibo post, the knowledge is presented as the meta-information about the internet: this stretch of Doutu is described as 'Internet can indeed break the constraints of social status'. To be more specific, it is Biaoqing and Doutu which shackle the bondage of social status. Both dimensions of sharing in this post embody the knowledge work of an instructor. Among the cases I collected on Weibo, there are also many examples of Doutu between parents and children. In these cases, the traditional persona prescriptions and moral scripts are all subverted. Parents, who are supposed to be loving and caring, use mean and insulting Biaoqing with their children; children, who are supposed to be docile and filial, also use mischievous, mean and insulting Biaoqing. Of course, such parents are only a handful of Chinese parents. And their Doutu are all conducted in a ludic manner. The so many cases of Doutu between the superior and the inferior are indicators of changes in Chinese people's perception of social status, as well as corresponding behavioral scripts.




As demonstrated in this case, the status gap between the superior and the inferior is closing up, at least to some degree in some situations. Though it is confined to ludic online spaces, or in a carnival (following Bakhtin, 1984) which is liberating and has anti-authority and anti-official-culture affordances (Dentith, 1995), this trend might gradually infiltrate into formal communication, into offline spaces, and eventually change the society's perception of social status.

To sum up, the examples of Doutu reflect three very important facts. One, participants have a clear idea of the genre difference between Doutu and other more common modes of interaction. Two, participants have a very precise idea of the boundary points at which the genre shifts. Both facts point to people's normative knowledge, which is the building block of a community of knowledge of Doutu. Three, Doutu is ludic in essence, be it on specialized Doutu forums or in personal communication. Resembling a competitive game, Doutu has the potential of functioning as a means to influence the interpersonal relations or to change social behavioral scripts, whether it is intended or an unexpected side effect. The majority of Doutu cases in my data happen between peers, but there is a tendency that more and more are happening between people of unequal social status, for instance between teacher and student, between parents and children, etc.

These carnivalesque practices of Doutu are indicators of changing perception of social status and power relations in Chinese society. The practices of Doutu are at the same time actions of creating, discussing, sharing or learning intangible knowledge products in a community of knowledge.

6.4.2 Partial deployment of Doutu in conflictual situations

Doutu is a dynamic genre, as discussed in the previous section. But its dynamism is not limited to ludic communication. As it resembles a competitive game where insulting, mischievous and violent weapons are allowed, and mocking hostility has become a norm, even in Doutu with cute and sweet Biaoqing. In some cases, the innate hostility of Doutu might be made real. In what follows, a case will be discussed to illustrate this phenomenon and the social reason behind it. This case is collected from a post on Baidu Post Bar where Wang, the protagonist, shares an incident with her boyfriend's mother. The mother, who thinks Wang is a bad girl who uses drugs, is trying to persuade her to break up with her son. Irritated by the mother's vilification and unreasonable request, Wang posts their chatting record on Baidu Post Bar to let out her anger, and thus comes the post titled 'My boyfriend's mother bribes me ¥200 to leave her son???' (see Figure 6.12).

<p>I'm Zhe's mother</p> <p>Today I have something to talk to you</p> <p>H'm, I'll be direct. I think you better break up with Zhe. He is stubborn, but you're not.</p>	<p>Hello aunt</p> <p>Ok, what is it</p>
<p>Don't you think you're severely influencing his future? Now all he knows is you. He doesn't even listen to me, his mother.</p> <p>And he uses his monthly allowance to buy you gifts. Don't you think you're going too far</p> <p>Don't try to quibble. Who would admit to taking drugs? If you admit, you would be arrested. Don't assume that I don't know. Girls from nursing schools are beautiful but not good. I don't care if you abuse drugs or not, you cannot be with my son.</p>	 <p>Why</p>
<p>Our money is not for you to buy drugs. And we won't have a drugster daughter-in-law</p> <p>Aunt, I'll say this again. Don't vilify my school and my major. I listen to you because I respect you. But you can't slander me as a drugster. Do you have proof?</p>	
<p>You're really ill-educated, so disrespectful to seniors. You think I have no proof? Several days ago, my son asked me for ¥200 to buy a lipstick for you. What kind of lipstick costs 200? How could it be so expensive? For sure you take the money for drugs.</p>	

²⁶⁵ Translation of the text: *Surprised*.

Yes, you. You should be sent to a drug rehabilitation center.

?????|?????

I won't interfere at all. Even your parents don't educate you, let alone me.

OK. I can see that you're not willing to let go of my son. I give you ¥200, please leave Zhe.

???

What do you mean?

What? You won't accept 200? How much do you want? Don't be too greedy. ¥200 is your break-up fee. Don't spend it on drugs. Or you'd make it like I support you to commit a crime

Did you finish?

I allowed the conversation to go this far only because you're the mother of Zhe

Don't you think you're crossing the line?

Slandering me of using drugs and being ill-educated

Insulting my parents, my school and my major?

And now using ¥200 to insult me?

Aren't you way out of line?

Young lady, don't you understand human language? I'm asking you to break up with Zhe. You refused because you want to be paid, right? I will pay you. My family can afford ¥200

Oh, I know, it's not enough, right?

OK, how about five hundred? Don't be too greedy. Five hundred is enough. You go and break up with Zhe

What do you mean? Don't go too far, or you'll get nothing.

That's it. End of conversation

Figure 6.12 Chatting record between Wang and her boyfriend's mother (translated by the author)²⁶⁶

²⁶⁶ Retrieved from http://tieba.baidu.com/home/main?un=%E7%8E%8B%E5%B8%86%E2%85%A1&ie=utf-8&id=45d2e78e8be5b886e285a1e703?t=1497003243&fr=pb&red_tag=y2756067669 on June 11, 2017. Messages on the left are from the mother, and those on the right are from Wang.

Later when her boyfriend discusses this incident with her, he criticizes her using Biaoqing with his mother. What the boyfriend said irritates Wang further, causing her to go on posting their conversation. In this follow-up post, Wang defends her practice of using Biaoqing with her boyfriend's mother, as if her audience were her boyfriend (see the post texts in Figure 6.13), and at the same time posts her chatting record with her boyfriend.

<p>1</p>	<p>😊 Are you stupid</p> <p>Ok Ok Ok Let's put it this way</p> <p>Let me talk</p> <p>Let's say it's all my fault, really all my fault</p> <p>And yesterday I told her not to interfere with us</p> <p>I apologize for what she did yesterday She shouldn't be so childish</p> <p>[Text on the Biaoqing: Who are you?]</p> <p>But you I've told you many times</p> <p>It's ok with me. But why did you use Biaoqingbao with my mom? To show off your Biaoqingbao?</p> <p>Are you stupid?</p>
<p>2</p>	<p>😊 Your mother is so hostile. In this situation, do you want me to bash her directly instead of using Biaoqingbao, and result in embarrassment? Will it be OK?</p> <p>In that condition, you want me to bash her directly instead of using Biaoqingbao?</p> <p>Ok Ok Ok Ok</p> <p>Let's get back to the topic</p> <p>Let me explain. First, my mom said that you used drugs. That's bullshit</p> <p>I don't know what's wrong with her. She surprised me</p> <p>I guess you're skinny and this causes her to relate to drug</p> <p>She had a nephew who became very skinny after using drugs</p>

Figure 6.13 Two of Wang's follow-up posts about the communication with her boyfriend

When the boyfriend's mother requests Wang to leave her son, accuses her of abusing drugs, and vilifies her education and up-bringing, Wang replies with Biaoqing, all conveying speechlessness with a tint of contempt. Later when the boyfriend criticizes Wang for using Biaoqing with his mother, Wang defends herself, arguing that under such a condition, Biaoqing is the only way to avoid direct conflict and spare each other embarrassment, as shown in follow-up post 2 in Figure 6.13. Though the conversation between Wang and the mother is not Doutu, the impression of Doutu is imbued in it, especially in the pattern of using unfriendly Biaoqing against unfriendly messages. Wang is importing the hostility innate in Doutu into the conversation with her boyfriend's mother, as testified by Wang's soliloquy in follow-up post 2 in Figure 6.13. In so doing, she on the one hand defends herself against the mother's unreasonable requests and slanders, and on the other hand avoids direct verbal conflict, which she deems embarrassing.

Wang's usage of Biaoqing, though not teaching or learning Doutu knowledge, is de facto an attempt to apply Doutu to a non-Doutu situation, or a non-Doutu genre, i.e. a cross-chronotope. This practice is an exploration of the elasticity of the Doutu genre, an (unintended) attempt to explore Biaoqing usage norms. The practice of sharing personal chatting record on an open access platform is par excellence a practice of sharing the knowledge embodied in Wang's usage of Biaoqing in such a communicative situation. In this sense, Wang performs some hard-core knowledge work, which contributes to the community of knowledge of Doutu. Note that this exploration is cross-chronotopic in essence (the topic of which will be fully addressed in Part IV).

This incident is a case of partial deployment of the Doutu genre for several reasons. First, only one of the participants uses Biaoqing, and the other sticks to text messages. This is a result of the mother's ignorance of the Doutu genre and its indexicalities, as indicated by the boyfriend's words 'But why did you use Biaoqingbao with my mom? To show off your Biaoqingbao?' (see 1 in Figure 6.13). Second, Wang only employs part of the norms of Doutu, i.e. hostility. In comparison with real Doutu, this partial deployment of Doutu genre in conflictual communication features the usage of non-violent Biaoqing. The more tense the situation, the less explicit the unfriendliness of the Biaoqing, and the more blatant the reversion of the emotional vector in the Biaoqing. However, in mock quarrels, for instance Doutu, the texts on Biaoqing, if there are any, are distinctly hostile and insulting (see the cases in Section 6.4.1).

There are deep-rooted social and cultural reasons for the partial exploitation of the Doutu genre in conflictual situations, though it is a new phenomenon on Chinese social media. As has been explained in Chapter 3, Chinese society is undergoing gradual yet dramatic changes, for which social media are both a convenient site and a breeding ground. First, there is increasing individualism, which results in increasing needs for the expression of the self, especially the expression of negative emotions, attitudes and opinions in spite of tacit social norms of harmony and politeness. Second, the young generation is caught in the dilemma of striving for success and being hampered by hard facts beyond their control, which drives public attitudes to extremes, that is, fierce and aloof. Often people are trapped in both sides: they have fierce reactions to what is happening around them, but there is little they can do to make a difference, and consequently many resort to aloof attitudes to let out their fierce reactions, and they become less caring of

the requirements of some traditional moral principles, for instance, standing firm at thirty (三十而立, *sān shí ér lì*), face (面子, *miàn zi*), propriety (礼, *lǐ*), sincerity/fidelity (信, *xìn*), etc. These factors contribute to Chinese people's increasingly direct, hostile, sarcastic expressions and self-representation on social media. Third, in online spaces, though the influence of Confucian doctrines is greatly weakened in comparison with offline spaces, they are still deeply rooted in people's consciousness, which results in tensions with less caring attitudes and increased legitimacy of individualism. Consequently, people often feel the need to let out their real (negative) feelings and attitudes without being too transgressive to traditional morals. The story of Wang is such a case.

As illustrated in the case of partial deployment of Doutu in a conflictual situation, in a rapidly changing sociocultural background, the internet provides a carnivalesque space (Bakhtin, 1984; Dentith, 1995) where (offline) authoritarian official norms can be subverted and new behavioral norms are being constructed. In other words, the internet provides the infrastructure which enables the construction of chronotopes for transgression.

6.4.3 Biaoqingbao Battle

When the Doutu genre is imported to higher-level communication between two sides, instead of between two (or more) individuals, a Biaoqingbao Battle may happen. In such situations, Biaoqingbao are often employed as a means of political participation. There are two prominent cases on social media. The first instance of Biaoqingbao Battle happened in January 2016. In November 2015, Chou Tzu-yu (周子瑜), a teenage pop star from Taiwan, waved the national flag of the Republic of China on a South Korean TV show and stated that she came from Taiwan, ignoring another singer's reminder that Taiwan is a region not a country. On the official website of JYP entertainment, Chou's nationality was 'Taiwan', rather than China or the Republic of China. The statements and actions of Chou Tzu-yu were accused of indicating Taiwan as an independent country, and thus caused the online conflict between people from mainland China and Taiwan. Later, Chou shot a video to apologize for what she had said and done, which was made fun of by a mainland actor who said, 'the apology came so suddenly that she didn't even have time to recite the texts'. After this, advocates of Taiwan independence began to leave hostile comments on the Facebook of the actor and other Taiwanese singers who publicly claim to support the One-China principle. This triggered people from mainland China, and an army of Doutu soldiers was organized on Li Yi Bar (李毅吧) on Baidu Post Bar, which has 21 million followers. The self-proclaimed warriors flooded the Facebook pages of Taiwan's president Tsai Ing-wen, Apple Daily and SET News with Biaoqing as a protest against the claim that Taiwan is an independent country.²⁶⁷ In this Biaoqingbao Battle, people from Taiwan and mainland China gradually turned from the topic of Taiwan independence to history, tradition, food, culture etc., and they drew the conclusion that they are all Chinese. Consequently, the originally hostile Biaoqingbao Battle ended with teasing and *mai méng* (playing cute). According to some critics, this incident is actually a case

²⁶⁷ Retrieved from http://news.ifeng.com/a/20160118/47122464_0.shtml on November 22, 2017.

of intercultural communication between young people from Taiwan and mainland China (Li Deyi, 2016; Xiao Chunyang, 2016).

The second instance concerns Hong Kong, and it happened in both online and off-line spaces. On September 5, 2017, a mainland student tore away the slogans advocating independence of Hong Kong from the Democracy Wall in the Chinese University of Hong Kong.²⁶⁸ When this news went viral, other mainland students printed out Biaoqing and glued them on top of the Hong Kong independence posters as a response (see Figure 6.14). These Biaoqing mostly assume a superior position to independence advocates and are dismissive towards the slogans (see Figure 6.14). After the Democracy Wall incident, some mainland Chinese internet users organized together and posted many Biaoqing on the Facebook page of the Student Union of the Chinese University of Hong Kong (see Figure 6.15).

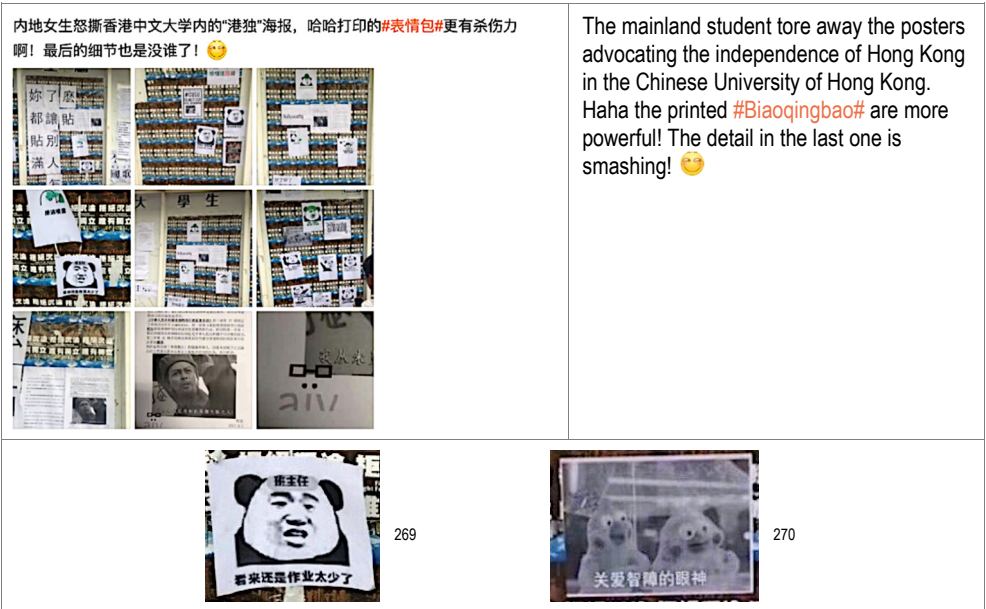


Figure 6.14 A Weibo Post about the Biaoqingbao Battle on the Democracy Wall of the Chinese University of Hong Kong and two examples of the Biaoqing posted by mainland students²⁷¹

²⁶⁸ Retrieved from http://news.ifeng.com/a/20170908/51914221_0.shtml on November 8, 2017. The Democracy Wall is a wall in the Chinese University of Hong Kong where students can post their opinions towards the Student Union, university administration, and political opinions.

²⁶⁹ Translation of the text on the forehead of the figure: *Head teacher*. Translation of the text under the figure: *It seems there is too little homework*. The meaning of the text is that because there is too little homework, the students have time to misbehave, i.e. advocating for Hong Kong independence.

²⁷⁰ Translation of the text: *The expression of caring for the retarded*. The text implies that mainland students regarded Hong Kong independence advocates as 'retarded', and could do nothing but watch them with pity and caring.

²⁷¹ Retrieved from https://www.weibo.com/1738932247/FkIqItOHv?refer_flag=1001030103_&type=comment#_rnd1564650741761 on September 10, 2017



Figure 6.15 Biaoqing on the Facebook page of the Student Union of the Chinese University of Hong Kong²⁷⁵

In these two cases, Biaoqingbao are employed to express political opinions, and Doutu is imported to a higher scale of communication and evolves into a Biaoqingbao Battle. There are multiple reasons behind this phenomenon, but two of them are most relevant. First, Biaoqing and Doutu are ludic in nature, which alleviates the seriousness of the incidents and the tension between the two sides. Second, the political system in China determines the limited direct political participation of the general public (Liang Shuming, 2005; Chen Guyuan, 2011). The Chinese general public have been searching and trying various ways to make their voices heard (Du Caixia, 2016). One of the efforts is to resort to Biaoqingbao to express their political opinions. Biaoqingbao and Doutu are chosen because they have a huge user base (which ensures the wide spread of the voices), and ranges from serious to lighthearted (which entails that the voices should be taken seriously but not too seriously). Consequently, the ludic becomes a convenient means of political participation for the general public in China.

It is very important to emphasize that all the above-mentioned semi-serious-semi-ludic political participation happens through the genre of Doutu. They almost shift out of Doutu, yet they stay within the genre. In other words, it happens in a highly specific and regulated chronotope. Within such a chronotope, it is acceptable to voice political opinions through the practice of Doutu or a Biaoqingbao Battle. When the voices transgress the chronotope, there is no guarantee of their acceptability.

Similar to the case of partial deployment of Doutu in a conflictual situation, Biaoqingbao Battles are practices of exploring the elasticity of the Doutu genre. The difference is that the two Biaoqingbao Battle cases are conscious attempts to explore Biaoqing usage norms. The actions in Biaoqingbao Battles result in new ways and norms of using Biaoqing, and contribute constructive knowledge to the community of knowledge of Doutu.

²⁷² Translation of the text above the Biaoqing: *But Britain does not want you either. So poor.* Translation of the text on the Biaoqing: *Such a young age, but a shithead.*

²⁷³ Translation of the text: *Please don't disgust me.*

²⁷⁴ Translation of the text: *Gaze from the Communist Party.*

²⁷⁵ Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/pg/CUHK.SU/posts/?ref=page_internal on September 29, 2017.

6.5 Conclusion

Doutu is a newly emerged grassroots genre of social action, which originates from people's pursuit of amusement in online communication. This genre becomes possible on the basis of the infrastructure of the internet and various social-media-facilitated multi-modal communication. Doutu may happen in (quasi) public spaces devoted to Doutu or in private communication on various social media. Both the public and private spheres are de facto nodes in a community of knowledge of Doutu where knowledge work is done by participants through Doutu, for instance creating Biaoqing for Doutu, passing on the knowledge of Doutu, learning genre shift clues or alerts, etc.

Ostensibly Doutu is ludic, light and unimportant, but essentially it is the result of the joint influence of numerous social factors, including the development of technology which provides basic infrastructures (e.g. the internet and various social media), new social issues which induce stress on the young generation, changing perceptions of traditional values, etc. The Doutu genre is a social fact conceived and nurtured both online and offline.

As there are no rigid norms prescribing its communication patterns and behavioral scripts, Doutu is highly dynamic and elastic to modification, and thus is often manipulatively exported to different communication scenarios for various communicative needs (e.g. for conflictual communication or political participation). The norms of Doutu are being constantly discussed, explored and expanded by people in their practices of Doutu. In the scenarios discussed in this chapter, we see many cases where participants almost break out of Doutu but manage to stay in the genre, and stay inside the chronotope.

So far, the formation of a community of knowledge of Biaoqing has been explained in detail, and the actions performed in the community are inspected carefully. The analysis in Chapters 4 to 6 shows that the Biaoqing usage and Biaoqing-related genres (e.g. Doutu and Biaoqingbao Battle) all happen in time-spaces governed with specific sets of behavioral norms, i.e. in chronotopes. At the same time, the actions of participants frequently point to norms that govern other chronotopes and issues of cross-chronotopic nature, which will be fully addressed in Part IV.

PART IV

The knowledge economy: Biaoqing markets

A vignette

When I was chitchatting with my friends on WeChat, I saw a fingerprint on the screen. After careful wiping, the fingerprint was still there. Suddenly I realized that it was not a fingerprint on my cell phone screen, but a fingerprint which is part of a text-message-like Biaoqing. After my complaint of being trolled, a similar Biaoqing was sent by my friend, this time one with a hair on a piggy head (see Figure IV). The fingerprint and the hair on the Biaoqing do not convey any semantic information, but their presence is so strongly felt that they even become a topic in our chitchat, though only for a brief time. The two Biaoqing are obviously designed to troll recipients and to lure participants into actions transcending online communication (e.g. wiping cell phone screens). This episode made me ponder on how Biaoqing sneak out of Biaoqing-related communicative/interactive genres, shape and are shaped by actions in offline spaces.

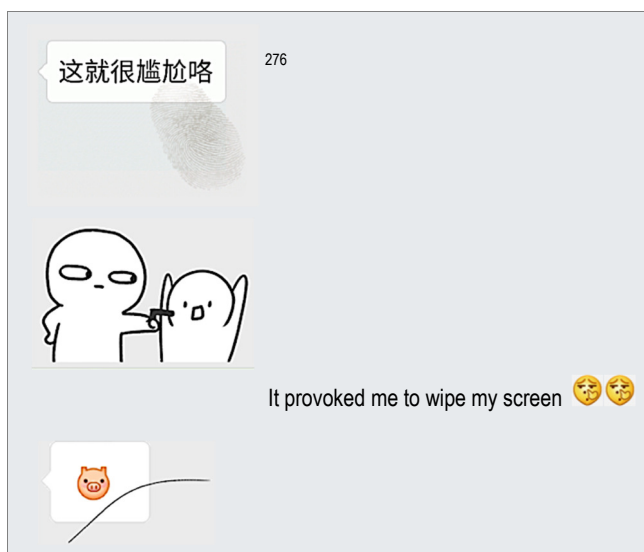


Figure IV Excerpt of chatting record with my friends (translated by the author)

²⁷⁶ Translation of the text on the Biaoqing: *This would be awkward.*

This curiosity directed me to find out more about the roles, functions and positions of Biaoqing in an online-offline nexus, which in the end results in the current part of the research. Part IV will reveal the complicated interaction between the online and the offline (Chapter 7), the knowledge economy of Biaoqing (Chapter 8), and the roles of Biaoqing in the production of new economic practices (Chapter 9).

CHAPTER 7

Transformations and expansions

7.1 Introduction

Biaoqing, as a semiotic resource on Chinese social media, convey various meanings in online communication, and have various direct and indirect consequences. In a rapidly changing online environment, Biaoqing are highly dynamic for four reasons.

1. The connotational/expressive meaning of certain Biaoqing might evolve in time. Such changes are often a result of collective negotiation and construction in communities of knowledge, as discussed in the Biaoqing-usage instruction community in Chapter 4. As not all people are participants of such communities, an inevitable consequence is that Biaoqing meaning is unequally distributed among different online communities.
2. The indexicalities of Biaoqing are different for different users, generating different (micro-hegemonic) communities.
3. People have the liberty to use Biaoqing as they see fit within limits, and consequently the expressive meaning and/or the indexicality of one Biaoqing might be dramatically different in different situations.
4. Numerous new Biaoqing are being created and added to the reservoir of Biaoqing, which may influence the Biaoqing ecology and Biaoqing practices in unpredictable ways.

The dynamics of the Biaoqing is projected in both easily noticeable and very subtle aspects in the community of knowledge of Biaoqing. The most conspicuous are the dramatic changes in both the meaning and the form of Biaoqing. Note that in this research, meaning refers not only to the denotational and connotational meanings (Austin, 1962; Leech, 1974; Palmer, 1976) of the graphic semiotic resource, but also to social meanings, i.e. indexicalities to, for instance, class, (micro-hegemonic) identities, social status, education, etc. (Blommaert, 2015b; Blommaert & De Fina, 2017; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Silverstein & Urban, 1996).

In this chapter, the four reasons behind the dynamics of the Biaoqing cultural system will be illustrated through cases reflecting both formal and meaning changes. Three cases will be analyzed:

- nonlinear transformation of Biaoqing meaning;
- polychronotopic deployment of elder Biaoqing;
- conviviality in Chinese-character-based Biaoqing.

The detailed information of the data is presented in Table 7.1.

Table 7.1 Summary of data

Forum of collection	Data size	Time of data collection
Sina Weibo and Douban	8 posts	July 2017-November 2018
Baidu Knows ²⁷⁷	2 Q&A entries	April 2017
WeChat Biaoqing Open Platform	Ranking on 20 days	September-November 2018

7.2 Nonlinear transformation of Biaoqing on Chinese social media

The nonlinear transformation of the meaning and usage of the smile 😊 and wave 🙌 Biaoqing on Chinese social media has been discussed in detail in Section 4.5. It is not necessary to repeat, and I will only recapitulate the main points here.

For the smile and wave Biaoqing, the meaning transformation from a marker of friendliness to a conduit for hostility is not predicable from the features of the sign, and thus such a transformation is nonlinear in the sense that the transformed meanings are not predictable from the original meanings or context of usage (Blommaert, 2015b). It is the result of collective construction and negotiation by participants in the Biaoqing-usage instruction community. On the surface, it is the connotational/expressive meanings of the two Biaoqing that are transformed. But close scrutiny reveals a deeper layer of this nonlinear transformation, which points to the indexicalities of the two Biaoqing. On the one hand, the transformed indexicalities of the smile and wave Biaoqing reflect the dynamic of the meanings of Biaoqing. On the other hand, the nonlinear transformation of indexicalities is a projection of changes in social ethos, especially the increased legitimacy of individualism in Chinese society.

From the newly developed indexicalities, new usage norms of the two Biaoqing emerge and develop. Though these norms seem light, they are robust as they define users as in-fashion or old-fashioned. This overt collective norm-making process is what Garfinkel (2002: 46) calls “congregational work”. Such a joint norm-making process takes place in a loose community of knowledge.

These new sets of norms entail new communicative situations and events, i.e. genres that operate in chronotopes. The nonlinear transformation of the two Biaoqing reveals the development processes of new genres and thereby new chronotopes. In this case, the two Biaoqing’s mobility from their original chronotopes to newly developed chronotopes is an instance of cross-chronotope.

²⁷⁷ The two Q&A entries collected from Baidu Knows are presented in full in Chapter 4.

7.3 Polychronotopic deployment of elder Biaoqing²⁷⁸

As illustrated in the vignette that opens this part of the thesis, the fingerprint on the Biaoqing does not contribute any concrete information to the communication. What it does is to troll recipients, which inevitably puts the form/style of the Biaoqing in the spot-light. After this episode I began to pay attention to the effects of Biaoqing with specific diacritics, to be more specific, how Biaoqing different from the most common ones (as discussed in Chapter 3) are perceived and received by people. For this end, I turned to the WeChat Biaoqing Open Platform²⁷⁹ to check the top Biaoqingbao on WeChat, and to Weibo for concrete usage examples.

On WeChat Biaoqing Open Platform, I checked all the Biaoqingbao that have been ranked top 10 between September and November 2018. As presented in Table 7.2, during these three months, 89 Biaoqingbao have been ranked top 10 on WeChat, among which 74 are cute, 10 are mischievous and insulting (of which 5 are cute at the same time), 3 are violent (of which 2 are cute at the same time), 7 are elder style and 3 are Chinese-character-based. The most dominant characteristic in *méng* (cute), followed by *jiàn* (mischievous, insulting) and violent (for details of these three characteristics see Chapter 3). What is new is the elder Biaoqingbao and Chinese-character-based Biaoqingbao. In what follows the Biaoqing diacritics of elder and Chinese character will be brought in focus to find out how they become viral and what people do with them.

Table 7.2 Characteristics of Biaoqingbao ranked among top 10 on WeChat, September-November 2018

	<i>Méng</i> (cute)	<i>Jiàn</i> (mischievous, insulting)	Violent	Elder	Character-based
Number	74	10	3	7	3

The Chinese name of elder Biaoqingbao is 中老年表情包, literally meaning 'Biaoqingbao for middle-aged and old people'. In this context, 'middle-aged and old' is not a demographic demarcation of age, but a general grassroots description for the group of elder people who are not familiar with online culture and whose aesthetic taste for Biaoqing is drastically different from that of younger digital natives (Du Caixia, 2016; Prensky, 2001). This description, proposed by the young generation, by definition takes the stance of young people. In this research, for the sake of brevity 'elder Biaoqing' will be used to refer to such Biaoqing for middle-aged and old people.

In what follows, five posts about elder Biaoqing usage along with the headers of the seven elder Biaoqingbao will be analyzed, looking at the communicative practices they are deployed in, and at the indexicality trajectories of elder Biaoqing.

²⁷⁸ An earlier draft of this section has been submitted for publication (see Lu Ying & Kroon, 2019).

²⁷⁹ https://sticker.weixin.qq.com/cgi-bin/mmemoticon-bin/emoticonview?oper=billboard&t=rank/index_. WeChat Biaoqing Open Platform is a service of WeChat for people to contribute Biaoqingbao to WeChat. It ranks Biaoqingbao according to their recent usage frequency. For more information see Section 8.2.

7.3.1 Avoiding misunderstandings between young and elder internet users

With the growing presence of a senior population on social media, there is an increasing number of funny stories of this population's misunderstanding of the Biaoqing used by younger people. For instance, in Figure 7.1, after the mother inquires about her son's work, the latter uses a Biaoqing as a joke, but the mother takes the text on the Biaoqing literally and completely fails to pick up the intended humor. This misunderstanding originates from the mother's 'wrong' interpretation of the Biaoqing used by the son, which is an example of the mischievous, dirty, violent Biaoqing dominantly used by young people. The meanings of such young-people Biaoqing are not always predicable from the composing images and/or texts, i.e. nonlinear (Blommaert, 2015b; Nie Hua & Lu Ying, 2018), and it often requires specific knowledge of online popular culture to understand them.



Figure 7.1 Misunderstanding caused by Biaoqing between mother and son²⁸⁰

Elder Biaoqing gradually come into being as a remedy for avoiding such misunderstandings. Such Biaoqing, as presented in Figure 7.2, usually feature positive expressions with bright colors and/or positive images (e.g. young people, pets, flowers, butterflies, a national flag, natural scenes, etc.).²⁸¹ A further characteristic of elder Biaoqing is that the expressions and images on them are to be taken at face value, which is different from the interpretation of mischievous, insulting, dirty and violent young-people Biaoqing (Huang Zhongjun & Pan Lulu, 2017).

²⁸⁰ Retrieved from <https://www.douban.com/note/599431525/> on November 13, 2018.

²⁸¹ Retrieved from <http://news.sina.com.cn/o/2017-11-17/doc-ifynwxum3377254.shtml> on November 4, 2018.



Figure 7.2 Examples of elder Biaoqing

Such elder Biaoqing are consciously designed as disambiguating interactional resources for cross-generational interactions. One of the top Biaoqingbao in September 2018 was an elder one, the highest ranking of which was number 2 on WeChat Biaoqing Open Platform. In the header of this Biaoqingbao, the designer Mr modo straightforwardly expresses that this Biaoqingbao is ‘specifically designed for your senior relatives’,²⁸² which indicates that the Biaoqing are meant to be used by young people in interaction with their elders (see Figure 7.3). Observe the explicit instructional nature of Mr modo’s statement: elder Biaoqing are offered to young people with a ‘users’ guide’, we can say. The Biaoqingbao comes with overt pragmatic and metapragmatic norms of usage, which takes us back to the discussion in the previous chapters.

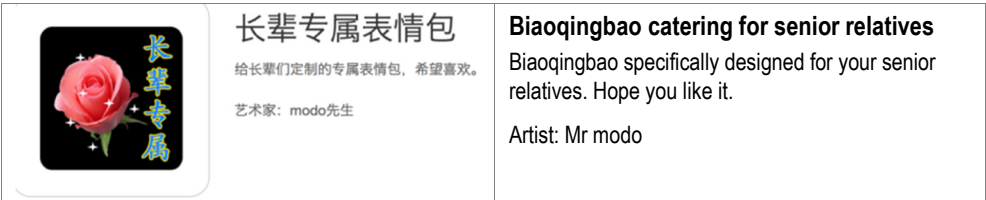


Figure 7.3 The header of an elder Biaoqingbao

Mr modo is not the only one who designs elder Biaoqing. Most of the elder Biaoqingbao are made by young people who take into consideration a number of perceived features of seniors’ aesthetic taste, their (inadequate) knowledge of neologisms, and their unfamiliarity with internet culture (Huang Zhongjun & Pan Lulu, 2017). The original purpose of elder Biaoqing is to avoid misunderstanding during online communication between young people and seniors. The emergence of elder Biaoqingbao on Chinese social media is a result of the young generation’s reflection on their own communicative need to use Biaoqing with seniors. This reflection at the same time shapes the indexicality of elder Biaoqing, that is, they are Biaoqing for seniors who are incompetent of grasping popular online culture dominated by a younger cohort of internet users. This indexicality points to age and cultural differences between the young and older generations, and is tinged

²⁸² In Chinese culture, there is a reverend term to refer to senior relatives, i.e. 长辈, which has no equivalent in English. ‘Senior relative’ is the literal translation, but there is a cultural nuance. 长辈 indicates respect for the sake of age, while this deference in connotation is missing in the translation ‘senior relative’.

with young people's sense of superiority, as well as with teasing or joking about seniors (Hu Miaomiao, 2017; Huang Zhongjun & Pan Lulu, 2017, 2018).

7.3.2 Appreciation of elder internet users

Seniors are exposed to elder Biaoqing through online communication and they appreciate these Biaoqing. For instance, a father, as reported by his daughter, thinks elder Biaoqing are practical (see Figure 7.4).

<p>今晚我爹问我表情包怎么用，我说就这么用啊，我发一些给你存着。然后我爹一看我的表情包，他说，唉女儿你的表情包一点都不实用，😂我说啥？哪些实用？于是乎我爹翻他的群聊找了个例子给我看，说你看这些早上好的多实用👍♀对就是中老年表情包😂😂😂</p>	<p>Last night my dad asked me how to send Biaoqing. I said "You use it this way. I'll send you some so you can save them on your phone." After seeing my Biaoqing, my dad said "Your Biaoqing are not practical at all." 😂 I said "What? Then which are practical?" Then he showed me an example from his group chatting, and said "You see these with 'Good morning' are very practical." 👍♀ Right, they are elder Biaoqing😂😂😂</p>
--	---

Figure 7.4 A senior's opinion of elder Biaoqing²⁸³

In this example (which once more is entirely about knowledge of the norms of Biaoqing usage), the father encounters elder Biaoqing in a WeChat group he participates in. Regarding them as handy and useful, he asks his daughter how to send Biaoqing. It is quite obvious that the father and the daughter have different perceptions of and experiences with Biaoqing. For the father, the elder Biaoqing he encounters are pretty much what he knows about Biaoqing, and he has no idea how to access them. For the daughter, however, elder Biaoqing is only a relatively trivial part of her Biaoqing repertoire, as indicated by the facepalm laugh-crying Biaoqing 😂 in her post and the fact that she shares this incident in a joking tone with her peers on Weibo. The user base of Weibo, 462 million by 2018, is much smaller than that of WeChat, but the user group is much younger than that of WeChat.²⁸⁴

The father in this example is not alone. There are many seniors who are fond of elder Biaoqing and have become very resourceful users. For instance, a young person who is in a WeChat group where the majority are middle-aged people feels pressed to use elder Biaoqing in this group (see Figure 7.5).

The examples in Figures 7.4 and 7.5 reflect that seniors identify with elder Biaoqing, eagerly access them, and enthusiastically use them in online communication. As using Biaoqing is a typical online communicative habit of young people, for seniors, this practice is indexically connected to being modern and in-fashion (Hu Miaomiao, 2017; Zhou Rui, Hentschel, & Kumar, 2017). In the eyes of seniors, elder Biaoqing are not only practical in a pragmatic sense (as stated in the example in Figure 7.4), but also evaluated as indices of elder people's in-fashionness and desire to participate in online culture. Elder

²⁸³ Retrieved from https://www.weibo.com/2121087914/H9GAVxwNy?refer_flag=1001030103_ on January 7, 2019.

²⁸⁴ Retrieved from <https://support.weixin.qq.com/cgi-bin/mmsupport-bin/getopendays> on March 5, 2019.

Biaoqing, for seniors, have acquired the indexicality of being *au fait* with new developments and/or having a young-people mentality, both highly positive valuations in contemporary China.


混迹在中老年购物群的我 急缺表情包👉 怎样才能显得我不是异类 求教	Mingling in a WeChat shopping group for elders, I'm in urgent need of Biaoqing 👉 What should I do to make myself not alien in this group?
	Good people will be happy Good morning Happiness be with your forever It is freezing Cold Please take care Good morning Good health Good mood Everything will be good

Figure 7.5 A Weibo post about seniors' usage of elder Biaoqing²⁸⁵

7.3.3 Usage of elder Biaoqing between young people and seniors

Although elder Biaoqing respond to the aesthetic taste of seniors, their designers are mostly young digital natives (Huang Zhongjun & Pan Lulu, 2018), which opens up a free space for young people to further reflect on the indexicalities of elder Biaoqing and rationalize novel ways of interpreting, using or modifying them. A telling example is how young people use elder Biaoqing with their parents, aunts and uncles with a hidden feeling of superiority. In the example presented in Figure 7.6 (a screen shot of the chatting between a mother and her son), the mother uses an elder Biaoqing, after which the son replies with another one. In this exchange, out of pragmatic consideration, the son uses elder Biaoqing to be on the same page with his mother so that their communication will take a smooth course.

²⁸⁵ Retrieved from https://www.weibo.com/2133789377/H9JA296AS?refer_flag=1001030103_&type=comment#_rnd1546870404529 on January 7, 2019.

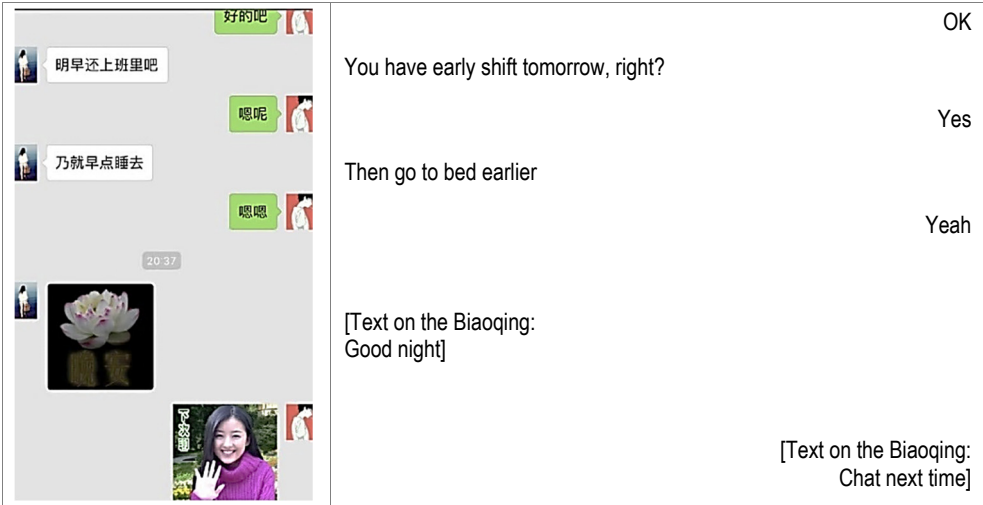


Figure 7.6 Chatting record between a son using elder Biaoqing with his mother²⁸⁶

However, this is only half of the story. After this chatting, the son posts the screenshot of the chatting record headed by a short text (see Figure 7.7) on Weibo, a social media with a much younger user group than WeChat. The son posts about his practice of using elder Biaoqing with his mother in order to share this experience with his peers. In the text message of the post, he frames the communicative event as a competition of Biaoqing resources (a perspective which the mother is unaware of), and underlines the fact that he, as a millennium youngster, is resourceful in Biaoqing, even when it comes to niched elder Biaoqing. In doing so, on Weibo he is highlighting his identity as a member of the young generation who is aware of elders' use of a different type of Biaoqing, and as a person who has sufficient Biaoqing resources for various scenarios, including responding to his mother who uses elder Biaoqing with the same type of Biaoqing, as indicated in the message to his peers in his Weibo post. The message here articulates a relational dimension of alignment with his own community, by pointing out his superiority in the use of elder Biaoqingbao.

中老年表情包？00后永不认输	Elder Biaoqingbao? Born after the millennium, I will never surrender
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Figure 7.7 Text in the Weibo post of the son

In this example, the son, a digital native, conspicuously suggests the different status of elder Biaoqing compared to that of the Biaoqing he usually uses. Such practice of the young generation is de facto a reflection on the two above-discussed indexicalities. Young people, by using elder Biaoqing and 'problematizing' such communicative practice

²⁸⁶ Retrieved from https://www.weibo.com/5863930010/GEwkc2etS?refer_flag=1001030103_&type=comment#_rnd1541337852791 on 4 November, 2018.

on a meta level, distinguish themselves from seniors in terms of Biaoqing competence. As a result of this reflection, the young users of elder Biaoqing can claim the indexicality of being a Biaoqing guru and an online-culture-savvy person, which is in essence a reflection of social status. Note that this indexicality has currency mainly among young people and not among elders. It is a feature of this particular community of knowledge of elder Biaoqing.

7.3.4 Usage of elder Biaoqing between young people

In the process of using elder Biaoqing, a further step of reflection on the part of the young people takes place, that is the use of elder Biaoqing for communication with their peers, most likely in a light-hearted and ironizing play, as illustrated in the conversation in Figure 7.8.


		[Text on the Biaoqing: Thank you]
不客气		You are welcome
		
咦，膈应了	我们都要很棒棒哦	We all will be good
		[Text on the Biaoqing: Hahaha]
	好啦好啦 不和你瞎扯了 我要洗漱，睡觉……	Ok Ok Let's call it a day I'll wash up and go to bed……
		[Text on the Biaoqing: Good night]
		[Text on the Biaoqing: Bye-bye]

Figure 7.8 An example of elder Biaoqing usage between young people²⁸⁷

²⁸⁷ Retrieved from https://www.weibo.com/5019193461/GDCuTVYUG?refer_flag=1001030103_&type=comment#_rnd1547044070505 on November 4, 2018.

In this example, the practice of the poster, a young woman, to use elder Biaoqing with her peer forms a contrast with her own identity as a young person. In their chitchat, her friend in a joking way says that the previous stretch of communication, which is polite and imbued with positive energy, make her feel disgusted, which prompts the girl to switch to the type of Biaoqing which young people usually deploy (see the Biaoqing with 'hahaha' in Figure 7.8). However, in their last round of chatting, both of them use an elder Biaoqing to end the conversation.

The two friends in this example are not middle-aged or old, yet they enthusiastically use elder Biaoqing with each other. They are in other words fully aware of the above-mentioned indexicalities of elder Biaoqing, and tacitly reach the agreement to use elder Biaoqing with each other, which is premised on their shared perception and knowledge of elder Biaoqing. This practice highlights their 'sameness', i.e. their shared identities of Biaoqing-gurus and members of the young generation.

Note that in this online communicative event, both participants endorse the Biaoqing-related behavioral trait of seniors, i.e. using Biaoqing that uphold positivity. They also tacitly follow the norm that the texts on elder Biaoqing are to be understood literally. For instance, they take the '再见' (bye-bye) on the elder Biaoqing as a polite greeting, instead of as an expression of contempt, dissatisfaction and irony, as is the case with many young-people-Biaoqing with the text '再见' or the image of a waving hand (for detailed discussion see Section 4.5). This example is an instance of the reflection on the characteristics of elder Biaoqing. Since it has been widely accepted that the texts and images of elder Biaoqing are to be taken literally, this characteristic is collectively and tacitly accepted as a reference for interpreting elder Biaoqing even when they are used between young people, and it has become a usage norm of elder Biaoqing.

When we go through the elder Biaoqingbao which have been ranked the top Biaoqingbao on WeChat, we find that all the elder Biaoqing are very simple phatic expressions for conviviality (see the examples in Figure 7.9). As elder Biaoqing are palpably different from the currently dominant cute, insulting, mischievous, dirty and violent ones, this difference in form is enough to index the intended uptake of Biaoqing purposefully designed in elder style. The established form-norm configuration of elder Biaoqing is employed by young people to revitalize the expressive power of daily mundane phatic expressions, which have been eclipsed by the currently dominant Biaoqing, and to rescue simple phatic expressions from being interpreted as perfunctory and insincere. This is the result of people's reflection on the usage and interpretation characteristics typical of elder Biaoqing.



Figure 7.9 Examples of elder Biaoqing from WeChat

Taking this argument a step further, one could suggest that the style of elder Biaoqing is employed to make Biaoqingbao specifically *for* young people to use. This claim is based on four observations. First, among one billion WeChat users, the proportion of users above 50 years old (80 million, 7.4%)²⁸⁸ is too small to make elder Biaoqingbao reach the top 10. This means it is mainly young people who are enthusiastically using them.

Headers of elder Biaoqingbao	Translation	Highest ranking
<p>花好月圆合家欢 精心手绘蝴蝶玫瑰爱心花草笑脸，漂亮组合，传递快乐。 家庭、爱人、情侣、亲朋好友、长辈中老年都可使用，日常问候聊天经典表情 中秋快乐、国庆快乐、合家欢乐，节日快乐。 艺术家：三宝</p>	<p>Butterflies, roses, hearts and smiles Beautiful combination to deliver happiness. Can be used with family, couples, friends, and seniors. Include the classic daily phatic expressions and Biaoqing Happy Mid-Autumn Festival, happy National Day, happiness for your whole family, good wishes for holidays. Designer: 三宝</p>	1
<p>家庭表情 忙碌的日子，记得照顾好自己。 艺术家：凡人工作室</p>	<p>Family Biaoqing During busy days, don't forget to take good care of yourself. Designer: 凡人工作室</p>	1
<p>甜蜜情话 思念你的心最甜 艺术家：凡人工作室</p>	<p>Honey words The heart missing you is the sweetest Designer: 凡人工作室</p>	1
<p>亲爱的好想你 情侣浪漫情话、爱人甜蜜情话、夫妻私密情话。 玫瑰、爱心、蝴蝶的美丽组合爱意浓浓，家庭日常问候聊天也可使用。 我的真心话只说给你听。 艺术家：三宝</p>	<p>My dear I miss you so much Honey words between couples. Beautiful combination of rose, heart and butterfly to express love. Can also be used for daily chatting in family. My true words are only for you. Designer: 三宝</p>	3
<p>我爱我家我爱你 一切为了你，我爱你，我爱我家。 精心手绘蝴蝶玫瑰、花鸟虫鱼、笑脸爱心，漂亮组合，传递幸福快乐 家庭、爱人、情侣、亲朋好友、长辈中老年都可使用，日常问候聊天经典表情 艺术家：三宝</p>	<p>I love my family I love you All for you. I love you and I love my family. Beautiful combination of butterfly, rose, flower, bird, worm, fish, smiling face and heart to pass happiness Can be used with family, couples, friends, and seniors. Include the classic daily phatic expressions Designer: 三宝</p>	5
<p>玫瑰爱心问候 蓝天白云，红花绿叶！ 玫瑰传情，用心聊，聊开心！ 祝您聊天愉快，幸福每一天！ 艺术家：lvendoit</p>	<p>Greetings with rose and love Blue sky, white cloud, red flowers and green leaves! Roses for love, chat heartfully and chat happily! Wish you enjoy chatting and happy every day! Designer: lvendoit</p>	6

Figure 7.10 Elder Biaoqingbao ranked among top 10 on WeChat, September-November 2018

²⁸⁸ Retrieved from <https://36kr.com/p/5189996> on April 3, 2019.

Second, among the seven elder Biaoqingbao ranked top 10, only one includes ‘senior’ in the title (see Figure 7.2), two mention ‘senior’ in the header, and the other four do not mention ‘elder’ or ‘senior’ at all (see Figure 7.10). Third, on many webpages, using elder Biaoqing is tacitly regarded as the practice of young people. For instance, an article on Sohu describes elder Biaoqing as a powerful resource in Doutu, a typical practice of young people:

When you are losing the upper hand in Doutu, elder Biaoqing often can help you miraculously. They not only strike back on your opponent, but also have the ironic effect of ‘hehe’, helping you win the fight without really fighting.²⁸⁹

Fourth, during chatting with friends, I heard of stories of young people in their twenties using elder Biaoqing with their peers. That is to say, elder Biaoqing are not solely for using with elders anymore, but for internet users, both young and senior, to use for their own sake, as shown in headers of the top Biaoqingbao in Figures 7.3 and 7.10. Note also, the information in the headers of the elder Biaoqingbao is usage instruction, in other words, knowledge about elder Biaoqing. They are the intangible knowledge products generated by the activities of instructors and the hub of knowledge work performed in the community of knowledge.

The result of this reflection is resemiotization (Iedema, 2003; Leppänen et al., 2014) of elder Biaoqing: they are extracted from previous frames and inserted in new contexts for communication. Different from the previous reflections, this reflection brings about new usage norms for elder Biaoqing (i.e. to be taken at face value), and new resources to Biaoqing repertoires (i.e. Biaoqing for polite greetings). A corollary of this process is the new indexicality of elder Biaoqing, i.e. polite and friendly phatic expressions for conviviality.

7.3.5 Reactions to age anxiety

The example of elder Biaoqing usage between young people (see Figure 7.8) is collected from a Weibo post, the text of which is presented in Figure 7.11. Apart from the reflection embodied in the communicative practices per se, there is another layer of reflection in this post.

步入中老年表情包…… 下一步 广场舞🤔🤔	Step to elder Biaoqingbao Next step Square dancing ²⁹⁰ 🤔🤔
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Figure 7.11 Text in the Weibo post about elder Biaoqing usage between young people

²⁸⁹ Retrieved from http://www.sohu.com/a/206317823_425113 on November 15, 2018.

Original Chinese text: 当你斗图失手, 中老年表情包往往能出奇制胜, 不仅能反击对方, 还能自带「呵呵」的讽刺效果, 出招于无形. For the explanation of ‘hehe’ see footnotes 15 and 146.

²⁹⁰ In China, square dancing is an activity mostly by retired people as a means of exercise in public squares and plazas.

The text of the post indicates that the poster is sharing the practice of using elder Biaoqing as a joke. She also jokingly says that the next step for her would be to engage in square dancing, a typical activity of seniors. In so doing, she intentionally connects a typical offline activity of seniors to elder Biaoqing. That is to say, the offline actions of seniors are also added to the indexicality bundle of elder Biaoqing.

The poster does not use elder Biaoqing purposefully to mock seniors. It is more about her own identity. As indicated in her post, even though she is aware of her age difference with elders, she uses elder Biaoqing anyway, and might later go a step further to do elder dancing. On the surface, the poster is mocking her deeds unmatching with her age; on a deeper level, her post is a reflection of the age anxiety in Chinese society, the understanding of which requires some sociocultural background information. As has been discussed and explained in Chapter 3, 'standing firm at thirty', the traditional Confucian criterion to evaluate the integrity of an individual, is still quite influential in modern Chinese society, even though it is not really applicable anymore. Nowadays it is not so easy for people to build their own family and have a successful career at such a young age (Zhang Xuehua, 2017). Caught between the stress of the Confucian criterion and such social facts, young people are experiencing age anxiety, i.e. the fear of getting old before achieving life goals and being left behind (Wang Qingfeng, 2017), which is the social origin of the neologism 'middle-aged teenage girl' (中年少女)²⁹¹ to refer to young women born in the 1990s. In this case, elder Biaoqing happen to be the media that reflect such anxiety. As a consequence, elder Biaoqing by chance become indices to age anxiety in Chinese society. Note that this indexicality is conspicuously different from the previous ones in the sense that it is deeply rooted in people's subconscious reaction to the precariat state of educated young people in China (Du Caixia, 2016), and that it might not be distinctly felt by people, not even by young people who use elder Biaoqing this way.

7.3.6 Multiple indexicalities and polychronotopic deployment of elder Biaoqing

Elder Biaoqing are originally created for the sake of elders by young people. The indexicality of elder Biaoqing goes through five stages, each is a result of collective negotiation and construction of meanings and norms on the basis of people's reflections on their communicative practices. The emergence and development of multiple indexicalities do not entail an exclusive relation among them. They might co-exist in the same instance of elder Biaoqing usage. A good example is the case of elder Biaoqing used between the mother and her son (see Figures 7.6 and 7.7). In this communicative episode, both the son and the mother interpret the texts on the Biaoqing literally, i.e. following the norms of using elder Biaoqing, and both use elder Biaoqing as semiotic resources for their online communication. However, they have different perceptions of elder Biaoqing. For the mother, elder Biaoqing (or any Biaoqing) are an index to her in-fashionness, to her identity as a person who can keep in step with the development of technology and with the culture of young people (as discussed in Section 7.3.2). For the son, elder Biaoqing are

²⁹¹ Retrieved from http://www.sohu.com/a/212913551_570242 on November 23, 2018.

only a (niche) fraction of his Biaoqing repertoire, and they are an index to his resourcefulness in Biaoqing, to his knowledge of how seniors use elder Biaoqing, and to his identity as a Biaoqing guru. In other words, the son and the mother orient to different Biaoqing indexicalities and usage norms when they use elder Biaoqing. The participants in this interaction are invoking different indexicalities and norms, and by extension, different genres and different chronotopes. The communication between the mother and the son is thus an example of polychronotopic deployment of elder Biaoqing within the same communicative event.

In this case, the son has full knowledge of the mother's perception of elder Biaoqing, but the mother does not know that of the son – their knowledge is asymmetrical. There are at least three chronotopes involved in this case. First, the chronotope where the communication between the mother and the son happens. This chronotope is observed by me as an outsider. Second, the chronotope where the mother uses elder Biaoqing to communicate with her son, which is the mother's perspective. Third, the chronotope where the son perceives the way or the chronotope where his mother uses elder Biaoqing, which is the son's perspective. In other words, the son and the mother cooperate in the materialization of the chronotope for the mother, but the son inserts this communication episode into a chronotope of his own, which the mother is not aware of. The second and the third chronotopes are incorporated in the first chronotope, which points to the layering or fractality of chronotopes (Bakhtin, 1981; Blommaert, 2010; Silverstein, 2003).

The emergence and popularity of elder Biaoqing is one of the trends in the Biaoqing cultural system in Chinese society. This trend, which is a result of multiple factors, reflects a number of concrete social facts, which point to new perspectives for approaching online phenomena.

First, the emergence of elder Biaoqing is caused by the growing presence of elder internet users, which is premised on the accessibility and affordability of technology, especially the internet and smart phones. Different from the young generation growing up with digital media, these elder internet users are "digital migrants" (Prensky, 2001). When they get online, they bring with them their semiotic resources and exert influence on the host space (i.e. the social media they use) through their semiotic practices as well as aesthetic tastes. The emergence of elder Biaoqing is catalyzed by elder digital migrants' ignorance of online popular culture, especially their lack of knowledge of the mischievous, insulting and dirty Biaoqing young digital natives use. Elder Biaoqing per se become part of the forever-changing online culture. This is in essence a reflection of the dynamics of the online semiotic resource Biaoqing, and such dynamism is a result of the complex interaction between online and offline spaces.

Second, although elder Biaoqing are designed for the sake of seniors, they are free for everyone to use. The meager number of elder internet users in comparison with young internet users renders them the minority. What is more, elder digital migrants are usually much less efficient in making use of the affordances of social media, for instance the WeChat Biaoqing Open Platform. An inevitable consequence of this is that young digital natives to a great degree have more capacity to construct the indexicalities and usage norms of elder Biaoqing on their terms. This in turn brings about e-inequalities between the majority digital natives and the minority digital migrants.

Third, communicative practices with elder Biaoqing are based on people's engagement with established indexicalities, or presupposition of usage appropriateness (Blommaert, 2010; Silverstein, 2003). In the process of communication, people demonstrate such engagement yet at the same time reflect on their engagement, which leads to moderation of communicative practices as people see fit, or entailment of creativity and effectiveness (*ibid.*). For instance, young people use elder Biaoqing as a reaction to the aesthetic taste of the senior generation, as a possession of valuable resources, as a claim of superiority in online spaces, as a creation of new communicative resources, and as a reaction to social stress they are faced with. People's reflection on their communicative practices brings about the interplay between presupposition and entailment of Biaoqing, during the process of which new usage norms are being established, and new indexicalities are being constructed for elder Biaoqing. All these actions and the information involved in the practices form a community of knowledge of elder Biaoqing.

Fourth, the establishment of norms and indexicalities mentioned in the above point are materialized in the process of the wide spread of specific ways of using elder Biaoqing. Through repeated reproduction of certain communicative practices, people collectively and tacitly precipitate specific indexicalities on elder Biaoqing. The configuration of forms, meanings, norms and indexicalities become pattern and standardized through extensive repetition in people's communitive practices with elder Biaoqing, and thus result in specific genres and thereby chronotopes related to elder Biaoqing.

Fifth, these indexicalities are not equally available or accessible to all users of elder Biaoqing, as illustrated in the case of the communication between the mother and the son in Figures 7.6 and 7.7. In other words, people's capacity to deploy elder Biaoqing is truncated, and the multiple indexicalities of elder Biaoqing are stratified.

Sixth, the five indexicalities are heterarchical and co-exist in the reservoir of semiotic resources, instead of coming in an ordinal degree and in a dialectic relation with each other as in Silverstein's (2003) theorizing. Elder Biaoqing are deployed in multiple chronotopes, without causing trouble for the achievement of coherent and understandable communication. When multiple chronotopes are invoked in the same communication, there is polychronotopic deployment of elder Biaoqing.

The above-discussed social facts point to some theoretical perspectives in approaching online phenomena. First, online phenomena should be regarded as happening in an online-offline nexus as what happens online is a result of the mutual influence between the online and the offline. Second, in online spaces there are various reasons behind various types of inequalities, some of which might easily escape our attention. For instance, even the knowledge of a neologism can be one of them. Third, people are constantly reflecting on what they do and what happens in online spaces, which makes it necessary to take into consideration people's agency and reflexivity in approaching online phenomena. Fourth, communications in online spaces take place with compliance with various norms, which are established, refined and changed through people's congregational work. These norms define genres, which function in shaping chronotopes that can operate within or together with other chronotopes. The congregational work to establish (new) norms and the fractality of chronotopes make online spaces never short of new chronotopes.

7.4 Conviviality in Chinese-character-based Biaoqing

Chinese-character-based Biaoqing is another new form of Biaoqing that I have observed. The texts on such Biaoqing are everyday phatic expressions, as presented in Figure 7.12. The three top Chinese-character-based Biaoqingbao are designed for different purposes, but they have two commonalities, i.e. simple, and phatic (see Figure 7.12). This characteristic is the same with the elder Biaoqing designed for conviviality, i.e. low-intensity social engagement with others through signs that are primarily relational (cf. Varis & Blommaert, 2015).

Headers of Biaoqingbao	Example	Highest ranking
 <p>Commonly used chatting phrases for lazy people Words for daily communication presented as cartoon images. More convenient for communication.</p>	 <p>Hahahaha</p>	1
 <p>Characters that can talk Words full of life. Simple yet full of fun.</p>	 <p>Hug</p>	3
 <p>I'm false messages I'm not really a message. I'm false~</p>	 <p>Hahaha</p>	6

Figure 7.12 Headers of the three Chinese-character-based Biaoqingbao

The texts on the Biaoqing can be easily typed in any instant messaging app, yet such low-information-value Biaoqing become popular. There are complex reasons behind this phenomenon. First, phatic communion is an inevitable part of online communication (Malinowski, 2006; Schandorf, 2012). Second, on Chinese social media Biaoqing is so omnipresent that it has become a genre per se (De Seta, 2018; Douglas, 2014; Lin Xiaodong, 2016; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015), keying a friendly or light-hearted communication milieu (though there are exceptions as we have seen in Section 6.4.2). Third, the omnipresence of Biaoqing and its generic indexicalities eclipse the expressive power of simple typed text messages (Bliss-Carroll, 2016). Though with the same phatic expressions, in comparison with Biaoqing which are composed of multimodal resources to make up for

what is missing from face-to-face communication to some degree, text messages are passively bleached of friendly tones for online communication, which results in a predicament of shortage in resources concise and efficient for phatic communication. A way out of this dilemma is to create new resources, and Biaoqing of simple phatic expressions prove to be handy. What is more, people are attaching great importance to the efficiency of online communication, as indicated by the Biaoqingbao instructions such as 'for lazy people' and 'simple' (see Figure 7.12), that is to say, great importance is being attached to communication per se, i.e. taking the Biaoqing at their face values, at least for phatic communication. This indicates the emergence of a parsimony trend in the Biaoqing cultural system. The popularity of the Chinese-character-based Biaoqing demonstrates parsimony in terms of literal uptake of the Biaoqing.

A different aspect of this trend, i.e. parsimony in the form and style of Biaoqing, is illustrated by people's reflection on their frequently used Biaoqing (see Figure 7.13).



Figure 7.13 Weibo post: *The history of my Biaoqingbao*²⁹²

This Weibo post, published on October 24, 2018, became a hit, reposted 13,240 times, accumulating 1,416 comments and 4,457 likes by November 12, 2018. The most frequently used Biaoqing of the poster changed from primal Biaoqing (i.e. emoji) in 2008 to mischievous, insulting, cute or dirty Biaoqing in 2015, and again to primal Biaoqing in 2018. This post triggers a discussion among people about their most used Biaoqing. Quite many people share this experience. They are amazed by how exactly the Weibo post reflects their own experiences (see comments 1-2 in Figure 7.14). They return to primal Biaoqing for both aesthetic and pragmatic reasons. Primal Biaoqing is now regarded as in fashion, and it is even compared to Renaissance (see comments 3-6 in Figure 7.14).

²⁹² Retrieved from https://www.weibo.com/6502658043/GFpbkcHRQ?ref=collection&type=comment#_rnd1542023195298 on November 25, 2018.

There are numerous reasons behind this change. The most prominent reasons are relevant to the nonlinearly transformed meanings and indexicalities of (some) primal Biaoqing.

For instance, the meaning of certain Biaoqing has become much more diversified than before (see comment 7 in Figure 7.14). And the statement that primal Biaoqing 🙌👉 have become top three for irony is readily acknowledged by people, as testified by the 1,227 likes it has accumulated (see comment 8 in Figure 7.14). It is worth mentioning that it is not only the expressive meanings of Biaoqing that have changed, but also their indexicalities. For example, the smile Biaoqing has acquired strong ironic meaning, and concurrently the indexicality of being in fashion (see comments 3-4 in Figure 7.14) and the identity of being a member of the new generation who break the shackle of tradition (for detailed discussion see Section 4.5). Apart from this, some people return to primal Biaoqing for more formal communicative situations or for the sake of efficiency (see comments 9-10 in Figure 7.14).

The return to primal Biaoqing is premised on the enriched expressive meaning, communication function, and transformed indexicality of the formerly simplistic Biaoqing. This also applies to the Chinese-character-based Biaoqing. Though they are not complicated in their denotational and connotational meaning, they are quite rich in indexicality. The small graphic changes to the Chinese characters convert them into Biaoqing, and thus become an index of literal uptake, an index of their distinction from the currently popular Biaoqing, and an index of parsimony taste.

Parsimony is an emerging trend, but not the only trend. For some people, primal Biaoqing are the new fashion, but this does not apply to everyone. For some, the stick figure Biaoqing, the coarsely made image macro, Panda Man Biaoqing, or kaomoji are their favorite (see comments 11-15 in Figure 7.14). The existence of multiple tastes for Biaoqing points to the fact that there are multiple norms that people orient to in their choice and usage of Biaoqing. That is to say, the Biaoqing cultural system in Chinese society is polycentric (Blommaert, 2010, 2018a). The emergence of parsimony trend and the existence of multiple tastes in the Biaoqing cultural system are concrete proof of the dynamic of Biaoqing. The knowledge of changing and emerging resources is passed on and picked up by people through communicative practices or through various specific instruction practices, all of which are the essential actions that constitute a community of knowledge.

The cases of elder and Chinese-character-based Biaoqingbao illustrate the emergence of the parsimony trend. There is a growing interest in Biaoqing intended for conviviality, and Biaoqing whose images and texts can be taken at face value. Concurrently, there is also a trend of returning to primal Biaoqing that have been imposed nonlinearly transformed meanings. To be more specific, this means the rising of parsimony taste in phatic expressions for conviviality.

1	是谁在偷窥我的生活	Who is spying on me
2	真实。。我走向复古	So true...I'm returning to the vintage
3	没错 以前觉得原始表情土爆了 现在用的 飞起😂	That's right. I used to regard primal Biaoqing as so out of fashion. But now I enjoy using them so much 😂
4	越土越潮流	The more it's out of fashion, the more it's fashionable
5	时尚是种轮回	Fashion goes around in circles
6	文艺复兴 😊	Renaissance 😊
7	但你能已经从简单的😊中看出比过去多百倍的含义	But you can read hundreds more meanings from the simple 😊
8	😂👍😂嘲讽三连 👍1227	😂👍😂 top three for sarcasm 👍1227
9	这就是我从学生到工作者的过程, 不过跟好朋友还是会用网络流表情包的😂	It coincides with my change from a student to an employee. But with friends I still use popular Biaoqingbao😂
10	我现在也很少用表情包了, 懒得去翻, 还是自带的小表情方便。	I seldom use Biaoqingbao now. Too lazy to find them. The default Biaoqing are more convenient.
11	看来我还活在 2015 年😂	It seems I'm still living in 2015 😂
12	对于特定人群是这样的嗷😂😂 2008年 2015年 2018年  👍3595	For some groups of people, their Biaoqingbao history is like follows 😂😂 2008年 2015年 2018年  👍3595
13	可我的表情包都是沙雕熊猫头……  👍492 ▸ 我手机 1W 多张照片, 8000 多沙雕熊猫头 ▸ 哈哈我也爱沙雕熊猫头和沙雕蘑菇头	But all my Biaoqing are stupid Panda Man...  👍492 ▸ Among the over 10,000 pictures in my phone, over 8,000 are stupid Panda Man ▸ Hahaha, I also like stupid Panda Man and Mushroom Hairstyle
14	 你很健康 👍193	 你很健康 👍193 [Text on the Biaoqing: You are very healthy]
15	而我喜欢颜文字嘻嘻 👍776	But I like kaomoji ²⁹³ 👍776
	 咋肥四鸭 👍329	 咋肥四鸭 👍329 [Text on the Biaoqing: What happened]

Figure 7.14 Comments on the Weibo post: The history of my Biaoqingbao

²⁹³ Kaomoji, Japanese variation of emoticons, are made of Japanese characters and punctuation symbols. Examples of Kaomoji are ~(_▽_~)~, (O∪O)_, (:3)∠_, (°_°)◇, etc..

7.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, the dynamic of Biaoqing is illustrated through the changing meaning, form and trend of Biaoqing. The meanings of Biaoqing are subject to people's reconstruction. The reconstruction of propositional meaning is concurrent with re-imposed indexicality. People are highly creative in the Biaoqing cultural system. They collectively negotiate and construct the expressive meaning and indexicality of Biaoqing, as in the case of the wave and smile Biaoqing. They also manipulate and transform established form-indexicality configurations to meet their own communicative needs and to index desired uptake, as in the case of elder Biaoqing for the use of young people and Chinese-character-based Biaoqing. Through collective negotiation-in-use, people create, refine, learn and spread usage norms of Biaoqing. Such extensive knowledge work is the foundation of a community of knowledge.

In the nonlinear transformation of the wave and smile Biaoqing, and the popularity of elder and Chinese-character-based Biaoqing, we see the expansions of usage norms of Biaoqing, expansions of genres and chronotopes (or cross-chronotope), and expansions from online to offline and vice versa. The nonlinear transformation in the meanings of the wave and smile Biaoqing flags a departure from traditional Chinese cultural norms to remain polite and maintain harmony. Similar to the nonlinear transformation of Biaoqing meaning, the emergence and popularity of Chinese-character-based Biaoqing is informed by deep-rooted traditional Chinese cultural traits as well the need for conviviality, as in offline communication. Here, too, we notice the transformation and conscious re-elaboration of knowledge products in search of new functions, the result of which is new forms of Biaoqing and new behavioral norms.

The emergence and popularity of elder Biaoqing is most directly the result of an offline fact: the growing population of seniors who gain access to affordable internet and smart phones. Elder Biaoqing are used by people orienting to different norms in the same communicative situation: similar signs being deployed by different participants to invoke different genres (and thereby different chronotopes) within the same communicative event, the result of which is polychronotopic deployment of Biaoqing resources. The fact that the polychronotopic deployment of elder Biaoqing is accessible to me, a digital ethnographic researcher, is only possible thanks to the widespread knowledge practices documented in earlier chapters: (young) people report their communicative practices on WeChat on Weibo. As different social media have different interface organization, regulations, policies, user terms, affordances, target audiences and behavioral norms, the crossing from one medium to another is immediately related to crossing of chronotopes. In other words, people's actual usages of elder Biaoqing on WeChat are chronotopically different from their reflections on the indexicality and usages of elder Biaoqing on Weibo. These Biaoqing-related practices on different social media and/or in different communicative situations are in essence cross-chronotopic. Throughout all the cases discussed in this chapter, we see how Biaoqing can be directed towards different populations and the relationships between members of these populations.

The discussion in this chapter reveals that the transformation of meanings and the creation of new forms project the dynamics of the Biaoqing cultural system. This transformation and change are propelled by varied and changing communicative demands arising from a rapidly changing society. The newly informed Biaoqing and Biaoqing practices are the result of complicated mutual influence between the online and the offline, and they point to issues of cross-chronotopic nature. The following two chapters will invoke concrete cases to illustrate the issue of cross-chronotopic and polychronotopic usages of Biaoqing. Both dimensions will be crucial in demonstrating how Biaoqing – a knowledge product – can be turned into a *knowledge-economic* product in which communities of knowledge are turned into markets.

CHAPTER 8

The expanding economy of Biaoqingbao

8.1 Introduction

The popularity of smart mobile devices provides the infrastructure for the development of Biaoqingbao, whose originally intended function was to make up for what was missing from face-to-face communication (Bliss-Carroll, 2016; Chu Yanfang, 2018; Dresner & Herring, 2010; Schandorf, 2012). Biaoqingbao, as a newly developed mode of semiotic system, has meanwhile developed far beyond its initially intended function. Besides serving as a paralanguage in online communication, Biaoqingbao has taken on various other communicative functions, for instance, as social voice animator (Chapter 3) and as identity marker (Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6). The versatile roles played by Biaoqingbao in communication have far and deep social consequences, one of which is the economy of Biaoqingbao. In this chapter, the term 'market' is invoked in the sense of trade, referring to the exchange between Biaoqing-related products and currency. In the economy of Biaoqingbao, the commodities are Biaoqingbao, Biaoqing-related knowledge and merchandise, and the currency is money, fame and attention. Building on the theorization of these three types of currency, cross-chronotopic phenomena of Biaoqingbao in four fields will be discussed: Biaoqingbao merchandise, marketing strategy, education, and politics.

8.2 The economy of Biaoqingbao

Biaoqingbao economy refers to the exchange activities that revolve around the demand and supply of Biaoqingbao-related products. In this section, three major and most influential aspects of Biaoqingbao economy will be introduced, that is financial economy, fame economy and attention economy.

As WeChat is currently the most used messaging app in China and thus one of the primary sites where Biaoqingbao are enthusiastically used, this chapter will use the case of Biaoqingbao development on WeChat to illustrate the economy of Biaoqingbao in China. The multiple features of WeChat win it the fame as China's 'app for everything', which includes instant messaging, commerce and payment services, timeline/posts, city services, map, news feed, etc. By March 2019, WeChat was one of the largest standalone

messaging apps, with over one billion monthly active users. By 2016, over one billion Biaoqing were used on WeChat on a daily basis.²⁹⁴

8.2.1 Financial economy

The term ‘financial economy’ is used here to refer to the fact that Biaoqingbao has become a for-profit business sector. The development of the financial economy of Biaoqingbao on WeChat depends on the infrastructures for providing a marketplace, commodities (i.e. Biaoqingbao), and means of transaction. In this section, the three aspects of the infrastructure will be introduced.

Marketplace

On WeChat there are three types of Biaoqing (see Figure 8.1). The first type is default Biaoqing which come as part of the app. They consist of some of emojis and the classic QQ Biaoqing. There are altogether 199 default Biaoqing, nine of which were added in November 2016. Default Biaoqing are the most stable type, and also the most popular ones, being used by over 50% of WeChat users on a daily basis. The second type is customized Biaoqing, i.e. Biaoqing added by users themselves through the Added Stickers feature of WeChat, which was released in November 2011. Maximally 300 customized Biaoqing can be saved to Added Stickers. It was estimated that around 30% WeChat users use customized Biaoqing on a daily basis. The third type is Biaoqingbao downloaded from Sticker Gallery, where users can choose and download Biaoqingbao to their WeChat accounts.

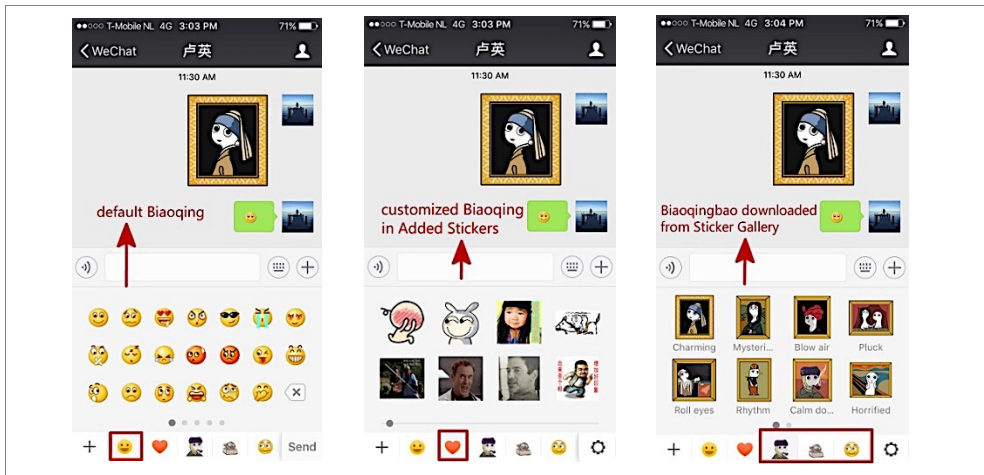


Figure 8.1 Three types of Biaoqing on WeChat²⁹⁵

²⁹⁴ Retrieved from <http://www.pingwest.com/wechat-sticker-store/> on October 12, 2017. In this chapter, unless otherwise indicated, the statistical information is taken from this source.

²⁹⁵ Retrieved from the WeChat account of the author on October 11, 2017.

Sticker Gallery, which is the major marketplace for Biaoqingbao on WeChat, needs to be introduced in detail. There are both Chinese and English versions of WeChat. On the Chinese version of WeChat, the term ‘Biaoqing Store’ (表情商店) was used (see Figure 8.2). When WeChat changed its marketing strategy for Biaoqing, which will be explained in the following part, ‘Biaoqing Store’ was changed to ‘Biaoqing’ (表情) accordingly. While on the English version of WeChat, the term ‘Sticker Gallery’ is used (see Figure 8.2).

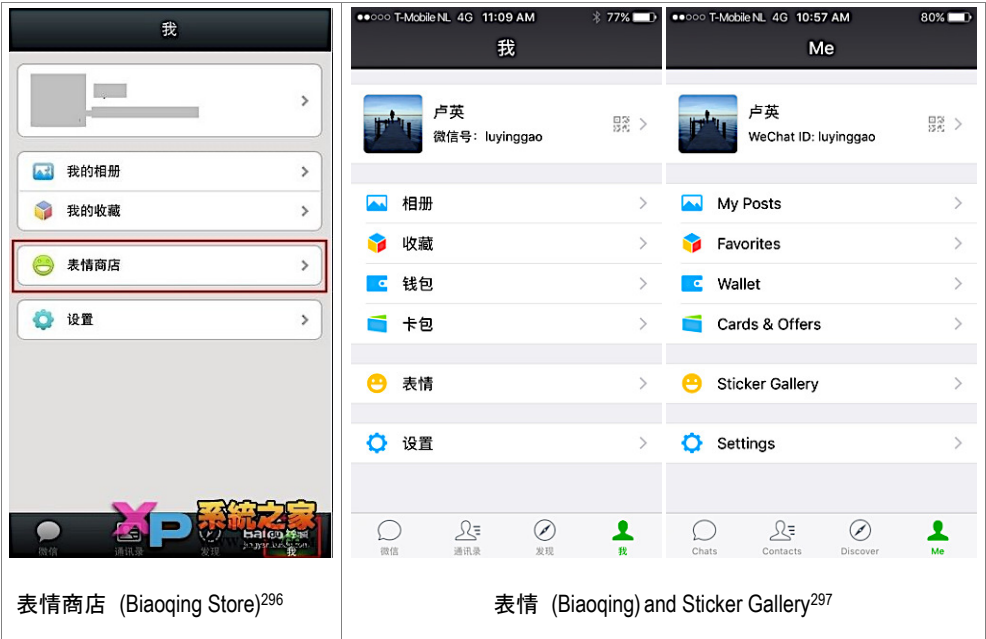


Figure 8.2 WeChat interfaces before and after the change of its marketing strategy

The feature of Sticker Gallery was added to WeChat in August 2013 for WeChat users to download Biaoqingbao to their own WeChat app.²⁹⁸ Before July 2015, Biaoqingbao in Biaoqing Store were arranged by a WeChat team who cooperated with professional Biaoqing designers. In Biaoqing Story, a limited number of Biaoqingbao were free, and the majority of Biaoqingbao costed ¥6 (less than €1) to download (see Figure 8.3).

The Biaoqingbao arranged by the WeChat team were met with a lukewarm reaction from users. Some were even criticized of being outdated and lacking novelty. To appeal to the tastes of users, in July 2015, WeChat launched the Biaoqing Open Platform for people who are interested in creating Biaoqing.²⁹⁹ The Biaoqingbao contributed to this platform need to meet the standards set by WeChat, including the number of Biaoqing,

²⁹⁶ Retrieved from <http://www.downxia.com/zixun/51175.html> on October 11, 2017.

²⁹⁷ Retrieved from the WeChat account of the author on October 11, 2017.

²⁹⁸ Retrieved from http://weixin.qq.com/cgi-bin/readtemplate?t=weixin_fa_android_50 on October 12, 2017.

²⁹⁹ Retrieved from <http://www.jianshu.com/p/6a57dd225b5f> on October 10, 2017.

the pixel size, the size of each Biaoqing, etc. Submitted Biaoqingbao will be assessed in terms of the legitimacy of the content as well as the forms of Biaoqing.³⁰⁰ Approved Biaoqingbao will be showcased in Sticker Gallery. The most popular ones will be promoted to more visible positions in Sticker Gallery. For instance, in Sticker Gallery, popular Biaoqingbao are presented in 'Top Picks' where the most popular ones are immediately seen in the category of 'Hot', and others are put under the icon 'View More' (see Figure 8.3).

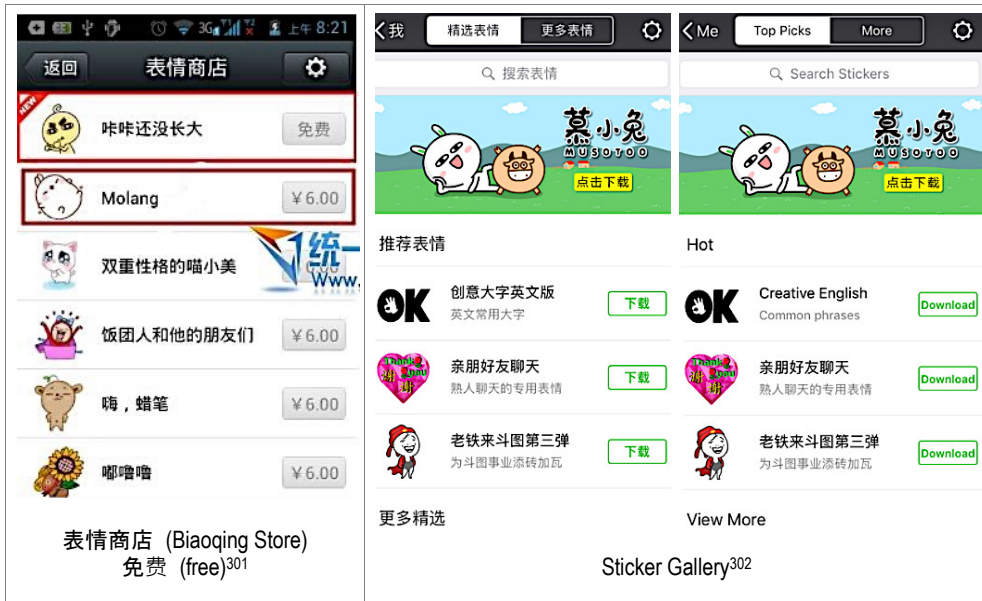


Figure 8.3 The interfaces in Biaoqing Store and Sticker Gallery

Means of transaction

After the launch of Biaoqing Open Platform, around 40 Biaoqingbao were released on a daily basis. At the early days after the launch of this platform, artists could choose whether to offer their Biaoqingbao for free or for ¥6 per download. Some celebrities, especially movie and teleplay stars, contributed Biaoqingbao made from their own pictures, which were warmly welcomed by their fans. However, not any celebrity can make real-person Biaoqingbao. WeChat only accepts real-person Biaoqingbao of celebrities who have more

³⁰⁰ In terms of legitimacy, the figures and texts on Biaoqing need to be in agreement with the laws and regulations of the People's Republic of China, for instance any content encouraging crime and violence, concerning vulgar erotic information, endangering the health of teenagers, inciting ethnic hatred, etc. will not be approved. Besides this, content which violates the intelligence property and/or privacy of a third party will not be approved. In terms of forms, the Biaoqing need to meet the format standards set by WeChat, and there should be no typos or advertisements.

³⁰¹ Retrieved from <https://www.jyrd.com/> on October 12, 2017.

³⁰² Retrieved from the WeChat account of the author on October 11, 2017.

than 500,000 followers on Weibo/Facebook, or who becomes searched very frequently online in the last 30 days. It is reported that some top stars have made over ¥2 million out of Biaoqingbao on WeChat, and the most popular celebrity Biaoqingbao was downloaded 2.8 million times within 30 days of its release.³⁰³

Though some top celebrities could earn a handsome amount of money from Biaoqingbao, it does not entail that the idea of paying for Biaoqingbao is widely accepted by Chinese people (Chen Zhuowei & Tang Ying, 2019; Geng Biao, 2016). Though ¥6 per download may not seem much, not everyone is willing or able to afford it. Consequently, the plan of WeChat to promote the Sticker Gallery Biaoqingbao was met with setback.

To amend the situation, the WeChat team cancelled paid Biaoqingbao, and added the feature of Reward,³⁰⁴ through which WeChat users could donate money to artists they appreciate in the form of Red Packet (monetary gift in a red packet/envelope) on WeChat. This change turned out to be a success. After publication, popular Biaoqingbao may fetch Rewards as high as ¥300,000, and top ones may fetch over ¥1 million. Since the addition of the Reward feature, a total of over ¥35 million had been rewarded to artists by April 2017. To have a better picture of this change, it is necessary to introduce the facility, which enables Reward and Red Packet, i.e. WeChat Pay, and the cultural implications of Reward and Red Packet.

WeChat Pay, launched in August 2013, attaches personal bank accounts to WeChat, enabling multiple payment methods, including Quick Pay, QR Code Payment, In-App Web-Based Payment and In-App Payment. Red Packet, launched in January 2014, enables users to give/receive electronic monetary gifts and deposit/withdraw money to/from their bank accounts.³⁰⁵

In October 2015, In-App Payment was applied to Sticker Gallery, enabling users to give Reward to Biaoqing designers (see 1 in Figure 8.4). On the Chinese version of the WeChat interface, after clicking on the button to give Reward, a page for giving Red Packet to the Biaoqing designer will pop up (see 2 in Figure 8.4). The interface of the

³⁰³ The most popular Biaoqingbao of celebrity does not entail that the celebrity is most popular. The popularity of a Biaoqingbao is influenced by the popularity of the celebrity as well as whether the Biaoqingbao is free or not. In the said case, the celebrity is not a top star, but her Biaoqingbao was free in Sticker Gallery. Retrieved from <http://chuansong.me/n/2220419> and <http://ent.qq.com/a/20160818/037449.htm> on October 12, 2017. In what follows, most of the statistical information on the topic of Mushroom Hairstyle is taken from the first source and that on the topic of financial economy of Biaoqing is taken from the second source. The income from Biaoqingbao was divided between App Store (30%), WeChat (35%) and the artist (35%).

³⁰⁴ In this text, the initial letter of the functions and features on WeChat is capitalized for clarity. The Reward is given to Biaoqing designers in full amount, and WeChat takes no share of it. In April 2017, the Reward function was canceled on WeChat for iOS under the requirement of Apple because the Reward function directs users to consume on an app by means other than Apple's In-App Purchase, which constitutes a violation of the regulations of App Store. As a remedy for this, artists often share a QR code for payment for iPhone-using followers who want to give Reward.

³⁰⁵ Retrieved from <https://baike.baidu.com/item/微信红包/13007189> on June 30, 2019. Through Quick Pay, money is paid to the person who scans the Quick Pay code. Through QR Code Payment, money is received from the person who scans the code. Through In-App Web-Based Payment and In-App Payment, payment on webpages and in different apps will be directed to WeChat Pay. In what follows, unless otherwise indicated, most of the information on the topic of WeChat Red Packet is taken from this source.

English version is slightly different: Reward is used in place of Red Packet on the popup page (see 3 in Figure 8.4).³⁰⁶ It is important to introduce the terms used on the Chinese version in order to understand the development of the Biaoqingbao economy on WeChat.

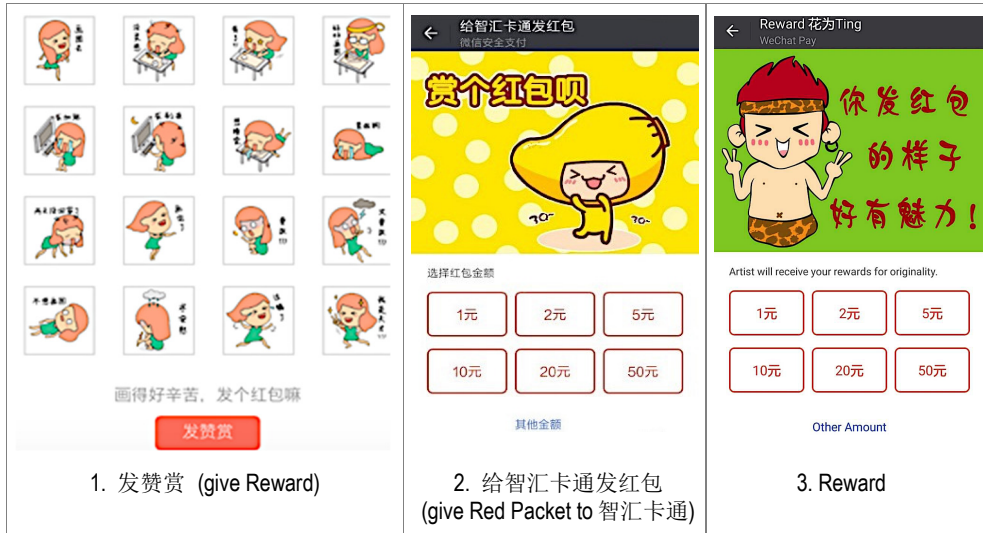


Figure 8.4 The Reward page and the Chinese and English popup interfaces after clicking on the give Reward icon³⁰⁷

Red packet, also known as red envelope or *hóng bāo* (红包), is a monetary gift given during holidays or on special occasions such as weddings, graduation or the birth of a baby. Traditionally, holiday red packets are given by senior generations to junior generations who are usually students, unmarried, or under 25 years old (for instance from grandparents to grandchildren) as a wish of good luck. In 2014, the distribution of digital red packets was popularized by WeChat thanks to mobile payment. Though nowadays red packets, especially digital ones, might be given by anybody to anyone else on any occasion, regardless of their age, marital status, etc., the tradition of seniors/superiors giving red packets to the juniors/inferiors is still respected, but in modern modified ways. A typical way is to pay lip service to people giving red packets, for instance they may be referred to as bosses, big brothers or sisters, etc. The lip service is in essence subtly offering a superior status to red packet givers, and at the same time giving face to them (Hu Hsien Chin, 1944; Hwang Kwang-kuo, 1987).

On the Chinese version of WeChat, the Reward feature is *zàn shǎng* (赞赏), literally meaning appreciation/appreciate. The practice on WeChat to give Reward to artists derives from a very similar online practice: *dǎ shǎng* (打赏). *Dǎ shǎng* (打赏) is indigenous

³⁰⁶ When I checked the popup interface after clicking on Reward on the Chinese version in August 2019, the term 红包 (Red Packet) has been replaced by 赞赏 (Reward).

³⁰⁷ Retrieved from <http://www.17qq.com/biaoqing/1796103.html> on October 13, 2017.

to traditional Chinese culture, which refers to the practice of people of higher status giving tips or other gifts to their inferiors or servants as a reward for their services (Xu Qie, 2015). With the development of internet culture, *dǎ shǎng* in the online environment has acquired new meanings, referring to the practice of giving monetary gifts to producers of original intangible knowledge products (for instance articles, pictures, videos, novels, etc.). *Dǎ shǎng* (打赏) has become an alternative to paying for knowledge products, and at the same time a new way of consumption in online spaces (Zhou Wenlin, 2019). The integration of Red Packet into the Reward feature in Sticker Gallery is a clever move. It provides WeChat users a means to *dǎ shǎng* artists out of their own choice, and at the same time to enjoy a very subtle feeling of being in a 'superior' position (Yang Gongzhen, 2015).

Chinese people do not have the habit and consciousness to pay for intangible products (Chen Zhuowei & Tang Ying, 2019). Between 2013 and 2014, only a meager 5.2% of WeChat users ever paid for Biaoqing, and 38.3% used only free Biaoqing, and many users go for cracked/pirate Biaoqingbao.³⁰⁸ The reluctance to pay for intangible products constitutes a big obstacle for the commercialization of Biaoqing on WeChat. The Reward feature is designed to address this problem, and is expected to fundamentally change Chinese people's attitudes towards the practice of paying for intangible knowledge products (Yang Xia, 2017). According to the reports on WeChat user and business ecosystem by Penguin Intelligence, the proportion of users who paid for Biaoqing rose from 5.2% in 2013-2014 to 17.3% in 2017. Though the samples and user structures when the two reports were drafted might be quite different,³⁰⁹ the increase from 5.2% to 17.3% is still remarkable. Behind this great advance, there is a relentless struggle between Chinese people's reluctance to pay for intangible internet products and the gradual establishment of the practice of rewarding IPs.³¹⁰ In this process, the ludic dimension of digital red packet plays an important role. The ludic nature is embodied in paying which is not called money but reward or *dǎ shǎng*. Consequently, the money people pay acquires a moral dimension, and the practice of giving reward is moralized, which provides an amiable environment for nurturing new yet old online consumption behavior on Chinese social media.

Reward, digital red racket and *dǎ shǎng* are inspired by their offline counterparts, but with much more unpredictable implications. On WeChat, Reward and Red Packet features have enabled and derived enormously varied online practices and behavioral norms from their offline counterparts. Here we see an online-offline nexus where both spaces integrate through their mutual influence on each other in extremely complex ways. This alerts us to the fact that the online cannot be seen as simply mirroring the offline.

³⁰⁸ Retrieved from <https://biznext.qq.com/> on October 9, 2017. In what follows, unless otherwise indicated, most of the statistical information on the topic of WeChat user and business report is taken from this source.

³⁰⁹ The 2017 report was based on a sample of 20,611 WeChat users, but the sample size of the 2015 report was not provided.

³¹⁰ On Chinese social media, IP, intelligence property, refers to literary and/or cultural contents, especially those with potential to be commercialized and to bring financial benefits (Gong Yufei, 2017).

Commodities

Biaoqing and Biaoqingbao, as graphic semiotic resources with potential for meeting a wide range of communicative needs, are very attractive to people. The pecuniary potential of Biaoqingbao is increasingly felt, and some people decide to make a career out of it. Block 12 Culture is one of the most prominent ones. Block 12 Culture, a company established in 2015, originally focused on the creation of manga brands and IP figures. With the development of Biaoqingbao, Block 12 Culture began to design figures for Biaoqing. So far, Block 12 Culture has designed over 50 manga figures, and Biaoqingbao featuring these figures had been downloaded 800 million times and used 20 trillion times by April 2017. Besides the handsome Rewards on WeChat, the popularity and fame brought by Biaoqingbao has helped Block 12 Culture win ¥25 million in its series A round (a company's first significant round of venture capital financing).

A further development of the commodity of Biaoqingbao is to step from online to offline. Some companies already begin to pick popular figures in top Biaoqingbao to produce Biaoqing merchandise. One typical case is applying Biaoqing to various small objects and gadgets, for instance, cushions, keychains, small toys, accessories, schoolbags, etc. Some examples are presented in Figure 8.5. The cushions in 1 in Figure 8.5 are based on emojis. The keychain and the cushion in 2 and 3 in Figure 8.5 are inspired by a hot Biaoqing figure created by a team in Block 12 Culture. The keychain and the schoolbag in 4 and 5 in Figure 8.5 are inspired by Panda Man Biaoqing with faces of Jacky Cheung and Kim (see Chapter 3). In Tmall, a business-to-consumer retail website by Alibaba Group, the keyword '金馆长挂件' (Kim pendant) fetched 563 search results, meaning that there were 563 products related to Biaoqing of Kim.



Figure 8.5 Examples of Biaoqing merchandise

To sum up, in the Biaoqingbao economy, the infrastructure includes not only the marketplace, but also technical facilities for payment, and the social environment conducive to such payment practices. Sticker Gallery is the marketplace and showroom of Biaoqingbao on WeChat. The launch of WeChat Biaoqing Open Platform, which provides Biaoqing artists access to the marketplace, ensures the supply of commodities to the marketplace. The mobile payment service provided by WeChat, especially WeChat Pay, Red Packet and Reward, bridges the marketplace and the commodity, bringing the Biaoqingbao economy to life.

Biaoqing has become a business in China, not only in online spaces, but also in offline spaces. This business is quite considerable in scale and is expected to expand further.

The success of the Biaoqingbao financial economy relies on the development of technology, e.g. affordances of WeChat and mobile payment technology. During the development of the Biaoqing financial economy, Biaoqing users and infrastructure providers (e.g. WeChat) influence each other. For instance, people's reactions to Biaoqing on Sticker Gallery promote WeChat to reform the marketplace and payment policies. The whole Chinese society is the ground for the development of the Biaoqing financial economy. The traditions, habits and cultures in this society are an invisible power which to a great degree shapes the special practices, such as Reward, Red Packet and *dǎ shǎng*.

8.2.2 Fame economy

Not all Biaoqingbao contributors make Biaoqing for the purpose of making money. Quite many of them do it for fame, especially movie and teleplay stars and IP hatching companies (e.g. Block 12 Culture). They create Biaoqingbao to gain fame and publicity, which will bring them benefits in other fields (Hou Mingyi, 2018). In the fame economy of Biaoqingbao, two types of Biaoqingbao contributors will be introduced, i.e. celebrities and Biaoqing designers.

Celebrities

In this chapter, celebrities refer to public figures, including but not exclusive to movie and teleplay stars, singers, TV program hosts, etc. Political figures also fall in this category. As focusing on political figures would sidetrack the argument, they will not be discussed here, but will be addressed in detail in Section 8.3.

To understand celebrity Biaoqingbao, some rudimentary knowledge of the history of celebrity Biaoqingbao on Chinese social media is necessary. Celebrity Biaoqing are originally made by anti-fans, i.e. people who dislike a certain celebrity. Anything about the celebrities might be taken by anti-fans to make Biaoqing. For instance, the unflattering images of Taiwan singer Jolin Tsai (蔡依林) and the nonstandard English pronunciation of singer Huang Zitao (黄子韬)³¹¹ have become fodder for anti-fan Biaoqing (see Figure 8.6). The Biaoqing made by anti-fans often go viral through various social media.



Figure 8.6 Examples of Biaoqing made by anti-fans of Jolin Tsai and Huang Zitao

³¹¹ In one of his concerts, Huang Zitao performed impromptu singing. One line of the lyric is '我不会就这样轻易地 go die' (I won't so easily go die). As he blended English with Chinese, the pronunciation of 'go die', which came immediately after Chinese, sounds very much like two Chinese characters 狗带 (*gǒu dài*, literally meaning dog and belt respectively).

As a counterattack to anti-fans, fans also resort to Biaoqing to express their admiration for their idols. For instance, fans of Chinese actress Zhao Liying (赵丽颖) make many sweet and cute Biaoqing from her pictures (see Figure 8.7). Biaoqing made by fans also spread to and become popular among the general public.



Figure 8.7 Examples of Biaoqing made by fans of Zhao Liying

The practice of making Biaoqing out of pictures of celebrities has become popular among the general public, especially among the young generation. Exaggerating and/or outstanding performances in TV dramas for example have become raw material for celebrity Biaoqing. For instance, the conspicuous nostrils of actor Zhou Jie, the exaggerated roaring facial expressions of actor Ma Jingtao, the listless slouch of actor Ge You, and the hostile face of actor and singer Jacky Cheung have all become popular elements in Biaoqing (see Figure 8.8 and Section 3.1). People churn out celebrity Biaoqing by superimposing various texts on their pictures. Besides being funny and humorous, these celebrity Biaoqing are all made for the purpose of projecting the emotions and daily life of people. Though the emotions and life situations presented in these Biaoqing are often opposite to what is widely perceived as success in society, they constitute an outlet of people's pent-up stress. For this reason, these celebrity Biaoqing are extraordinarily popular, and consequently greatly increase the publicity of the celebrities, though many of them are already quite well-known in China.



Figure 8.8 Examples of celebrity Biaoqing by the general public

After the brief introduction of the history of celebrity Biaoqing, now let's go on with their latest development. With the development and increasing influence of WeChat among Chinese people, Biaoqing on WeChat are being used more and more frequently. When WeChat invited some celebrities to contribute Biaoqingbao, they gladly accepted the invitation. Celebrity Biaoqing, which have become a highlight on WeChat Sticker Gallery, infiltrate social media through the enthusiastic Biaoqing practices of fans. Celebrity

Biaoqing are quite well received by the general public, and consequently the celebrities gain much more publicity. A good example is singer Gloria Tang Tsz-kei (邓紫棋), who is well-known in China. With the release of her Biaoqingbao, which was downloaded 2.8 million times within 30 days after its release and used 500 million times within half a year, Gloria Tang Tsz-kei has become much better-known via the spread of her WeChat Biaoqing. After the success of the first Biaoqingbao, Gloria Tang Tsz-kei has released a second one, featuring cuteness and warmth, which is expected to narrow down the distance between Gloria Tang Tsz-kei and her fans, or potential fans.

The publicity-gaining effect of celebrity Biaoqingbao on WeChat is attracting increasing attention and investments. Celebrities not only shoot pictures specifically for Biaoqingbao, but also give permission to use pictures of their performance in teleplays or movies to make Biaoqingbao. There is also a trend to outsource the task of making Biaoqingbao to professionals. Besides celebrities, teams of TV shows and teleplays have also begun to contribute Biaoqingbao to WeChat. On Sticker Gallery, there is a Biaoqingbao theming the then popular teleplay *Nothing Gold Can Stay* (那年花开月正圆) broadcasted from August 30 to October 8, 2017 on Jiangsu Television (江苏卫视), a channel which broadcasts from Nanjing in Jiangsu Province. This Biaoqingbao was made by the artist Cute Lychee (荔枝萌萌哒) who designs Biaoqingbao exclusively for entertainment programs and teleplays of Jiangsu Television under its authorization (see Figure 8.9). As the logo of Jiangsu Television resembles a lychee, Jiangsu Television is nicknamed Lychee Television (荔枝台), and thus comes the name of the Biaoqing artist 'Cute Lychee', who might be an individual or a team. Here we see that Biaoqing making practices are crossing over the individual sphere to an industrial sphere, in this case the entertainment industry.

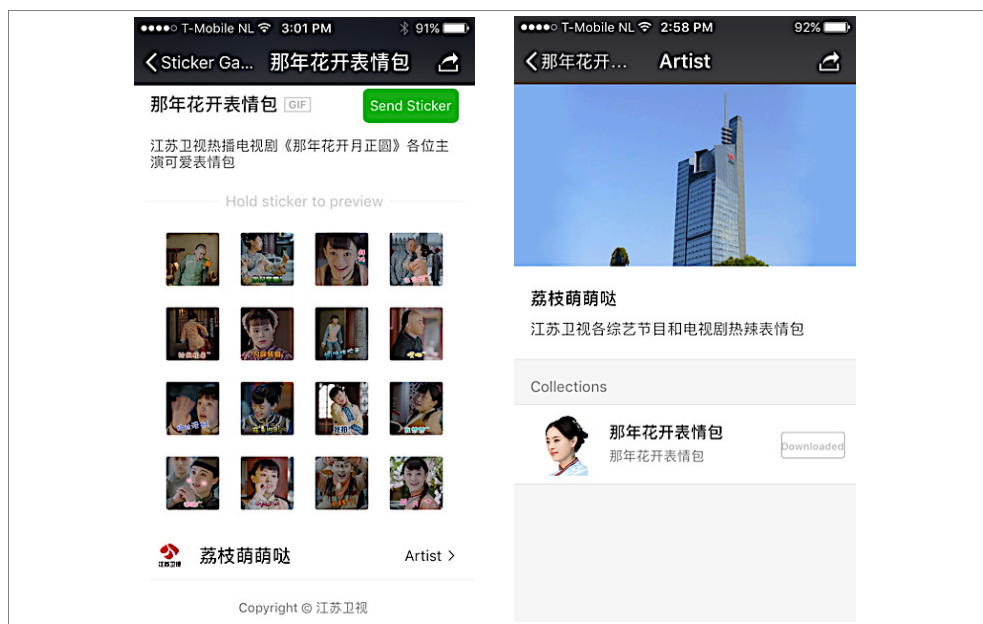


Figure 8.9 Biaoqingbao of *Nothing Gold Can Stay* and the homepage of the artist

This is only one of the numerous Biaoqingbao on Sticker Gallery contributed by the entertainment industry for the purpose of gaining publicity. In some cases, what is gained is popularity of the TV programs or teleplays; in others, it is the increased publicity of the celebrities, or more support for the celebrity among anti-fans. For instance, in the case of Huang Zitao, some of his anti-fans, after using his Biaoqing, became his fans.

In the fame economy of Biaoqingbao, celebrities and their teams, TV programs and entertainment corporations invest considerable amounts of time and energy in making Biaoqing. In return, they gain more publicity and popularity, i.e. fame, which is expected to bring in benefits in other fields, for instance, more roles, a wider audience, and thus more income.

Biaoqing designers

Celebrities are not the only group who contribute Biaoqingbao in return for fame. Some Biaoqing designers (or artists), both professional and amateur, invest their time, energy and creativity to make Biaoqingbao in return for fame. But for them, fame means something different than in the case of celebrities. For Biaoqing designers, fame might be in the form of the popularity of the cartoon figures they have created, the satisfaction after they complete a Biaoqingbao, or a sense of achievement when their Biaoqing are widely used. In this part, cases of both professional and amateur Biaoqing designers will be analyzed to illustrate the fame economy of Biaoqingbao.

A most prominent example of professional Biaoqing designers is Wu Zewu (吴泽武), who creates the Biaoqingbao figure of Mushroom Hairstyle (see Figure 8.10). Wu is a cartoonist and the founder of Mosquito Cartoon (蚊子动漫). His masterwork is *Xiao Yuer's Life* (小鱼儿生活记), the protagonist of which is a boy with mushroom hairstyle (see Figure 8.10).

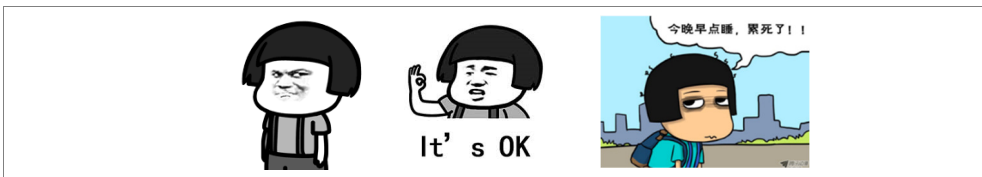


Figure 8.10 Two Biaoqing of Mushroom Hairstyle, and the protagonist in Wu's comic *Xiao Yuer's Life*

When Wu first began this serial comic in January 2014, it was not popular. To gain publicity for his comic, Wu came up with the idea of designing a QQ Biaoqingbao featuring Xiao Yuer, the protagonist of his comic. His Biaoqingbao, which was downloaded only 300,000 times, far below the average download (1 million times), did not work as well as he expected in boosting the popularity of his serial comic. Wu continued to struggle with getting funds for his comic and at the same time trying various ways to increase the publicity of Xiao Yuer. In 2015, Wu decided to give Biaoqingbao another try. But this time, instead of making it very delicate, Wu opted for a simple and seemingly coarsely made figure, the Mushroom Hairstyle. The simple coarse style of the Biaoqing and the integration of funny and mischievous texts made Mushroom Hairstyle Biaoqingbao a great hit

on social media. Then Wu and his team began to focus on designing more Mushroom Hairstyle Biaoqing, uploading them on various social media, including QQ, WeChat and Weibo. The popularity of the Mushroom Hairstyle Biaoqingbao won Mosquito Cartoon over 100,000 followers on Weibo. The resulting boosted publicity helped Wu and Mosquito Cartoon win enough funding to continue their serial comic. The motivation for Wu and his team to design Mushroom Hairstyle Biaoqingbao is to gain publicity and popularity for the protagonist in their comic. Wu is not the only one who designs Biaoqing for this purpose. Other artists such as Block 12 Culture also resort to Biaoqing to promote the figures/images they have designed.

Different from Wu and Block 12 Culture, PDB designs Biaoqingbao for a different purpose (see Section 5.2.2). PDB designs three posh Biaoqingbao featuring paintings from the Middle Ages and contributes them to WeChat Sticker Gallery. For each Biaoqingbao, PDB writes an article to give detailed explanation of the creation process and the stories behind each Biaoqing. In her articles, PDB mentions that the Biaoqingbao are designed on the basis of her need to let out her emotions, but the most direct reason is to try out novel ways of interacting with her fans and at the same time share the Biaoqingbao with them. PDB explicitly says that she designs the Biaoqingbao for her audience as a bonus. The motivation for PDB to design Biaoqingbao and share them on social media (e.g. WeChat and Weibo) is to enhance her status as an instructor in her community,³¹² to demonstrate her capacity, and to maintain her status of a knowledgeable person in the community.

Some artists design and share Biaoqingbao in return for a much more subtle type of fame. They are mostly amateur Biaoqing designers, though many of them may have studied drawing, or work as illustrators. They are not public figures, nor famous IP holders, and thus have no fan base. Rewards and Red Packets to their Biaoqingbao are largely based on charity, i.e. they might get paid for their creative labor or they might not. For this reason, designing Biaoqingbao would not be a reliable source of income, and consequently most of them decide to be amateur instead of full time Biaoqingbao designers.³¹³ Most of them design Biaoqingbao for fun, for entertainment, for their own interest, or for some fulfilment. Some of the most popular Biaoqingbao figures are designed by amateur Biaoqingbao artists, for instance the Well-Behaved Baby (乖巧小人) and Corgi Mushroom (冬菇老司基)³¹⁴ (see Figure 8.11).

³¹² PDB is a guest writer of Shiwuyan (十五言), a community focusing on writing and reading. She is also a self-media editor, writing articles for her own WeChat official account 植梦书 under the account salmon_123. Retrieved from https://www.weibo.com/p/1005051909318602/info?mod=pedit_more on October 15, 2017.

³¹³ There are for sure exceptions. Biaoqingbao designer Qunqing (群青是也), who had no fans, experienced hard times when she received less than ¥10 of Reward per day on Sticker Gallery. Seriously dispirited, she decided to end her Biaoqingbao career with a series of Biaoqing reflecting her desperation. But surprisingly her *Desperate Small Person* Biaoqingbao became a hit and won her ¥5000 Reward. This unexpected success brought her hope, and finally she pulled through the rough patch and continued her Biaoqingbao career. Retrieved from <https://www.zhihu.com/question/60341521> on October 15, 2017.

³¹⁴ 冬菇 (Mushroom) is the name of the dog. The dog is a corgi, the Chinese for which is 柯基. 老司基 pronounces the same as 老司机 (skilled driver). The term 老司机 originates from a Yunnan Province folk song *The Skilled Driver with Me* (老司机带带我), which is loaded with undisguised vulgar and erotic



Figure 8.11 Examples of Biaoqing of Well-Behaved Baby and Corgi Mushroom

Well-Behaved Baby, designed by animator Chao Neng (超能), had accumulated over 30,000 times of Reward on WeChat by December 2016, and had been promoted to Hot Picks on Sticker Gallery for quite a while. According to Chao Neng, he designed Biaoqingbao as a means of self-entertainment. The Biaoqingbao of Well-Behaved Baby are so popular and so handsomely rewarded that Chao Neng later decided to quit his job and work full time as a Biaoqingbao designer.³¹⁵

May, an illustrator, created the Corgi Mushroom Biaoqingbao. According to May, she was inspired by other people who use pictures of their pets for Doutu. May designed Biaoqingbao on the basis of pictures of her corgi called Mushroom, and her Biaoqingbao became a hit in a community of corgi lovers. When other corgi owners request May to make Biaoqing for their pets, she would gladly help. For May, it does not matter if her Biaoqingbao does not become popular. At least she would have a Biaoqingbao specifically for her pet.³¹⁶ The data collected for this research show that a related practice is parents making Biaoqing out of pictures of their children, which are mainly for circulation among family members or intimate groups.

Quite a few designers share their Biaoqingbao-making experience on Zhihu, a Q&A forum.³¹⁷ Some designers share their feelings and attitudes towards the general public's reaction to their Biaoqingbao. For designer Xiaoqiaopi, simply seeing her Biaoqingbao released on Sticker Gallery makes her wild with joy, because it is her first formal design, though it is only a Biaoqingbao. According to designer Sunny, 2,900 people downloaded her Biaoqingbao on the first day after its release, which is very encouraging for an amateur who makes Biaoqingbao as a hobby. By August 6, 2017, she had already received several hundred RMB Reward from WeChat users. Though it is not much money, it gives her more motivation to continue designing Biaoqingbao, and it brings her fulfilment. For

insinuations, for video of the song see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=catt0U_CkY. 老司机 has become a neologism on Chinese social media, referring to people who are savvy in specific fields, especially people who share erotic pictures or videos on online forums, and the practice of sharing such resources is referred to as 发车 (depart) or 开车 (pull out). Retrieved from <https://baike.baidu.com/item/老司机/19298122> on November 8, 2017. The title of the Biaoqingbao 冬菇老司机, with the '老司机' substituted by '老司基', is a pun, pointing to the fact that the dog Mushroom is naughty and dirty, and that the dog is a corgi (柯基).

³¹⁵ Retrieved from <http://www.myzaker.com/article/5855ff7f1bc8e0673a0000cb> on October 15, 2017.

³¹⁶ Retrieved from <http://pic.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0420/c1016-29224740.html> on October 12, 2017.

³¹⁷ The experiences shared by the designers Sunny, Qunqing (群青是也), KBchen and Juechen (绝尘小碎步) were retrieved from <https://www.zhihu.com/question/60341521> on October 15, 2017. The experiences shared by the designers Xiaoqiaopi (小俏皮) and Hexx (何zx) were retrieved from <https://www.zhihu.com/question/43601794> on October 15, 2017. The experiences shared by the designer Lala (辣辣) were retrieved from <https://www.zhihu.com/question/21680863> on October 15, 2017.

designer Lala, what makes her happiest with her Biaoqingbao *Spicy Girl* (辣小丫) is that for the first time she receives Reward from strangers.³¹⁸ Though Lala would not rely on making Biaoqingbao for a living, receiving Reward for her design is an amazing experience, because, in her opinion, that means recognition of her value. According to designer Hezx, her Biaoqingbao was downloaded over 10,000 times within two days of its release. Though it is not a considerable number on Sticker Gallery, the thought that so many people are using her Biaoqingbao makes her feel very happy.

Some designers mention the reasons and/or motions for them to design Biaoqingbao. For instance, according to KBchen and Juechen, the motivation for them to design Biaoqingbao is to have a Biaoqingbao of their own on Sticker Gallery. For Hezx, she decides to design her own Biaoqingbao because there are many occasions where she could not find the Biaoqing she wants, and besides this, she enjoys drawing. There are also designers who make Biaoqingbao because there are people who are expecting their design.

The fact that Biaoqing designers not only publish their Biaoqingbao on Sticker Gallery but also answer questions on Zhihu, a Q&A forum, to share their experience in making Biaoqingbao, which they have no obligation to do at all, is also very telling of the fame they expect in return. They explicitly say that they are driven by their interest, and when they receive Reward they feel encouraged and recognized by others. When they are designing Biaoqingbao, they are not quite clear about what exactly they would get in return, but they are quite sure that they expect others to use their Biaoqing, from which they get a sense of self-fulfillment. In spite of all the uncertainties, they design Biaoqingbao for the value and fun, which points to their ludic attitude towards this practice. The actions of Biaoqingbao designers (designing, sharing Biaoqing and Biaoqing design experiences) and followers (giving monetary Reward) are in essence ludic practices performed in a ludic frame. The Reward can be seen as a ludic transaction, a light remuneration in return for fun, happiness and identity.

Both professional and amateur Biaoqing designers expect fame in return for their Biaoqing, though the fame has different meanings for them. Their expectations might be materialized to different degrees and perceived differently by different designers. The pursuit of publicity, popularity, authority, status, recognition, self-fulfillment, etc., in one word, fame, is a powerful motivation for Biaoqing designers to keep on contributing their time, energy and originality to creating Biaoqing, and thus endlessly injecting vigor, diversity and life to the economy of Biaoqingbao.

8.2.3 Attention economy

There is some overlap between fame and attention, both entailing the expectation of adoration from others. In this research, I differentiate the two from the perspective of stance: the former is from the stance of Biaoqing designers and contributors, while the

³¹⁸ For many amateur Biaoqing designers, when their Biaoqingbao are released on Sticker Gallery, their family and friends would Reward them as an expression of encouragement or moral support.

latter is from the stance of Biaoqing users. The attention economy of Biaoqingbao is dependent on the sociocultural indexicalities of Biaoqing, which is an important part of pop culture, a symbol of being in step with sociocultural developments, a marker of open-mindedness, and an indicator of resourcefulness, as discussed in Chapters 3-6. The various micro-hegemonic identities and qualities indexed by Biaoqingbao are what Biaoqing users want others to recognize in them.

The fact that a person has and uses certain Biaoqing is an indicator of identities such as being a fan of celebrities, a trend-setting or fashionable person, or a person knowledgeable of pop culture, etc. For example, in the case of posh Biaoqingbao discussed in Chapter 5, a Weibo user reposts the posh Biaoqingbao as it is, not for sharing it, but for marking her high taste (see 1 in Figure 8.12). For her, this posh Biaoqingbao is far more than merely a Biaoqingbao. It is also an embodiment of her high taste, which distinguishes her from the 'mediocre' and the 'ordinary'.

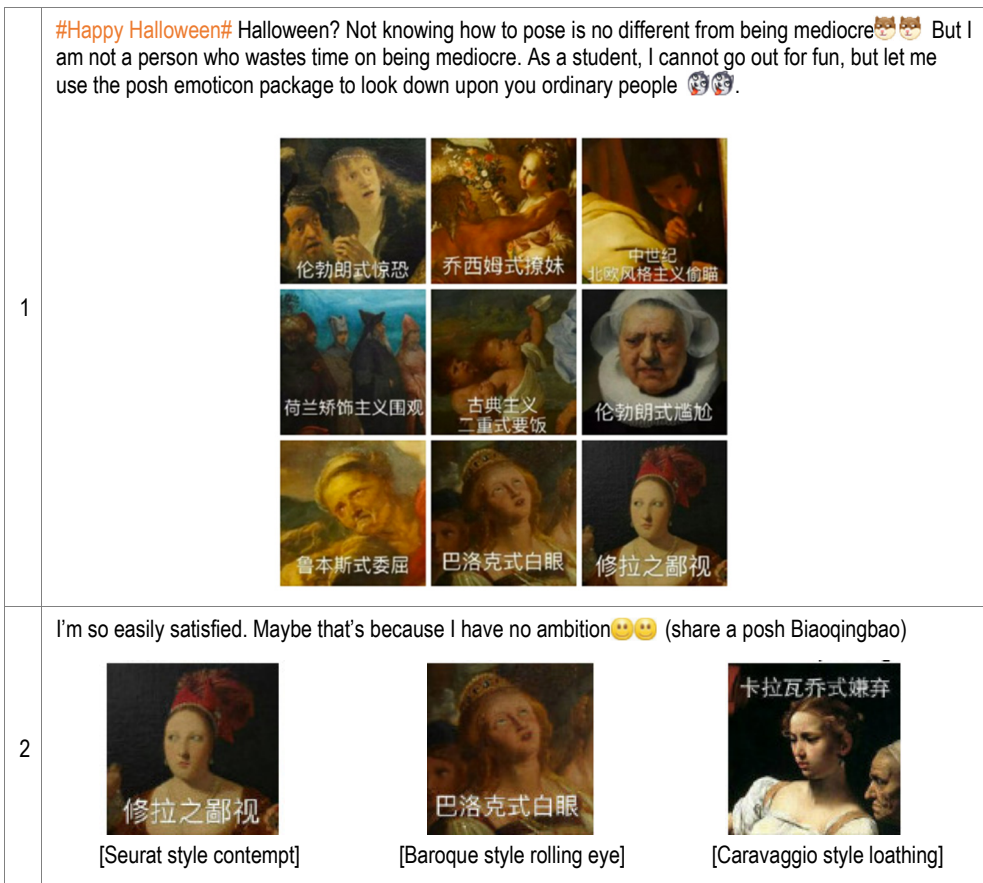


Figure 8.12 Two Weibo posts of posh Biaoqingbao (see also Chapter 5)

Another Weibo user writes in her post 'I am so easily satisfied. Maybe that's because I have no ambition'. Immediately following this piece of personal information, she writes 'share a posh Biaoqingbao', which is put in brackets to indicate the subordinate status of this information (see 2 in Figure 8.12). However, on the whole, the Biaoqing are the most salient component in the post. In this case, it seems that the Weibo user is sharing her private feelings, and by the way sharing some posh Biaoqingbao. But in fact, the information value of the Biaoqing is as important as, or more important than, that of her personal feelings, as indicated by the salience of the two parts (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). More interestingly, only three Biaoqing are picked and all of them convey despise and negative opinions. In this post, apart from the text in the brackets to suggest the subordinate status of the Biaoqing, there is no other explicit information about the relationship between the text and the three posh Biaoqing. By attaching the posh Biaoqing to a seemingly irrelevant post, she subtly indicates her high taste and trendiness, and at the same time insinuates that being trendy and of high taste is a piece of cake for her because she can achieve it in an effortless 'by-the-way' manner.

For both Weibo users, they are using the posh Biaoqing to mark their high taste and knowledge of pop culture. Their friends on Weibo are often offline friends or acquaintances. The presence of offline networks in online spaces is an important factor for the attention economy. People will be more willing to present and share information when they know that people they know are there to view or receive the information. The practice of posting about personal life is a means of gaining attention. And the practice of posting the posh Biaoqingbao is to demonstrate their taste and knowledge to their followers and friends, which is in essence a means to gain/attract adoration for themselves. For a more detailed discussion, see Chapter 5.

It is not only individuals who resort to Biaoqing for attention. Some institutions also employ Biaoqing for attention. People's Daily Online (人民网), the mouthpiece of the Communist Party of China, is a representative example of such institutions. As the official news agency of the People's Republic of China, People's Daily Online is expected to report news in a decent, serious and respectable manner. But the official account of People's Daily Online on Weibo often behaves blatantly against this behavioral script. A typical example is a news report on October 2, 2016 (see Figure 8.13).

In this post, two Biaoqing go together with the pictures of the event reported in the news. The two Biaoqing that insinuate sex in a humorous way³¹⁹ are not necessary for the report. The addition of the two Biaoqing arouses heated reaction among viewers in the comment session of the post. Many viewers comment that they are dazzled by the Biaoqing, and their comments are liked by many viewers. Some Weibo users even comment that they come 'only to see the illustrating pictures' (see Figure 8.13).

³¹⁹ In traditional Chinese culture, topics, images, texts related to sex are regarded as vulgar, and it is not proper to expose teenagers to sex-related content. Though progress is being made in sex education, this idea is still deeply rooted in Chinese society. This is why in the second Biaoqing in the post, the senior person covers the eyes of the junior, protecting him from exposure to erotic scenes.

<p>【车停高速隧道盖篷布 疑似“不可描述”😏】1日，重庆高速公路执法人员经过人和隧道时，发现一辆遮布的轿车停在应急停车带，执法人员以为是故障停车，忙下车了解情况。谁知...掀开篷布透过小车窗户，执法人员看到一个小孩正熟睡在副驾驶位置，小车后排，一对男女正赤身裸体“不可描述”。@重庆日报</p> <div></div>	<p>【car covered with tarpaulin and parked in the tunnel of a highway, suspected of “indescribable”³²⁰😏】 On October 1, when a law-enforcement officer of Chongqing³²¹ highway passed a car covered with tarpaulin on an emergency parking strip, he thought the car broke down and stopped to help. Surprisingly...when he lifted the tarpaulin, he saw a child fast asleep on the copilot seat, and a naked couple on the back seat “indescribable”. @Chongqing Daily</p> <p>[Texts on the two Biaoqing: Indescribable! Don't watch, or you'll be blind.]</p>
<p>配图 我服!!!! 很人民网!!!!</p>	<p>Illustrating pictures I'm smashed!!!! So People's Daily Online!!!</p>
<p>“别看！会瞎的！”哈哈，小编，你也太任性了！</p>	<p>“Don't watch! Or you'll be blind!” Haha, editor, you're so willful!</p>
<p>讲真 配图我只服人民网😏😏</p>	<p>To be honest, for illustrating pictures, I'm only smashed by People's Daily Online😏😏</p>
<p>我是来看配图的😏</p>	<p>I'm here only to see the illustrating pictures😏</p>

Figure 8.13 A Weibo post by People's Daily Online and examples of comments to this post³²²

There might be multiple reasons for the editor to add Biaoqing to the news report, for instance, to be humorous, to induce more comments or likes, etc. One of the perspectives to look at this phenomenon is that the official news agency employs Biaoqing, an element of pop culture, to reverse its established rigid image. The deployment of Biaoqing is a means to deliver the message that the official news agency is in step with social developments and popular online culture, and a means to add a tint of humor to the news reports, thus narrowing the distance with the general public. The usage of funny Biaoqing seems not in line with the established criteria for traditional news report norms, but it works very well for People's Daily Online to impress its viewers.

The fact that the news is reported on Weibo, a social media which features interaction between post hosts and followers, means that it is seen as acceptable for the official news agency of the government to use Biaoqing. Through this fact, we can see that social media, with its affordances, regulations, interface organization and target audience, form a chronotope where specific sets of behavioral norms are compelling and other specific

³²⁰ Indescribable (不可描述, *bù kě miáo shù*) is a neologism on Chinese social media since 2016. This term became popular after it was used in a news report of a couple having sex in their car on a highway in Hubei Province. 'Indescribable' is used as a humorous euphemism for sex. Retrieved from <http://www.northtimes.com/bfsk/review/20160427/89243.html> on October 17, 2017.

³²¹ Chongqing is a major city in southwest China.

³²² Retrieved from https://www.weibo.com/2286908003/EaWCo75HC?from=page_1002062286908003_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1565019038390 on October 17, 2017.

norms are accepted. The same genre, for instance news report, when invoked in different chronotopes, is subject to the norms that govern those chronotopes.

Besides the above examples, many people resort to new or novel Biaoqingbao for their daily online communication. The communicative affordance of Biaoqing is of course a reason for this, but not the only reason. There is always, to a greater or lesser degree, the intention to indicate certain personalities, identities or qualities, as manifested in people's self-reports on why they like and use specific Biaoqing and in the observation of scholars (see e.g. Li Guomin, 2016; Liu Hanbo, 2017; Liu Min & Xu Shuai, 2016).

To sum up, in the attention economy of Biaoqingbao, Biaoqing – which have become a trend of vanguard pop culture, a symbol of fashion, and a marker of belonging to the young generation – are employed by the general public as well as by different institutions to mark various identities and thus attract more attention for themselves. In the cases analyzed in this section, we see how the usage of Biaoqing expands from pure conversational or interpersonal interaction genres to genres such as social media post and news report: a central element in the cross-chronotopic phenomena of Biaoqingbao we flagged earlier and need to return to presently.

8.3 Cross-chronotopic phenomena of Biaoqingbao

Biaoqingbao, as part of vanguard pop culture, are loaded with indexicalities to various identities, qualities and characteristics. The use of Biaoqingbao is no longer confined to online communication and online spaces. Their presence has crossed online communication to other activities, and from online spaces to offline spaces. A wide range of practices have derived from Biaoqingbao, and become standardized or conventionalized for (new) communicative situations, or to be more precise, newly derived Biaoqing-related practices are normalized for new chronotopes. This section discusses the cross-chronotopic phenomena of Biaoqingbao in four fields, i.e. merchandise, marketing strategy, education and politics.

8.3.1 Biaoqingbao merchandise

Some Biaoqingbao are so widely used that the figures in them become well known to and welcomed by people. This popularity becomes a selling point for the figures, and they begin to spawn various merchandise, for instance cushions, clothes, keychains, toys, and even food, as has also been discussed in Section 8.2.1.

The fun, cuteness, humor and novelty of Biaoqing are exported to merchandise, and possession of these products takes on similar effects as using and having the latest and most popular Biaoqingbao. The purpose of Biaoqingbao merchandise is not merely to serve as a cushion, a keychain or a schoolbag, but more importantly to serve as a means to index and declare certain identities, for instance fashionable, humorous, open-minded, or in step with the trend etc., as discussed in Section 8.2.3. People are what they buy and what they use (Ahuvia, 2005; Bauman, 2007; Poster, 2004; Veblen, 2005).

In a nutshell, Biaoqingbao step from intangible knowledge products to material knowledge products, i.e. crossing from pure communicative chronotopes to material commercial chronotopes.

8.3.2 Biaoqingbao in marketing strategy

Biaoqingbao, prevalently used on Chinese social media and effective for gaining fame and attracting attention, have also become a rising star in marketing strategy. Marketing practitioners have already provided tips for successful marketing through Biaoqingbao. For instance, the Biaoqing need to be funny and capable of integrating the marketed service/products, fit the situations where the target audience will think of and use the advertised products, and be timely, that is in sync with currently popular topics (He Jun, 2017). As Biaoqingbao feature different figures (e.g. cartoons, stick figures, real people, pets etc.) and have disparate selling points (e.g. celebrities, created figures, texts on Biaoqing, stories recontextualized in Biaoqing), marketing through Biaoqingbao accordingly takes various different forms. In this section, Biaoqingbao marketing practices on three levels will be introduced in detail.

Marketing practices in the entertainment industry

The first form is the marketing for celebrities, teleplays and TV programs. Movie and teleplay stars shoot pictures specifically for Biaoqing, or give permission to use pictures of their performance in movies and teleplays. Marketing teams of teleplays and TV programs, much the same way as celebrities, create Biaoqing with the pictures and footage in their teleplays or programs, for instance the Biaoqingbao of teleplay *Nothing Gold Can Stay* (for more see Section 8.2.2). In this form of Biaoqingbao marketing, the marketed contents are stars, teleplays and TV programs. Sometimes the story in the teleplay or TV program might be recontextualized in a Biaoqing, but this is not so common. The images of celebrities and the roles they play, with distinctive personalities, are more attractive and efficient in gaining publicity, as has been observed in the data of this research and manifested in the observations of journalists (see e.g. "Ge You Slouch", 2016; Qiu Junfeng & Xiong Ying, 2016).

Marketing practices of name brands

Biaoqingbao might be employed by name brand companies for marketing by integrating their products with currently popular Biaoqingbao. A case in point is Durex. In 2016, when the Emotion Shooter Biaoqingbao became viral on social media, Durex drew inspiration from one of the Biaoqing and updated a Weibo post (see the 'love' Biaoqing in Figure 8.14 and the Weibo post in Figure 8.15). In this post, the 'love' Biaoqing and condom are incorporated with each other (see the second and third Biaoqing in Figure 8.15). In the fourth Biaoqing in the post, the Chinese character '套' (condom) is replaced with the stick figure of a condom (see Figure 8.15).

Figure 8.14 Emotion Shooter Biaoqingbao³²³Figure 8.15 The Weibo post by Durex on October 2, 2016³²⁴

To pick up the humor in this post, one needs to know the meanings of 套 (*tào*). 套, used as both verb and noun, literally means cover, harness, knot. Besides these meanings, 套 is also short for 避孕套 (*bì yùn tào*, literally meaning: contraception cover), i.e. condom. In the Weibo post by Durex, 我“套”牢了你的心, the literal meaning of which is 'I lock in your heart', is a pun. “套”牢 in this context has two meanings: first, lock in, hold onto fast; second, secure with condom. And 心 (*xīn*), literally meaning heart, is a symbol of love, and in this context refers to what is supposed to be secured by a condom. This marketing attempt by Durex turns out to be a great success. It not only wins positive comments from people, but also promotes the word ‘杜蕾斯’ (Chinese translation of Durex) to a very visible position on the word cloud of Weibo.³²⁵

The second example of marketing practices of name brands seems quite contingent, but actually is not. I will illustrate this point in detail with an incident featuring Fu Yuanhui (傅园慧), a Chinese competitive female swimmer who specializes in backstroke. In an interview after winning a bronze medal at the 2016 Rio Olympics in the 100-meter backstroke, Fu’s optimistic attitude, trendy expressions and funny facial expressions made her immediately popular on social media. Images of her also became a popular Biaoqing theme (see Figure 8.16).

³²³ Retrieved from the WeChat account of the author on October 18, 2017.

³²⁴ Retrieved from https://www.weibo.com/1942473263/E1IWhD6U1?from=page_1006061942473263_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1565088489532 on October 18, 2017.

³²⁵ Retrieved from <http://www.seeisec.com/index.php/2016/11/01/p9401> on October 18, 2017.

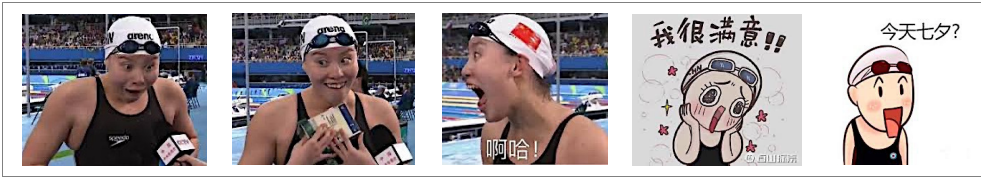


Figure 8.16 Pictures of Fu Yuanhui and examples of Biaoqing featuring her³²⁶

Before the ending of the 2016 Olympics, Fu lost her cell phone and she posted this incident on her Weibo. Later Fu received a tailored cell phone from ZTE, a cell phone producer. The catch line in Fu's interview – 洪荒之力³²⁷ – was printed on the back of the cell phone. Fu posted the picture of the tailored cell phone on her Weibo, which immediately boosted the publicity of ZTE and consequently increased the sales of ZTE cell phones.³²⁸ Though this incident seems quite contingent, the logic is crystal clear. When Fu becomes famous, she becomes a theme for Biaoqingbao and thus a powerful fame and attention magnet. ZTE employs these two selling points and presents her with a tailored cell phone, in exchange for attention and publicity for its brand.

Marketing practices of online sellers

Besides big companies and name brands, online vendors also resort to Biaoqingbao for advertisements. Two interesting examples will be introduced here, one of a Taobao-wang³²⁹ seller, and one of an individual P2P (peer to peer) vendor.

I ran into the Taobaowang case when I was browsing Weibo, where I saw a post updated by a user who shares what he has seen on a Taobaowang store (see Figure 8.17). The word 'peculiar' is used to describe the store for two reasons. First, Biaoqing are integrated into the introduction of the products, which is a novelty on Taobaowang. Second, ridiculous, funny and insulting texts characteristic of Biaoqing are kept, which is blatantly different from normal product introductions which emphasize the good quality of the products and aftersales service, and attribute good taste to the products. The employment of such Biaoqing in product introductions marks the uniqueness of the seller. What is more, these Biaoqing appeal to people who identify themselves as sharp, direct and biting. In this sense, with these Biaoqing, the seller is not only marketing the products, but also marketing the 'peculiar' identity, attitude and style of the online store, which is

³²⁶ Retrieved from <http://image.baidu.com/search/index?tn=baiduimage&ps=1&ct=201326592&lm=-1&cl=2&nc=1&ie=utf-8&word=%E5%82%85%E5%9B%AD%E6%85%A7> on October 18, 2017.

³²⁷ 洪荒之力 (*hóng huāng zhī lì*), which is a relatively obscure expression, means forces that can destroy the universe. In *The Journey of Flower*, a fantasy TV drama broadcasted in China in 2015, 洪荒之力 is used to refer to the most devastating type of supernatural power of the protagonist. The term 洪荒之力 became better known to the general public with the popularity of this TV drama. Retrieved from <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E6%B4%AA%E8%8D%92%E4%B9%8B%E5%8A%9B/19884849> on October 31, 2019.

³²⁸ Retrieved from <http://www.vmarketing.cn/index.php?mod=news&ac=content&id=11220> on October 18, 2017.

³²⁹ Taobaowang (淘宝网, literally: searching-for-treasure network) is a Chinese online shopping website operated by Alibaba Group.

not spelled out in words, but mediated through the Biaoqing. The facts that the Weibo user posts specifically about the peculiarity of this Taobao store and that viewers leave comments such as 'simple and sincere', 'it makes me want to buy some', and 'hahahaha so funny' testify that the Biaoqingbao marketing of this seller is a success.



<p>想买点百香果 某宝搜了一下 突然看到一个画风轻奇的店铺</p> 	<p>I wanted to buy some passion fruit Searched Taobao And found a peculiar store</p>
<p>Hahaha, shithead. How could it be possible that someone buys them.</p> <p>Buy me!</p> <p>It might be that you are blind. Go to the hospital and check your eyesight.</p>	<p>It looks like this when it blooms</p>  <p>Don't you think they are ugly?</p> <p>A friendly smile</p> <p>White blooming jasmine. Potted flower with strong fragrance</p>

Figure 8.17 The Weibo post about the peculiar Taobaowang store and one of its product introductions³³⁰

³³⁰ Retrieved from https://www.weibo.com/2139751672/EzbLPfVta?from=page_1006062139751672_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1565093585074 on October 18, 2017.

I ran into the online P2P vendor case by chance. One day when I was checking the messages in a Doutu group on WeChat, the Biaoqing sent by one of the participants caught my attention, because all her Biaoqing featured teeth (see Figure 8.18). She uses Biaoqing to arouse people's desire for white teeth and thus encourage them to buy her teeth-beautifying products. Another participant in this group quickly picks up the message in the Biaoqing, and asks if she is an online vendor. Later in the communication, she gives a positive answer to the question. Usually when an online vendor sends advertisements to social media groups not devoted to advertisements, the advertisements would encounter a cold silence, or even criticism from participants in the group. But in this case, the Biaoqing advertisements are quite well received in the group, leading to a short and heated but not hostile discussion, mostly about admiration for the novelty of the advertisements.



Figure 8.18 An example of Biaoqingbao marketing by an online vendor³³¹

To sum up, the abovementioned examples show that Biaoqingbao marketing can be very well received by the general public. This practice is being employed on different levels, from famous international companies, to specific industries, and online vendors. This fully illustrates the potential of the fame and attention economy of Biaoqingbao.

The spillover of Biaoqingbao to marketing is a result of the prevalent use of Biaoqing on social media and the popularity of the genre of Biaoqing. This genre is not only about the images and the texts on them. It is more about the qualities, personalities and characters projected in Biaoqing, for instance, cute, straightforward, funny, hilarious, dirty, etc. These qualities and characters, which are usually not valued in traditional marketing, are welcomed by the general public, especially the young generation. The immense size of this audience group makes Biaoqingbao interesting for advertisers and businesses. In

³³¹ Retrieved from the Doutu group on the WeChat account of the author on March 12, 2017.

such a social environment, Biaoqingbao, which are convenient grassroots conduits of certain identities, become an appealing means of novel and effective marketing.

The usage and evaluation norms of Biaoqing are grafted to the field of marketing, resulting in new operational handbooks and behavioral scripts, as illustrated by the tips for Biaoqingbao marketing discussed at the beginning of this section. The newly derived practices still fall in the genre of marketing, but different from any marketing practices before, they constitute a new category of marketing genre. The corollary of this new genre is the establishment of new a chronotope, a time-space configuration governed with specific sets of Biaoqing-related rules and norms.

8.3.3 Biaoqingbao in the field of education

In this section, the term 'education' is used in a broad sense. It refers not only to formal schooling, but also to moral regulations and exhortations by authorities. In this section, two cases of Biaoqing for educational purpose will be used to illustrate the social logic behind this phenomenon.

The first case is about a teacher asking students to answer questions in the final exam with Biaoqingbao. On July 8, 2017, Yangtse Evening Post reported the news about an exam in which students were asked to use Biaoqingbao to express their feelings in different situations (e.g. 'your emotion when you are in the last exam before holiday', 'the feeling of the students sitting around you', 'your feeling when you see these questions', etc.).³³² This exam is for the course 'User Experience and Psychology' at Nanjing University of Information Science & Technology. According to the teacher of this course, Lu Xiaotian, Biaoqing has become an indispensable part of communication on social media, and they are quite relevant to web product design, so he decides to use Biaoqingbao to test students' understanding and knowledge of user experience and psychology. Biaoqingbao, a ludic object, has never been used in exams before. Lu expects to imbue some fun into the final exam for his students.

A Weibo post about this news report goes viral, accumulating 4,636 reposts, 5,668 comments and 31,000 likes (see Figure 8.19). In general, the practice of introducing Biaoqing into the exam is well received on social media, as manifested by the text in the Weibo post 'Internet users are amazed: Please give me a dozen of such exams!' and comments 2-5 in Figure 8.19. The majority of people who are skeptical of this practice are concerned about its validity (see comment 1 in Figure 8.19), which is answered by comment 6 in Figure 8.19. This case shows that educators have noticed the value of Biaoqingbao in everyday life, and are trying to keep in step with the trend of social development in education (see e.g. Tang Jianxun, 2019; Wang Tingting, 2019).

³³² Retrieved from <http://t.yzinter.com/index.php?m=News&a=listcontent&classid=93&id=439028> on October 19, 2017.

<p>【大学#期末考试用表情包答题#👉】8日，@南京信息工程大学 15级数媒专业“用户体验与心理”的期末考试试卷成了网友们关注的焦点。试卷要求用表情包画出考试时的心情和老师的心情等。顿时各种表情包都成了考试答案。网友惊呼：这样的卷子请给我来一打！👉@扬子晚报👉期末考试时你的心情如何？请以表情包表示……南信大期末考试考“斗图”</p>  <p>转发4636 评论5668 赞3.1万</p>		<p>【University #Use Biaoqingbao in the end-term exam #👉】On July 8, @ Nanjing University of Information Science & Technology The end-term exam of the course “User Experience and Psychology” for majors of Digital Media became the focus of attention for internet users. The exam asks the students to express their own and the teacher’s emotions in the exam with Biaoqingbao. Immediately all kinds of Biaoqingbao become answers. Internet users are amazed: Please give me a dozen of such exams! 👉@ Yangtse Evening Post👉 What’s your emotion in an end-term exam? Please express yourself with Biaoqingbao…… “Doutu” in the end-term exam at NUIST</p>	
1	有多少同学心中有答案，可是准备下笔的时候，发现手残，根本画不出来😭👍 691	Many students know the answers, but cannot draw them 😭👍	
2	所有的问题都可以用两个表情回答，没错就是滑稽😂和doge😂👍 373	All the questions can be answered with these two Biaoqing. They are funny😂 and doge😂👍	
3	谁说学理科的情商低，我第一个飞板儿砖！妥妥的逗逼系。👍 19	Who says that science majors have low EQ, I would first disagree! No doubt a funny one.👍	
4	有想法，但是手残的我可不会画，想象力不够😭👍 15	Interesting idea. But I cannot draw, not enough imagination 😭👍	
5	这试卷好潮，好时尚啊👍 10	This exam is so trendy, so fashionable👍	
6	数字媒体是要学手绘的 望周知👍 10	Freehand drawing is compulsory for Digital Media majors FYI👍	


Figure 8.19 A Weibo post about the news report and examples of comments³³³

The second case is the slogans of an anti-wasting-food campaign in Sichuan Agricultural University. Anti-wasting themed Biaoqing are posted at every corner of the dining halls at the university (see Figure 8.20). The figures of currently popular Biaoqingbao, for instance the Mushroom Hairstyle and Panda Man, are used for moral persuasion and exhortation. In this case, there are multiple reasons behind the choice of Biaoqingbao for exhortation. First, they are popular among students, and thus are (more) acceptable to them. Second, in Biaoqing-related genres, rough and hush texts are tolerated and regarded as acceptable or normal. The use of Biaoqing with rude, harsh texts in a moral


³³³ Retrieved from <https://m.weibo.cn/detail/4127519643372950> on October 19, 2017.

campaign (which usually features top-down preaching) creates a sense of thrill and novelty, and might be more effective in persuading the students to save food than traditional exhortative slogans.


被表情包乱入的学校食堂😂这是吃个饭都要斗图的节奏啊……还能不能好好吃个饭了!😂😂😂



Biaoqingbao spotted in university dining halls😂
Seems there would be Douyu even during mealtime……It's impossible to simply enjoy a meal!😂😂😂



Dare you waste food again



How come you left so much food

Figure 8.20 Weibo post about the anti-wasting-food campaign and two examples of the Biaoqing³³⁴

A very interesting point is that both events are posted as uncommon and worth-knowing events on Weibo. This fact points directly to the novelty of the practice of using Biaoqingbao for such occasions. These two cases reflect the fact that Biaoqingbao-derived practices expand far beyond online chatting. Biaoqingbao not only have changed communication patterns/modes online, but also are gradually changing the practices, rules and norms both online and offline. In many cases, Biaoqingbao are not only crossing from one genre to another (e.g. from online chatting to marketing), but also at the same time establishing new genres and thereby new chronotopes (e.g. marketing with Biaoqingbao).

8.3.4 Politics

Politics is another field where the cross-chronotope of Biaoqingbao is worth mentioning. Two cases will be discussed to illustrate the use of Biaoqing as a way of political participation in China. The first case is about the high-speed train crash in Wenzhou, China on

³³⁴ Retrieved from https://www.weibo.com/1731986465/FfSUM8cCj?from=page_1002061731986465_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1565098690628 on October 18, 2017.

July 23, 2011. After the accident, at the press conference on July 24, Wang Yongping (王勇平), then spokesman of the Ministry of Railways,³³⁵ when asked why the crashed train was hastily buried, explained that because there was a mire in the accident location, burying the derailed locomotive would facilitate rescue efforts. This was welcomed with heckling and disbelief by journalists in the conference, which caused Wang to blurt out 'whether you believe or not, I believe anyway' (至于你信不信, 我反正信了).³³⁶ After the press conference, Wang's famous declaration became a theme for Biaoqingbao.

There are Biaoqing featuring the original words of Wang, but with funny images. In the first two in Figure 8.21, Wang's words are superimposed on Panda Man Biaoqing with bitter or embarrassed smile, and these two Biaoqing are often used as response to what impresses people as ridiculous, funny, unbelievable, or helpless. The third Biaoqing depicts Wang as a furious bully who forces his idea on journalists, represented by a tiny, powerless and trembling figure. This Biaoqing is loaded with metaphor and irony, both for Wang and for the Ministry of Railways. In the fourth Biaoqing, a rat is tied up as a criminal with a board hung on his neck stating his wrongdoing: gnawing through the rail track. This Biaoqing airs a different voice than the third one. It compares Wang to a rat, but at the same time points out that he is merely the scapegoat for the tragedy.



Figure 8.21 Examples of Biaoqing spawned by the speech of Wang Yongping³³⁹

³³⁵ Ministry of Railways was dissolved on March 10, 2013, and its duties are taken up by the Ministry of Transport (safety and regulation), National Railways Administration (inspection) and China Railway Corporation (construction and management).

³³⁶ Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xja4UY3SMPE> on November 4, 2016.

³³⁷ The English text in this Biaoqing "negative positive" is a literal translation of '反正' (meaning anyway). This literal transliteration which does not convey the original meaning creates a funny or humorous effect.

³³⁸ The original words of Wang are '我反正信了' (I anyway believe), but in some Biaoqing inspired by Wang, the text is '反正我信了' (anyway I believe). The two express the same meaning.

³³⁹ Retrieved from <http://image.baidu.com/search/index?tn=baiduimage&ct=201326592&lm=-1&cl=2&nc=1&ie=utf-8&word=%E8%87%B3%E4%BA%8E%E4%BD%A0%E4%BB%AC%E4%BF%A1%E4%B8%8D%E4%BF%A1%E4%BC%8C%E6%88%91%E5%8F%8D%E6%AD%A3%E4%BF%A1%E4%BA%86> on October 17, 2017.

In China, the general public have limited direct participation in politics (e.g. policy making, election of government officials and people's representatives), and consequently many voices from common citizens are to some degree muffled (Du Caixia, 2016; Liang Shuming, 2005; Wu Guoguang, 2015). But the internet and social media are powerful infrastructures to change this situation, maybe not fundamentally but at least to some extent. As Biaoqingbao is a popular and widely accepted grassroots genre, it is naturally taken as the carrier of social voices from the general public. The massive user base of Biaoqing and tolerance of hush and ironic texts are important factors for Biaoqingbao to serve as a means of political participation.

This is not the only case where Biaoqingbao are used as a means of political participation. On September 5, 2017, a mainland student tore away the slogans advocating independence of Hong Kong from the Democracy Wall of the Chinese University of Hong Kong. When this news went viral, other mainland students printed out Biaoqing to respond to the advocacy of Hong Kong independence. These Biaoqing are posted on top of the Hong Kong independence slogans (see Figure 8.22), and they mostly assume a superior position to independence advocates and are dismissive towards the slogans (see Figure 6.14).



Figure 8.22 A Weibo post about the Biaoqingbao Battle on the Democracy Wall of the Chinese University of Hong Kong³⁴⁰

In this case, Biaoqingbao is used to express political opinions not merely because of its popularity among internet users, but also because of the ludic essence of this genre and the affordance of the internet infrastructures (for detailed discussion see Section 6.4.3).

The political system in China determines the limited direct political participation of the general public (Du Caixia, 2016; Liang Shuming, 2005; Wu Guoguang, 2015). The Chinese general public has been searching and trying various ways of making their voices heard. One of the efforts is to resort to Biaoqingbao to express their political opinions (Wang Xiaofeng, 2019; Yu Xiaodong & Huang Yayin, 2016). Biaoqingbao is chosen because this genre has a huge user base, which ensures the wide spread of the voices, and it is ludic, which entails that the voices should be taken seriously but not too seriously. Besides these two features, the newness and novelty of Biaoqingbao also contribute to

³⁴⁰ Retrieved from https://www.weibo.com/1746575865/FkHTlaot9?from=page_1005051746575865_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1565118602370 on October 18, 2017.

the effectiveness and influence of the voices. In this sense, the ludic is becoming political. These ludic practices of political participation show how the actions of people break out of Biaoqing-related communicative chronotopes and shape new chronotopes for political participation.

8.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, three sectors of the Biaoqingbao economy, i.e. finance, fame and attention, were discussed. The three sectors all develop on the basis of necessary infrastructures, such as the internet, social media, smart terminals, Biaoqing-making software/apps, etc., which make online communication possible and make Biaoqingbao popular. They inter-relate with and mutually contribute to one another.

Besides the infrastructure, the indexicalities of the genre of Biaoqing, and the indexicalities of different types of Biaoqing are the most important reasons behind the popularity of Biaoqing. As a grassroots genre, Biaoqing and Biaoqingbao are originally designed to make online communication more face-to-face like, and to add more fun to online communication. This determines the ludic nature of Biaoqing and Biaoqing-related genres. With the development of technology, innovation of various social media and affordances of Biaoqing-making apps, people have explored and found more use of Biaoqing, for instance, bantering, Doutu, irony, political participation, etc. These further developments of Biaoqing precipitate and consolidate the ludic essence of the Biaoqing usage norms.

The newly developed Biaoqing practices, governed with specific norms, become standardized and thus become new genres, which automatically entail new chronotopes. Biaoqingbao not only play an important role in online communication, but also begin to exert increasing influence on other online sectors and various aspects of offline spaces. The virality and attention-attracting potential of Biaoqing, the ludic essence of Biaoqing-related genres, and the social ethos behind the cross-chronotopic phenomena of Biaoqingbao (especially in the field of marketing and politics) all manifest this point.

In this chapter, we have seen that, under the influence of other chronotopes, grassroots Biaoqing activities can easily cross 'pure' Biaoqing chronotopes. Biaoqing activities have created specific new publics, or communities. And all of this is based on actions.

CHAPTER 9

Biaoqingbao hatched economic practices

9.1 Introduction

Chapter 8 has discussed how Biaoqing bring in money, fame and attention, and the cross-chronotopic phenomena of Biaoqingbao. The figures in some Biaoqingbao even become idols for people. Once new Biaoqingbao are published in Sticker Gallery on WeChat, they are warmly applauded and handsomely Rewarded by users, or their fans. It is very interesting that people willingly pay when they can get Biaoqingbao featuring their idol figures for free. For some designers, their Biaoqing are so lucrative that they make Biaoqingbao their career. This was quite unimaginable even when I started working on this research in 2015.



Biaoqingbao has spawned new types of economic practices on Chinese social media, especially on WeChat. The purpose of this chapter is to investigate the reasons behind these new economic practices, i.e. the reasons behind the cross-chronotopic phenomena in the financial economy of Biaoqingbao. To be more specific, I will investigate why people willingly spend money on free Biaoqingbao. To answer this question, it is necessary to find out what in the Biaoqing figures and their Biaoqingbao attracts users so much that they willingly and voluntarily open their wallets.

For this purpose, I closely follow fan-communities of idolized Biaoqing figures. Among the numerous idolized Biaoqingbao figures, Eggy, a cat, and Budding Pop, a cartoon image, are chosen as examples for three reasons. First, they are two of the top Biaoqingbao on WeChat, which means that they are among the most popular ones in the Biaoqing market. Second, they have generated fan communities, and are capable of attracting Reward on WeChat and attracting buyers through merchandise.³⁴¹ Third, the two figures represent different types in terms of fan-group formation. Information of the two Biaoqing figures is presented in Table 9.1.

In this chapter, I will follow fans' actions and opinions in the two Biaoqingbao communities to find out why and how the two Biaoqing figures can bring handsome revenue for their designers.

³⁴¹ The exact revenue generated by the figures is not accessible. They are chosen on the basis of their presence on various social media (many of which involve payment or reward functions), for instance WeChat, Taobao, Weibo, TikTok (a short video sharing and making app, with online store function).

Table 9.1 Information on Eggy and Budding Pop Biaoqingbao

	Eggy	Budding Pop
Idolized Biaoqing figure		
Creation time	2016	2013
Initial platform of popularity	WeChat	Weibo
Designer	Individual	First individual, now group
Major active social media	WeChat, Weibo, TikTok, Taobao	WeChat, Weibo, TikTok, Taobao

9.2 The fan community of Eggy Biaoqingbao

9.2.1 Eggy Biaoqingbao

The figure of Eggy, known as Happy before December 2017, was originally created in 2014 by Li Weiyl (李纬一) to test the functioning of a cartoon-making software. After being posted on Weibo and zcool.com.cn (a Chinese social media catering to communication among designers), the GIFs featuring Eggy were warmly received on both platforms, reposted 1,593 times on the former and viewed 5,796 times on the latter. However, the Biaoqingbao of Eggy did not come into being until two years later when Li, who quit his job and became a freelancer, picked up the creation of Eggy and began to focus on it. In February 2016, Li published the first Eggy Biaoqingbao on WeChat Sticker Gallery, and immediately Eggy won great popularity. The first Eggy Biaoqingbao was liked by WeChat users so much that they generously rewarded it more than 6,000 times, amounting to at least ¥12,000 (€1,536).³⁴² Since then, Li regularly publishes Eggy Biaoqingbao on WeChat. At the time this chapter was being written (September 2018), there were already 14 Eggy Biaoqingbao.

Along with the creation of Eggy Biaoqingbao, Li added other figures. In December 2016, Popo, Eggy's roommate and girlfriend, was introduced; and in December 2017, Daimi, Eggy's cousin appeared. In the Eggy Biaoqingbao, the three cats often appear together, especially Eggy and Popo (see Figure 9.1).

³⁴² According to the official statistics of WeChat, the average is ¥2.02 per Reward. Retrieved from <http://media.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0406/c40606-28252394.html> on December 15, 2018.



Figure 9.1 Examples of Egg Biaoqing before and after the introduction of Popo and Daimi³⁴³

To find out how and why fans’ wallets are willingly opened for Egg, Li’s Weibo posts, WeChat official account articles and Biaoqingbao, including the actions of fans (e.g. comment, like, repost, share, reward), are closely followed and analyzed. WeChat official account articles are used for announcing the publication of new Biaoqingbao, sharing Egg profile pictures and cell phone wallpaper. Weibo posts, besides broadcasting new Biaoqingbao and sharing computer wallpaper, are used for collecting opinions and ideas from fans, telling small stories of Egg and Popo, and publishing information about merchandise. Li’s WeChat official account did not have a comment function until January 2017. That is why he resorted to Weibo, the comment function of which is full-fledged, for better communication with fans. Restricted by the affordances of the platforms, fans may perform different actions on the two social media. For this reason, both platforms are chosen as data collection sites. The collected data are presented in Table 9.2.

Table 9.2 Data of Egg Biaoqingbao

Platform	N	Fan action
WeChat official account articles ³⁴⁴	91	Comment, view, like
Weibo posts ³⁴⁵	108	Comment, repost, like
Biaoqingbao on WeChat Sticker Gallery ³⁴⁶	14	Reward, download

³⁴³ Retrieved from the WeChat account of the author on November 10, 2017.
³⁴⁴ Retrieved from https://mp.weixin.qq.com/mp/profile_ext?action=home&__biz=MzA4MjgyNjY0OQ==&scene=124#wechat_redirect on September 13-19, 2018.
³⁴⁵ Retrieved from https://www.weibo.com/kaixinmaoleyuan?is_all=1 on September 18-20, 2018.
³⁴⁶ Retrieved from the WeChat account of the author on September 13-20, 2018.

There are several types of action on each platform, but not every action is followed in the case study. To answer the research question, comments of fans are followed to collect information, including their feelings and attitudes towards the Biaoqing, and their stories related to the Biaoqing, all of which are revealing of what happens in the fan community.

9.2.2 Fans' description of the cats and their Biaoqing

Fans rarely comment on the Biaoqing, and the majority focus on the figures of the Biaoqing, i.e. the cats. Cute (可爱) and *méng* (萌)³⁴⁷ are the most-used descriptions, which are the defining characteristics omnipresent in every Biaoqing of Eggy, Popo and Daimi. Other descriptions for Eggy include charming, soft, super, lovely, funny and naughty (see comments 1-7 in Figure 9.2). The temperament of Eggy is not static and flat, but dynamic and multifaceted. In different Biaoqingbao, Eggy demonstrates different traits; sometimes cute, sometimes naughty, sometimes sweet, and sometimes romantic (see comments 8-12 in Figure 9.2).

1	蛋黄（开心）猫是只有超有魅力的喵，男女老少通吃	Eggy (Happy) is a super charming cat. Everyone likes it, male and female, young and old
2	软萌软萌的	Soft and <i>méng</i>
3	最爱蛋黄猫～形象生动又呆萌可爱	Love Eggy the most~ His image is vivid, nerdy, <i>méng</i> and cute
4	超乖超赞的蛋黄，非常可爱了	Super lovely Eggy. Very cute
5	蛋黄猫好像小仙女家的智障 哇咔咔	Eggy is like a silly cat of a fairy, hahahaha
6	蛋黄是戏精，那小表情，没谁了，超级喜欢。	Eggy is so good at performing. His facial expressions, nobody is his equal. Super like him.
7	开心总是在挨打的边缘试探 然后成功挨打	Happy always testing the limit, and then succeeds in annoying [Popo]
8	谁让你这么帅呢，你都不知道，你弹琴的姿势是那么的优美，就连你发飙的表情都是这么酷，爱你	Why you are so handsome. You don't know that the way you play piano is so beautiful. Even when you get angry, your expression is so cool. Love you
9	从第一期到现在这么多的惊喜，可爱的它，霸气的它，闷骚的它，得瑟的它，萌萌的它	Since the first Biaoqingbao till now, there have been so many surprises. Cute Eggy, manly Eggy, dirty Eggy, bragging Eggy, and <i>méng</i> Eggy
10	感觉蛋黄猫变得更天真可爱了，是和噗噗的爱情带来的单纯美好喵	I feel that Eggy has become more innocent and cuter. It's the result of the sweet and pure love with Popo
11	这一期开心从邪魅路线重回呆萌小样儿	This time Happy returns from the enigmatic style to the nerdy <i>méng</i> style
12	用了那么多季的表情包，那天我老公忽然跟我说：你有没有发现蛋黄原来是一只主人的宠物猫，后来有了噗噗以后就成精了	After so many Biaoqingbao, one day my husband suddenly told me: Eggy used to be a pet, but after he got Popo, he became a cat with a human soul

Figure 9.2 Examples of descriptions of Eggy's characteristics

³⁴⁷ In Chinese, 萌 (*méng*) is synonymous with 可爱 (*kě ài*, cute). In the translation of comments, *méng* is used to translate the neologism 萌, and cute to translate 可爱.

The multifaceted nature of the image of Eggy, and the changing characteristics and themes of different Eggy Biaoqingbao are important reasons why fans follow Eggy. Knowing that the next Biaoqingbao might provide Biaoqing that suit them better than the previous ones, fans often eagerly wait for the publication of new Eggy Biaoqingbao. And they even take pride in being the first ones to comment, or to give Reward, as shown in the comment of a fan ‘😂😂 busy rewarding, and I failed to be the first one to comment!! Haha, but I am the third to reward!!😍😍’.

Aside from expressing their fondness for Eggy, Popo and Daimi as cats, fans often personify them and ascribe human characteristics to them. For instance, fans treat Eggy as a role model, either for themselves, or for their boyfriends/husbands (see comments 1-4 in Figure 9.3). Some fans see the characteristics and qualities of themselves or their loved ones in the cats (see comments 5-8 in Figure 9.3). For their fans, Eggy, Popo and Daimi are not merely the cartoon figures in Biaoqingbao anymore. They are what their followers want to be, and they are the cartoon version of their fans. In the eyes of the fans, Eggy is a moral model of ‘ideal’ social behavior.

1	每天都要像开心一样乐观，积极向上喔，加油喵！	I will be as optimistic and positive as Happy. Cheer up!
2	你认真工作的样子真的好有魅力和魄力，你温柔而不失霸气，多情而有专情，我从你贱贱的微笑里看到你满满的自信	The way you work hard is so charming. You are gentle and manly, warm-hearted and devoted. I see confidence in your naughty smile
3	蛋黄真是标准的大暖男 我也想要一个这样的男友	Eggy is a super warm boy. I want a boyfriend like him
4	最暖心的就是开心骑着摩托来接噗噗的那一幕，简直融化了我的少女心啊，最简单的浪漫，最单纯的感情，大概就是开心和噗噗为我们诠释的	The warmest is when Happy picks Popo up with his motor. It's almost melting my heart. The simplest romance and the purest feeling are what Happy and Popo show us
5	放屁那个太可爱了，和我老婆一起时简直一摸一样	The Biaoqing of Eggy farting is so cute. Exactly what happened between me and my wife
6	我觉得我家胖子和蛋黄猫长的好像啊，吃东西动作都好像，结果就是蛋黄猫一出表情我就下载	My fatty boy resembles Eggy a lot. Even the way they eat is similar. That's why I download every Eggy Biaoqingbao when it's published
7	啊呀呀，我可爱的开心呀，对你爱爱爱不完~~~像极了 我男票，胖胖的，懒懒的，却又勤奋上进~	Ayaya, my cute Happy, my love for you will never end~~~ Eggy is so much like my boyfriend, plump, lazy, but at the same time diligent and ambitious~
8	呆咪：爱情的铜臭味 每个节都被他俩过成情人节	Daimi: The sting of romance. They make every holiday Valentine's Day ³⁴⁸

Figure 9.3 Examples of moral descriptions of Eggy

³⁴⁸ This is a comment on a Biaoqingbao featuring the daily activities of the couple Eggy and Popo. The fan is employing the voice of Daimi, a cat without a girlfriend, to joke about a single person's attitude towards the daily life of couples.

1	喜欢所有嘤嘤和蛋黄同框的表情！太有爱啦，看了治愈又想谈恋爱！	I like all the Biaoqing where Popo and Egg are together! Full of love. They heal me and make me want to be in love again!
2	感觉蛋黄就是正能量，每次看到心情都会豁然开朗	Egg is positive energy. Seeing him puts me in a good mood
3	看到开心和嘤嘤就会有幸福感从心底升起，两只猫咪的出现的地点，是疲惫生活中的柔软角落	A sense of happiness will rise in my heart when I see Happy and Popo. Wherever the two cats are, it's a soft spot where I can have a rest from my busy tiring life
4	感谢蛋黄一家陪我走过了一年 这一年每逢困境 我都会看蛋黄猫 给我带来快乐 带来勇气...	Thanks for the companion of the Egg family. Throughout this year, whenever I was in trouble, I would look at Egg. He brought me happiness and courage...
5	我当年高考压力大的时候就一直刷开心猫撸猫的那个表情，简直就是我的心灵鸡汤，全世界最棒的开心	Before college entrance exam, whenever I felt stressed, I would have a look at the Biaoqing of Happy. It's almost the chicken soup for my soul. Happy is the best in the world
6	以前一个同学推荐了蛋黄猫的表情包，我觉得好玩就用了，后来发给一个女同学，她也很喜欢，现在那个女生是我女朋友，谢谢蛋黄猫给我们带来的缘分	A classmate recommended Egg Biaoqingbao to me, and I began to use them because they are funny. Later I sent them to a girl, and she liked them too. Now that girl is my girlfriend. Thank Egg for bringing us together
7	蛋黄和嘤嘤的每一季都和先生我俩的状态神同步，.....看着蛋黄和嘤嘤成长的日子感觉就像我和先生的Q版小日记，不用言语，发一个表情给对方完全就能达意，很感动，谢谢一叔和一婶，感谢蛋黄和嘤嘤的陪伴。	The Biaoqingbao of Egg and Popo sync precisely with the life of me and my husband. Their Biaoqingbao are like the diary of us. No need for words, we would understand each other through a Biaoqing. Thank you Li and your girlfriend. Thanks for the companion of Egg and Popo.
8	我和我男朋友是军恋，蛋黄猫是我们军恋路上的开心果，我们的聊天记录每天要发一百遍蛋黄猫，就像我俩的生活，感谢有蛋黄猫，在难过的时候，可以让我们坚强，快乐	My boyfriend is a soldier and we cannot see each other so often. Egg brings happiness to our relationship. Every day, we would use Egg in chat for a hundred times. Egg witnesses our life. Thank Egg for making us strong in sadness and bringing us happiness
9	超级喜欢蛋黄猫。真心奇了怪，每次男朋友发蛋黄猫表情，我即便再生气都一秒破功。看到萌萌的蛋黄，就是气不出来。	I'm super big on Egg. It's really strange that when my boyfriend sent me Egg Biaoqing, my anger would vanish, no matter how mad I was at him. The sight of <i>méng</i> Egg eases my anger.
10	我老公是外国人，我们异地恋好多年了，一直没有机会在地球上彻底凑在一起，好几次都互相有误会，互相不理解，差点黄了。。我记得有一天我好生气的，对他有误解，我随手发了个蛋黄猫和嘤嘤猫打架的表情，之后我们竟然笑了起来，后来互相又发了很多蛋黄猫系列的表情，真的化解了好多矛盾！我对这份感情的珍惜和坚持，真的非常感谢蛋黄猫和嘤嘤猫的陪伴！	My husband is a foreigner and we had a long-distance relationship for several years, but never had a chance to be with each other for long. We often misunderstood each other and almost broke up... One day I misunderstood him and got furious. But when I sent him a Biaoqing of Egg and Popo fighting with each other, we both began to laugh. After that we sent each other many Egg Biaoqing, and this really helped us solve many misunderstandings! I'm truly grateful to Egg and Popo for their companion in my relationship!

Figure 9.4 Examples of fans' emotional experiences with Egg and Popo

9.2.3 The emotions, feelings, actions the cats invoke in fans

There are many comments where fans share their emotions and feelings towards Eggy, Popo and Daimi, and their actions towards the three cats. These comments are very revealing of why fans are fascinated by them.

Emotions and feelings

Eggy is an IP figure, a brand. In this sense, the fans are consumers. Emotional attachment is one of the most important reasons why fans follow their idols (Huang Yu-An, Lin Chad, & Phau, 2015; Park et al., 2010; Park, Macinnis, & Priester, 2006). Besides fondness for and seeing themselves in the three cats, fans have various other emotional experiences with the Biaoqing figures. For some, Eggy and Popo heal their emotional wounds and bring them good mood (see comments 1 and 2 in Figure 9.4). For some, Eggy and Popo support them through their bad patches and provide them a safe haven away from the hustle and bustle of life (see comments 3-5 in Figure 9.4). For some couples, the Biaoqing of Eggy and Popo are witness of their love, and an indispensable part of the communication with their loved ones (see comments 6 and 7 in Figure 9.4). To many followers, Eggy and Popo provide moral support that keeps them company through the highs and lows in life. For fans, this emotional bond imposes a symbolic meaning on Eggy and Popo. The Biaoqing are the same for everyone, but the feelings and emotions they invoke in each fan are (experienced as) personal and unique. For their fans, the two cats are no longer simply virtual figures in Biaoqingbao, but represent support, companionship, love, warmth, etc.

Aside from the cats' cute appearances and personified characteristics, emotional attachment and moral value appreciation, fans follow Eggy Biaoqingbao for practical reasons. For many fans, the cats bring them emotional enjoyment (see comment 2 in Figure 9.4) and provide them comfort in hard times (see comments 4 and 5 in Figure 9.4). For many couples, the Biaoqing of the cats not only provide them with great convenience in daily communication (comments 7 and 8 in Figure 9.4), but also become an important means for maintaining their relationship, for instance, resolving their conflicts or solving their misunderstandings (see comments 9 and 10 in Figure 9.4).

Actions

Attachment to, fondness for, and appreciation of Eggy are highly consequential, resulting in various actions and reactions in fans. The most common actions of fans are using Eggy Biaoqing, following and sharing content relevant to Eggy on social media. After the fourteenth Eggy Biaoqingbao was published, it was ranked sixth out of over 2,000 new Biaoqingbao (see Figure 9.5).³⁴⁹ The article on Eggy WeChat official account was widely read and liked by fans, accumulating 8,864 views and 280 likes within four days of its publication (see Figure 9.5). In the comments, fans share what they do to show how much

³⁴⁹ Over 70 Biaoqingbao are published every day on WeChat Biaoqing Open Platform. The ranking of top Biaoqingbao is based on recent usage frequency. Retrieved from <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/50713068> on December 15, 2018.

they are fascinated by Eggy. Many regularly check the home page of Li for the latest information on Eggy Biaoqingbao. The actions and reactions of some fans are not so common, for instance, dreaming about the publication of new Eggy Biaoqingbao, bursting out in laughter upon the publication of new Biaoqingbao, or downloading an app only for the purpose of watching Eggy videos. The actions and reactions reported by fans all directly reflect their intensive fondness for Eggy and their fascination with Eggy Biaoqingbao.

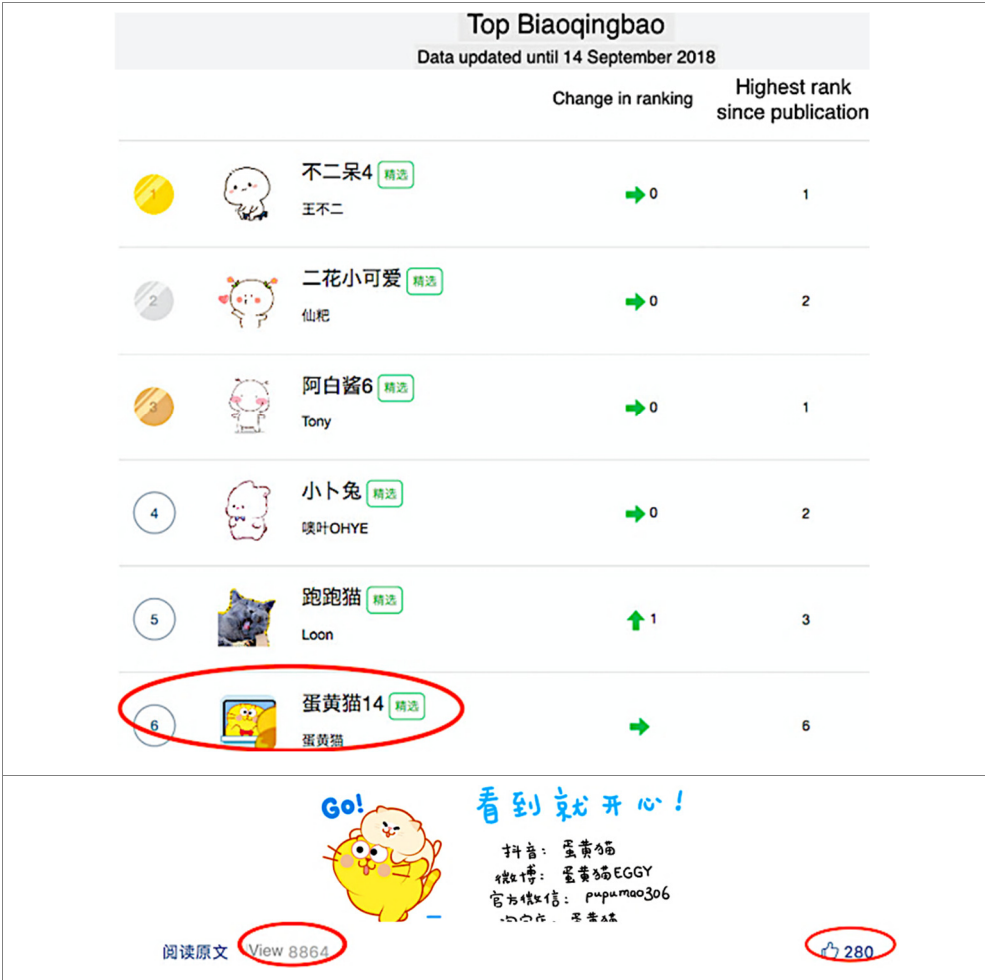


Figure 9.5 Ranking of Eggy Biaoqingbao and the number of views and likes of official account article³⁵⁰

³⁵⁰ The ranking was retrieved from <https://sticker.weixin.qq.com/cgi-bin/mmemoticon-bin/emoticonview?oper=billboard&t=rank> on September 17, 2018. The WeChat official account article was retrieved from https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/XbmC2tp11nCt_WNwaq3Gnw on September 17, 2018.

The actions of fans are not restricted to their own lives. The influence of their actions extends to people around them, for instance family members, friends, colleagues, etc. In some cases, fans proactively recommend Eggy Biaoqingbao to others; while in some cases, fans' practice of using Eggy Biaoqing is enough to attract more fans for Eggy (see comments 1-5 in Figure 9.6). The actions of fans reveal how individual engagement turns into community formation.

1	我想买台历，可是我是海外党怕寄丢，所以我强烈的给我娘安利蛋黄，我们都是这些喵的粉丝	I wanted to buy Eggy calendar, but I am overseas, and I'm afraid it might be lost during delivery. So I strongly recommended Eggy to my mom. We are both his fans
2	我还以为只有我一个人这么痴迷它呢，每天逮着谁都给谁发我们的黄黄，爱它爱到不能自拔了	I thought I was the only one so fascinated by it. I use Eggy Biaoqing with everyone who contacts me on WeChat. I'm lost in my love for it
3	我们公司的人被我带的都下载了开心的表情	Under my influence all my colleagues have downloaded Happy Biaoqingbao
4	第一次在微信看到表情包的时候就超级喜欢胖胖的小家伙了！给老爸发了几次之后老爸也喜欢上了，看到就觉得治愈	The first time I saw his Biaoqing, I liked this chubby kiddy! My dad began to like him after having received his Biaoqing from me. Eggy comforts the soul
5	有个猫奴朋友之前最喜欢蹬拖鞋那个表情，她家的喵爱做一样的动作……我一发给她够不到小鱼干的表情，她立马就去下载了。	A cat-loving friend likes the Biaoqing of Eggy playing with a sleeper. Her cat does the same After I sent her the Biaoqing of Eggy failing to reach a fish, she immediately downloaded the Biaoqingbao.
6	萌死了每天等着抖音更新。。。小外甥看蛋黄猫停不下来还跟着视频模仿三倍抖动，猫粮吃光，学猫叫等等，他娘还让他在小荧星课上表演三倍抖动。	So <i>méng</i> . I wait for new videos of Eggy everyday...My little nephew simply cannot move his eyes away from the videos. He even imitates Eggy. His mom encouraged him to perform the waving of Eggy in his class.
7	想买他俩的同款帽子和男票一起戴	I want to buy hats the same as Eggy's and Popo's for me and my boyfriend
8	别人结婚证照片衣服上贴小爱心，我们贴蛋黄和噗噗！希望像他们一样幸福一辈子	Other couples put heart stickers on their clothes when taking wedding pictures. We used Eggy and Popo stickers! Hope we will be as happy as them
9	在香港做英文老師的我，根據學生的口語考試出現問題，用開心貓做了各種示範！	As an English teacher in Hong Kong, I used Happy to explain students' mistakes in oral exam!

Figure 9.6 Examples of fans' actions concerning Eggy

Some fans go a step further. They are not only crazy about the cats and their Biaoqing, but begin to imitate Eggy and Popo, or involve them in their offline life. For instance, a little boy imitates the waving gesture of Eggy, couples use the stickers or hats of Eggy and Popo to symbolize their love, and a teacher uses the image of Eggy in her teaching (see comments 6-9 in Figure 9.6). By so doing, fans are, to some extent, projecting themselves on the cats and at the same time treating the cats as themselves. Underlying these actions is fans' aspiration for the ideal qualities or way of being embodied in the cats. Such aspiration is 'heavy' in the sense that it is about fans' identities and social ties, and it has transformed into willingness to spend money on the Biaoqing figures, i.e. to reward

the Biaoqingbao and pay for merchandise. These actions are Biaoqingbao-induced economic activities, which will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

9.2.4 Reasons for fans to give Rewards and buy merchandise

The answer to the question why fans and followers reward Eggy Biaoqing and buy Eggy-related merchandise can be found in the self-reported reasons in their comments. According to followers, there are mainly three reasons. First, followers give Rewards and buy merchandise for the values of Eggy. They are paying for the qualities that are valuable to them, for instance cute, beautiful (see comments 1-4 in Figure 9.7), for what they appreciate, for instance being optimistic, hard-working, gentle, confident (see comments 1 and 2 in Figure 9.3), and for what they want to become, for instance a positive person (see comment 2 in Figure 9.4), or a loving couple (see comments 7 and 8 in Figure 9.6).

1	挂件超级棒，超级超级可爱，每天带着开心出门	The bangle ³⁵¹ is super good super cute. I bring it with me everyday
2	美好的表情，开通后第一时间打赏	Beautiful Biaoqing. I rewarded immediately
3	太可爱啦！已经下载+打赏+推荐给群里的朋友	So cute! Already downloaded, rewarded, and recommended to friends
4	这么优秀的漫画，应该多多的赞助	Such excellent cartoon deserves a lot of reward
5	直接打赏 10 块给开心噗噗加小鱼干🐟	I rewarded ¥10 to buy fish for Happy and Popo🐟
6	唯一会打赏的表情包期待更多互动	The only Biaoqingbao I reward. Looking forward to more interaction
7	兄弟 永远别断蛋黄猫好吗 我可是一直打赏的	Bro, please keep on creating Eggy Biaoqing. I have been rewarding all along
8	这是我第一次看到广告植入这么开心的，因为有市场蛋黄猫就会出更多的表情啦！店里的每一种毛绒公仔都买了，真的太喜欢了！！	This is the first time I am so happy to see product placement, because if Eggy has a market there will be more Eggy Biaoqingbao! I have bought every doll in the store. I like Eggy so much!!
9	一叔一婶辛苦了，从未让我们失望过，已赞赏	Uncle and aunt Li ³⁵² thanks for your hard work. You never disappoint us. Already rewarded
10	艺术家画得很棒～蛋黄猫眼神很到位～嘴部表情也生动可爱～肥萌啊超喜欢，虽然打赏的不多～对艺术家创作比心❤️	The artist draws really well~ The expressions of Eggy are very vivid~ and the mouse is also cute~ chubby and <i>méng</i> . I super like it. Though the Reward is not much~ but it's my thanks for the creation of the artist ❤️
11	我妈总说肉乃乃的蛋黄猫蠢蠢胖胖憨憨的可爱样子简直就是我，12 弹一出就赞赏了 2 块钱	My mom always says that the nerdy chubby cute Eggy is the same as me. She immediately rewarded the 12 th Biaoqingbao ¥2

Figure 9.7 Examples of self-reported reasons for rewarding

³⁵¹ Bangle in this case refers to an accessory that is hung on handbags or backpacks for decoration.

³⁵² Uncle Li and aunt Li are the pet names for the designer Li and his girlfriend.

Fans of Egg series Biaoqing are consumers who pay for the intangible knowledge products, i.e. Biaoqingbao, and the merchandise, both of which project esteemed values, qualities and personalities. These Biaoqing, employed in daily communication, will be the resources and capital for fans to perform desired micro-hegemonic identities and acquire desired persona for themselves. In a nutshell, followers pay for what they are and what they want to be (Dholakia & Firat, 1998; Fiske, 1992).

Second, they give Rewards and buy merchandise so that the cats will have money for fish (see comment 5 in Figure 9.7). In this reason, we see the ludic essence of this economic practice. Fans are aware that offline there are no such cats as Egg, Popo and Daimi who need fish snacks. It is the designer of the cat figures and cat Biaoqingbao who needs to make a living. This reason is a highly romanticized and ludic way for fans to say that they want Li to earn money.

Third, they reward Biaoqingbao and buy merchandise for Li to keep on creating Egg Biaoqingbao (see comments 6-8 in Figure 9.7). Besides these three major reasons, some fans give Rewards to express their appreciation to Li (see comments 9-10 in Figure 9.7), and some fans reward him because they think Egg and Popo resemble themselves or their loved ones (see comment 11 in Figure 9.7).

9.2.5 Attitudes towards the designer

In the comments, fans often express their appreciation and gratitude to the designer and his girlfriend for their effort in creating new Biaoqing, and for the high quality of their creation (see comments 4, 9-10 in Figure 9.7 and comment 1 in Figure 9.8). Some fans extend their fondness for Egg to the designer, and they often express good wishes to him (see comments 2 and 3 in Figure 9.8), or try to know more about him (see comments 4-6 in Figure 9.8). Here we see the inclination of some participants in a community of knowledge to make the community more personal and intimate.

1	一叔非常注重细节 开心和噗噗的形象可爱至极 往往玩了好久后才发现亮点 每个细微的点 都让我玩的兴奋不已 一直会支持下去 一叔加油	Uncle Li pays extreme attention to details. The images of Happy and Popo are super cute. I often fail to notice the punchline until after having used the Biaoqing for quite some time. Every detail makes me so excited. I will follow Egg. Hurray uncle Li
2	灵感永不枯竭，不愧是我爱的一叔一婶儿！	Wish you have endless inspiration. That are the uncle and aunt Li I love!
3	一叔一婶早日有个小开心	Wish you have your baby Happy soon
4	一叔，看到你的蛋黄猫作品很开心，仿佛可以看到作品背后作者的温暖与幸福	Uncle Li, I seem to see your warmth and happiness through the Egg you have created
5	感谢你创意出来这么完美的蛋黄猫，你一定有一颗善良的柔软的内心	Thanks for creating such perfect Egg. You must have a kind and gentle heart
6	作者暴露年龄了 典型 80 后啊	The designer reveals his age. He is typically the 80's generation

Figure 9.8 Examples of comments concerning the designer

9.2.6 Li's actions concerning Eggy Biaoqingbao

After having checked fans' opinions and actions, it is time to have a look at the actions of Li, the designer. In his opinion, Eggy and Popo are 'two naughty angels' (两只磨人的小妖精). Li, a cat person himself, designed Eggy Biaoqingbao specifically for people who love cats. In his official account article on November 17, 2016, Li expressed his hope that Eggy Biaoqing will be loved by cat-lovers. For Li, Eggy Biaoqingbao is his career, and at the same time, it marks some big events in his life.³⁵³ For instance, Eggy's girlfriend Popo is named after Li's girlfriend, and he draws inspiration from his girlfriend in the creation of new Biaoqingbao. This is clearly demonstrated in the different style and theme of Eggy Biaoqingbao before and after the introduction of Popo (see Figure 9.1 and comment 12 in Figure 9.2).

Apart from his own observations and experiences, Li collects the opinions of fans to draw inspiration for Eggy Biaoqingbao. On February 20, 2016, Li posted an article on his WeChat official account to announce the publication of the second Eggy Biaoqingbao. At the end of the article, there is a questionnaire about fans' impressions of Eggy, including its gender, sexual orientation, zodiac sign, character, personality, and whether it's sterilized or not. In the article on May 18, 2016, Li wrote to his audience that they could leave him a message if they have some interesting ideas for the next Eggy Biaoqingbao. Besides the content of Biaoqing, Li also gets ideas from fans for the forms of Biaoqing. For instance, in a WeChat official account article on June 8, 2016, Li expressed his surprise at the handiness of Biaoqing without any text, which is the suggestion from fans of Eggy. It is obvious that the designer and Biaoqing users, or fans, are co-constructing the image of Eggy and Eggy Biaoqingbao. Biaoqingbao figures are crossing from ludic Biaoqing-related genres and chronotopes to a sphere where congregational knowledge work goes to the creation of an (imagined) moral idol.

9.2.7 Light community, heavy influence

Fans follow Eggy Biaoqingbao for various yet similar reasons. To sum up, there are four major reasons. First, the cute appearance and naughty character of the cats are very attractive to fans. Second, Eggy Biaoqing present highly personified activities, which fans perform in their daily life. Third, fans appreciate the qualities they see in the cats, for instance positive, caring, warm, etc., and they treat the cats as their role models. Fourth, fans aspire to the ideal life of the cats. The cute and happy lives of the three cats attract fans, and their personified activities enable fans to project themselves in Eggy Biaoqing.

Some fans spend hours on making up stories with Eggy Biaoqing, just for the purpose of posting them on Weibo and notifying Li of their creations; some take pride in being the first ones to comment or to give Reward; some regard the publication of new Biaoqingbao as the best present for themselves. In this community, fans comment on, create and repost Eggy-related content on WeChat, Weibo and other social media. All

³⁵³ Retrieved from http://www.china.org.cn/chinese/2018-08/06/content_58149155.htm and https://m.sohu.com/n/469693539/?wscrid=95360_4 on September 25, 2018.

these actions, which are spontaneous and performed for fun, are 'light'. While performing such light Eggy-fan identity work, fans occasionally indicate in passing their age, job, position, and other identities related to ethnic background, gender, social status, etc., i.e. the typical features of traditional, robust, fixed or 'heavy' communities.

In the Eggy fan community, strong ties and weak ties co-exist (Granovetter, 1983; Levin & Cross, 2004; Krackhardt, 2003) in an online chronotope. On the one hand, fans forward Eggy-related Biaoqing, articles, short videos, etc. to family members, friends and colleagues, and thus build a community around their own fascination. On the other hand, the majority of the fans do not know each other, work in various fields, live in different cities, and are of different age and gender. The only thing they have in common is that they are users of Eggy Biaoqing who enjoy the fun brought by the cat figures. Fans' attachment to the community resides solely in their fondness for the cat figures and their Biaoqing, and there is no shared background or space to tie Eggy Biaoqing users together. This fan community is open to anyone and undemanding in terms of participation, and thus lacks the stable and robust structure as in traditional communities. In this sense, the Eggy community defies traditional communities of practice (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 1999; Wenger, 2011) or affinity spaces (Gee, 2005), and they form *de facto* a light community (Blommaert & Varis, 2015). Light communities are characterized by their micro-hegemonic character: light features 'rule' such communities. Participants adopt resources and normative behavioral templates which define the light feature of the community to perform identities, i.e. micro-hegemonic identities (Blommaert, 2017, 2018a).

The online Eggy-fan community is light, and there are no shared traditional bureaucratic parameters to bind participants together, but its influence is heavy, and it crosses to offline spaces. The light community can generate a strong sense of belonging offline. For instance, a fan shares in the comment section of a post that when she sees a girl with Happy merchandise, she feels the urge to shake hands with the girl. Other more consequential influences are reflected in fans' enthusiasm in giving Rewards and buying merchandise. Many fans, especially couples, strongly express their desire for the hats, clothes, sleepers and bowties worn by the cats. Micro-hegemonic identity is at work here. Their aspiration to be a happy couple as Eggy and Popo is projected in their desire for what the cats use in their daily life, which generates great (quasi rigid) demand for Eggy merchandise. By using the merchandise of the happy cat couple, fans become happy couples, at least in their opinion. The market for merchandise, together with the willingness to reward Biaoqingbao and buy the merchandise, might bring enough income for (top) designers to work full-time on the creation of Biaoqingbao.³⁵⁴ In this sense, Biaoqingbao has hatched a new economic practice, and a new category in cultural industry.

³⁵⁴ Retrieved from https://m.sohu.com/n/469693539/?wscrid=95360_4 on September 25, 2018.

9.3 The fan community of Budding Pop

9.3.1 Budding Pop Biaoqingbao

Budding Pop is a round-headed figure with a plant sprout on top of its head (see Figure 9.9). The sprout, which is budding and popping up, symbolizes growth. This figure, drawn by a high school girl for fun in December 2013, was reposted over 1,000 times on Weibo after its debut. After that, its designer Mao Tui (pseudonym) shared more and more Budding Pop Biaoqing on Weibo. This gradually attracted a group of followers that developed into a fan base. By February 2014, Mao Tui's Weibo post sharing Budding Pop Biaoqingbao fetched as many as 5,945 reposts. Budding Pop and its Biaoqingbao gradually became one of the most popular ones on QQ and WeChat.³⁵⁵ In September 2014, Mao Tui joined Block 12 Culture, a cartoon image IP management company. After that, Mao Tui has been working with a team to create Budding Pop Biaoqingbao. The figure Budding Pop and its Biaoqingbao attract thousands of fans. By June 2014, one year after Mao Tui registered an account on Weibo, the number of her followers increased from a couple of thousand to 100,000; by June 2015, the number rose to 600,000; and by June 2016, the number was over one million.³⁵⁶

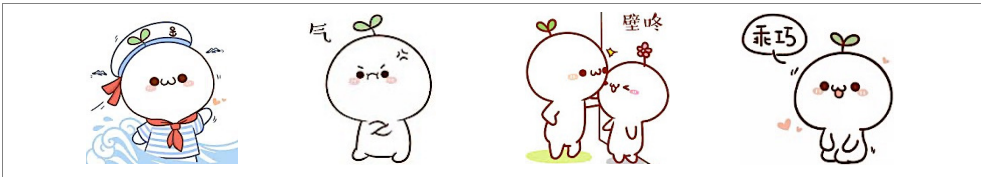


Figure 9.9 Examples of Budding Pop Biaoqing

Budding Pop's presence is not only felt on Weibo but also on WeChat. When WeChat launched Biaoqing Open Platform in July 2015, Budding Pop Biaoqingbao became a hit, having been sent over 350 million times on WeChat within two months of its publication.³⁵⁷ At the same time, the promotion and marketing by Block 12 Culture provided a sustaining dynamo for the virality of Budding Pop. So far, Budding Pop is still among the top Biaoqingbao on WeChat Sticker Gallery (see Figure 9.10).

The image and persona of Budding Pop experienced four stages (see Figure 9.11). The first stage features Japanese style emoticons (e.g. (´・_・`) (≧▽≦) (´・_・`) etc.). The second stage features outfits of different cartoon figures. The third stage combines the characteristics of cute with mischievous and dirty. In the fourth stage, cute and innocent

³⁵⁵ Retrieved from https://baike.baidu.com/item/长草颜文字/19274175?fr=zhidao_relate on September 2, 2018.

³⁵⁶ Retrieved from https://www.weibo.com/132419214?topnav=1&wvr=6&topsug=1&is_all=1&is_search=1&key_word=%E7%BA%AA%E5%BF%B5#_0 on September 2, 2018.

³⁵⁷ Retrieved from https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzA5MjI1MjI1Ng==&mid=400081989&idx=1&sn=1751617a5761d732d8a6bebd3f986bd&scene=1&srcid=1111FdVijMbu8W3zeVI6c2UQ#rd on September 23, 2018.

become the dominant characteristics. The four stages constitute an exploration for the optimal characteristic for the persona of Budding Pop. All Budding Pop Biaoqingbao on WeChat Sticker Gallery are of cute and innocent style.³⁵⁸

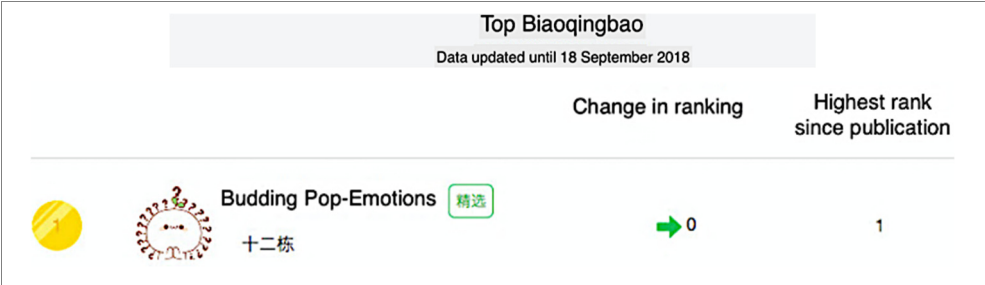


Figure 9.10 The top Biaoqingbao on WeChat Sticker Gallery on 18 September, 2018³⁵⁹

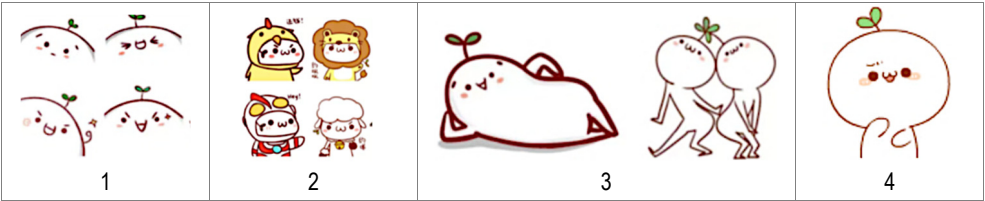


Figure 9.11 Examples of Budding Pop Biaoqing at different stages

Before June 2014, the fan community was mainly based on Weibo. After June 2014, when Mao Tui created an official account of Budding Pop on WeChat, more and more fan activities began to take place on WeChat, including commenting (which was enabled in August 2018 on her account), rewarding, liking, and sharing articles. In order to find out why fans reward the Biaoqingbao and pay for merchandise, the WeChat official account articles and Weibo posts of Mao Tui are followed and analyzed. As Mao Tui updates at least once every two days on her WeChat official account since June 2014, and updates at least five Weibo posts every day since December 2013, it is not practical to follow all her articles and posts. For this reason, two WeChat official account articles and three Weibo posts are selected every month on the basis of the volume of fan actions. The resulting data are presented in Table 9.3.

WeChat official account is not only a forum to share Biaoqingbao, but also a platform to share Budding Pop comics, to involve fans in the comics and encourage them to leave comments and communicate with Mao Tui. Her Weibo posts are not restricted to Budding Pop, but also include whatever she is interested in. There is a clear change in

³⁵⁸ Retrieved from https://baike.baidu.com/item/长草颜文字/19274175?fr=zhidao_relate on September 2, 2018.

³⁵⁹ Retrieved from <https://sticker.weixin.qq.com/cgi-bin/mmemoticon-bin/emoticonview?oper=billboard&t=rank/index> on September 20, 2018.

Weibo posts after September 2014 when Mao Tui joined Block 12 Culture. After that, the proportion of Budding-Pop-related content greatly increased.

Table 9.3 *Data of Budding Pop Biaoqingbao*

Platform	N	Fan action
Weibo posts ³⁶⁰	171	Comment, repost, like
WeChat official account articles ³⁶¹	102	Comment, read, like
Biaoqingbao on WeChat Sticker Gallery ³⁶²	15	Reward, download

In what follows, the fan community of Budding Pop will be analyzed, including the actions and reactions of fans, their opinions towards Budding Pop, its Biaoqingbao, and towards Mao Tui, as well as the actions of Mao Tui.

9.3.2 Fans’ opinions and actions

Fans’ opinions and actions are all related to their fondness for Budding Pop. The majority of fans think Budding Pop is cute and lovable (see comments 1-4 in Figure 9.12). Attracted by the cuteness of Budding Pop, fans not only share the pictures and Biaoqing of Budding Pop with their friends, but also make Budding Pop their profile pictures (see comments 1-3 in Figure 9.12). Besides this, fans often leave comments to request Mao Tui to create Biaoqing of their liking (see comment 5 in Figure 9.12), which would often become inspiration for the next Biaoqingbao.

1	好萌!!! 抱走当头像了~	So <i>méng</i> !!! I'll make it my profile picture~
2	好可爱~ 老公你说哪个当我的头像比较好~	So cute~ Honey, which one do you think I should take for my profile picture~
3	Vinkyway: 回复@阿倩倩倩倩倩子:这个太萌!!! 抱走微信头像了要不要跟我一起	Vinkyway: reply @阿倩倩倩倩倩子: This is so <i>méng</i> !!! I'll make it my profile picture. Wanna do it with me
4	我最爱长草颜啦! 因为它让我感到无比的幸福!	I love Budding Pop the most! Because it makes me feel super happy!
5	求哆啦 A 梦的	Please draw Budding Pop with Doraemon outfit

Figure 9.12 *Examples of fans’ attitudes to and actions on Budding Pop*

Mao Tui not only collects ideas from fans for inspiration, she also intensively engages fans. First, the themes of the Biaoqingbao she designed are highly relevant to fans, especially young people, for instance popular video games, reality shows, military training, and up-coming holidays. Second, Mao Tui encourages fans to share their stories. For

³⁶⁰ Retrieved from https://www.weibo.com/132419214?is_all=1 on September 23-October 14, 2018.
³⁶¹ Retrieved from https://mp.weixin.qq.com/mp/profile_ext?action=home&__biz=MzU5NDA1Njc5OA==&scene=124#wechat_redirect on September 23-29, 2018.
³⁶² Retrieved from the WeChat account of the author on September 23, 2018.

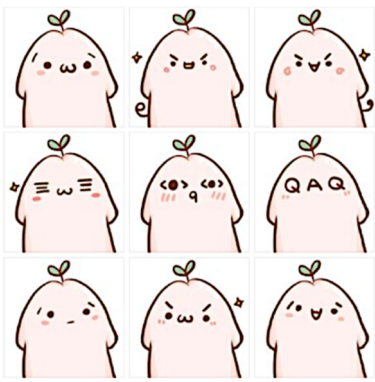
instance, on September 17, 2018, a comic featuring college students’ military training was published on her WeChat official account. At the end of the comic, Mao Tui left a message to encourage fans to share their military training experiences (see Figure 9.13).

你还有哪些军训时的经历 不说出来会亏一个亿? 酷爱在评论里告诉团子和大家吧!	What else have you experienced in military training? If you don't tell, it will be a huge loss Please tell Pop and everyone in comment!
--	---

Figure 9.13 The message at the end of the WeChat official account article on September 17, 2018

Similar to the Eggy fan community, four elements play an important role in the formation of the fan community of Budding Pop: (1) its cute attractive appearance, (2) fans’ aspiration to be cute and attractive, (3) intensive interaction between fans and the designer, i.e. congregational knowledge work, (4) the spread by fans to their friends.

Cute and *méng* are not the only descriptions given by fans. There are some other facets of Budding Pop, though these are not dominant ones. On February 26, 2014, Mao Tui posted nine Biaoqing of Dicky³⁶³ (Budding Pop in the shape of a penis), which accumulated 4,313 reposts, 1,496 comments, and 683 likes from fans (see Figure 9.14).

(° Ⅱ° Ⅲ))) 俺冒着绳命危险画完了这套看上去 就好疼的图哈哈哈哈哈 (滚 然后 因为比较忙又用了同一个模版 (事实上是因为 懒 欢迎大家的好朋友 小杰宝 \ (^o^) /	(° Ⅱ° Ⅲ))) I completed this series at the risk of my life. You can feel pain even just by looking at them hahahahahahahahaha (fuck off then because I'm busy so I used the same template (in fact it's because I'm lazy. Let's welcome our good friend, little Dicky \ (^o^) /
	
☆ 收藏 4313 1496	👍 683

³⁶³ The name of the penis-shaped Budding Pop is 小杰宝 (*xiǎo jié bǎo*, literally: small excellent baby), whose pronunciation is similar to 小鸡巴 (*xiǎo jī ba*, 鸡巴: slang of penis, i.e. dick). On the one hand, 小杰宝 is an effort by Mao Tui to avoid the vulgar expression 小鸡巴. On the other hand, this euphemized name imposes an element of cuteness on the image. Without an equivalent to this naming, I translate 小杰宝 to Dicky, which embodies the diminutive and the euphemism.

1	无节操.....2333333333333333.....	shameless.....2333333333333333..... ³⁶⁴
2	叶子大美女要瘦瘦瘦瘦瘦：好帅气！！不敢用. . .@秋秋 sophia	叶子大美女要瘦瘦瘦瘦瘦： So handsome!!! But I dare not use it . . . @秋秋 sophia
3	萌的心肝颤😏	So méng 😏
4	小半只毛豆：这个...咱不好意思转了. . .@凯瑟喵 【捂脸	小半只毛豆： This...I'm too shy to repost it . . .@凯瑟喵 【cover face ³⁶⁵
5	阮凯怡：@李绍康- 哈哈哈哈哈	阮凯怡： @李绍康- Hahahaha
6	我想要两颗西 Yao：@懒羊羊羊羊羊羊洋不能胖嘟嘟 想到你 🐼	我想要两颗西 Yao： @懒羊羊羊羊羊羊洋不能胖嘟嘟 It reminds me of you 🐼
7	叫我田森森：@_软绵绵的小笨蛋 这个适合你	叫我田森森： @_软绵绵的小笨蛋 This suits you
8	叫我田森森：哈哈哈哈哈我操@陈小花哈哈 这个好可怕，送你当头像 陈祖凯_：回复@叫我田森森：猥琐至极	叫我田森森： Hahahahahaha Fuck @陈小花 Hahaha This one is horrible. For your profile pic 陈祖凯_： reply to @叫我田森森： Extremely obscene
9	饭饭饭饭哒：好色啊哈哈@Yang Yang：回复@饭饭菌的日常：你最喜欢	饭饭饭饭哒： So dirty. Haha @Yang Yang： reply to @饭饭菌的日常： You like it the most
10	好高兴君：@有头脑君 有头脑君：回复@好高兴君：简直没节操啊 [挖鼻屎] 好高兴君：回复@有头脑君：好可爱哈哈哈哈哈快选个！ 有头脑君：回复@好高兴君：第四个😏 好高兴君：回复@有头脑君：那我要第三个哈哈 我去换~	好高兴君： @有头脑君 有头脑君： reply to @好高兴君： Blatant shameless [pick booger] ³⁶⁶ 好高兴君： reply to @有头脑君： So cute hahahahaha choose one, quick! 有头脑君： reply to @好高兴君： The fourth😏 好高兴君： reply to @有头脑君： Then I'll choose the third hahahaha I'm gonna change my profile pic ~

Figure 9.14 Mao Tui's Weibo post on February 26, 2014 and examples of comments

The majority thought it is very dirty (see comment 1 in Figure 9.14), some comment that it is dirty yet cute (see comment 2 in Figure 9.14), and a few directly say that it is super cute/méng (see comments 3 and 10 in Figure 9.14). Though there are differences in attitudes, fans enthusiastically share the post with their friends, as demonstrated by the number of reposts and @³⁶⁷ in comments. An interesting thing is that when fans share this

³⁶⁴ 233 is the code for the laughing emoticon on Weibo. People use 233 to represent laughing. The number of 3's represents the length of the laughter.

³⁶⁵ In the process of editing texts, some Weibo users insert emojis by typing the Biaoqing description in square brackets. But only on the condition that the description is the same as the default descriptions of Weibo Biaoqing panel, will a Biaoqing show when the text is published. In this case, '【cover face】' is not typed correctly and fails to produce the Biaoqing 😏 on Weibo.

³⁶⁶ In this case [pick booger] is manually inserted, but the description does not match the default one on Weibo, and thus fails to present the Biaoqing 🐼, whose description is [pick nose]. This Biaoqing conveys contempt.

³⁶⁷ In the comment section of a post, Weibo users can type @ and then choose the name of their Weibo friends, and the users mentioned in the @ function will be notified of the post.

Biaoqingbao with their friends, most of them leave no comments. Among those who do leave a message, some say that it is dirty, with either verbal expressions, laughter, or shy/sly Biaoqing (see comments 4, 5, 9, 10 in Figure 9.14); some leave comments like 'it reminds me of you' or 'this suits you' (see comments 6-7 in Figure 9.14). These actions, though not direct messages expressing attitudes, are enough to indicate that the followers have a general positive opinion towards Dicky Biaoqingbao, otherwise they would not share or forward them to their friends.

Besides the clearly declared and subtly mediated positive opinions, some embracing attitudes of followers are coated with a thick layer of shyness. The conversations between fans and their friends in the comment section may serve as an illustration here. In comment 8 in Figure 9.14, both the fan and the friend hold a negative opinion towards the dirty Biaoqingbao, and the word 'obscene' is used. In comment 9 in Figure 9.14, when the post is forwarded with the comment 'So dirty. Haha', the receiver replies 'You like it the most' to the sharer. As fans are sharing dirty Biaoqingbao with their friends with laughter, it is obvious that they do not dislike it. The reply 'You like it the most' confirms the sharer's positive attitude toward the dirty Biaoqingbao, but at the same time it conveys the information that being dirty and liking dirty content are not something one should be proud of, at least for the person who replies this. In comment 10 in Figure 9.14, though the friend uses 'Blatant shameless' to describe the Biaoqingbao at the beginning, he/she reveals his/her true attitude through picking one as a profile picture, with a bashful emoji while doing so. Similar to the example in comment 9, the friend, though he likes the dirty Biaoqing, is aware of the negative moral or value judgement of the 'Dicky' Biaoqingbao.

The three conversations indicate that there exists a layer of negative moral judgement of Dicky Biaoqing among fans and their friends who have been forwarded the Biaoqing. There are a few who clearly deliver their negative opinion, and the majority do not directly indicate their attitude. However, their reposting, sharing with their friends, and commenting on the Biaoqing already reveal their liking for Dicky. Fans secretly like the dirty Biaoqing, but the majority do not admit it. To understand this shy reaction, it is necessary to turn to the moral judgement of sex and sex-related topics in Chinese society. Abstinence and stigmatization of sex in the history of Chinese culture, especially since Qing dynasty (1644-1912) till the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), is still deeply rooted in modern Chinese society (Enjiang, 2018; Li Yinhe, 2009; Wang Guimei & Wang Sidong, 2018). Though de-stigmatization of sex is in progress, Chinese people in general are still quite sensitive to public discussion of sex (*ibid.*). This social fact explains fans' shy enthusiasm for Dicky Biaoqing. Though Dicky is an interlude in the Budding Pop Biaoqingbao, it highlights the moral judgement of Biaoqing in the Biaoqing cultural system.

Though the key temperament of Budding Pop has changed several times, the defining and dominant feature, that is cute/*méng*, has always been firmly present. In the fans' comments, cuteness/*méng*-ness is the only overwhelming reason why fans follow Budding Pop (see comments 1-3 in Figure 9.15). Because of their deep love for Budding Pop, fans would anxiously wait for the publication of new Biaoqingbao (see comment 4 in Figure 9.15), and they would generously spend money on merchandise and show off their collection (see comments 5 and 6 in Figure 9.15).

1	抱走 好萌！😍😍😍	I'll take them. So méng!😍😍😍
2	好萌啊。看它们扭啊扭啊心情都不一样了呢。。嘿嘿。期待下一季！！	So méng. When I watch them dancing, my mood will get better. Looking forward to the next Biaoqingbao!!
3	第一次看到长草就觉得得到了发现了新天地，在这么多没节操的表情文字爬满屏幕的时期，这种可爱又逗比的画风真的让人感觉亲切又刚好，不分年龄的萌，又很活泼，又很抓眼球	I found a new world after I saw Budding for the first time. In an age where screens are filled with vulgar Biaoqing and texts, this type of cute and funny style really feels warm and just right. Méng regardless of age, lively and attractive
4	等了很久的新表情，终于来啦	A long-awaited-for new Biaoqingbao. Finally
5	早就买啦(●'ω`●)挂饰自己剁手买了 抱枕基友吃土送我	Already bought (●'ω`●) I bought the pendant myself with all my savings, and my friend bought the cushion for me with all her savings
6	收到书啦😊😊😊	I received the picture book😊😊😊

Figure 9.15 Examples of fans' comments on and actions to Budding Pop

Fans hold a high opinion towards Mao Tui for different reasons. The majority of fans think she is cute and funny (see comments 1 and 2 in Figure 9.16), and they like her because she creates Budding Pop Biaoqing (see comments 3 and 4 in Figure 9.16). Some fans share interests with Mao Tui, which enhances their liking for her (see comment 5 in Figure 9.16). A handful of fans think Mao Tui brings positive energy to them (see comment 6 in Figure 9.16).

1	感觉 po 主萌萌哒	I think she is very méng
2	喜欢毛腿好久了，萌贱萌贱的！	I have been liking Mao Tui for quite long. She is mischievously méng!
3	腿腿真的是卯足劲的养团子呀，太爱你啦！ 高效腿腿，赛高！！比心❤️	Tui is really working hard to raise Pop. Love you so much! Efficient Tui is the best. Love you ❤️
4	加油毛腿 多出表情和周边 躺等_(:↘)∠_	Cheers Mao Tui. Put forward more Biaoqing and merchandise. I'm waiting _(:↘)∠_
5	毛腿毛腿撒赖嘿哟~~~~也要继续喜欢凯源宝宝呐🤗🤗	Mao Tui I love you ~~~~~please also keep on liking Karry and Roy ³⁶⁸ 🤗🤗
6	正能量👊	Positive energy👊

Figure 9.16 Examples of comments on Mao Tui

In her post on September 8, 2014, Mao Tui mentioned that she was a freshman, which triggers heated reaction from fans. For most fans, the designer of their idol is supposed to be a senior experienced person. Consequently, many fans are surprised that they are following a person much younger than themselves (see comments 1-3 in Figure 9.17), and some are amazed by her achievements (see comment 4 in Figure 9.17). Based on the cute yet naughty characteristic of Budding Pop, some fans speculate on the personality

³⁶⁸ Karry Wang and Roy Wang are members of TFBOYS, a Chinese boy band.

or character of its designer. When Mao Tui's age and social status are revealed, some fans are surprised by their incorrect assumptions regarding her (see comment 5 in Figure 9.17), and some are happy to confirm their speculation (see comment 6 in Figure 9.17).

1	原来我是阿姨😅	It turns out I'm an aunty 😅
2	泥竟然是小孩儿!!!	You are a kid!!!
3	😅我竟然在关注一个在校大学生，还要是刚报道的那种。	😅 I'm following a college student, and even a freshman.
4	天辣，才大一😭 同是大一，怎么差这么多 [泪流满面]	Oh my god, a freshman😭 I'm also a freshman, but there's such a big difference between us [full of tears]
5	诶你居然刚上大学！我还以为是变态大叔诶。。	You just started college! I thought you were a wired uncle..
6	毛腿这么可爱果然还是个孩子！	Mao Tui is so cute. No wonder, she is a kid!

Figure 9.17 Examples of comments about Mao Tui's identity

This incident concerning the age and identity of Mao Tui reflects the difference between traditional offline communities and new online communities. It is not unusual to see people making judgments about online identities grounded in customary offline habits of identification. For instance, the majority of fans naturally assume Mao Tui, the designer of Budding Pop, to be an adult experienced in fine arts. This incident is special in the sense that there are not so many people as successful as Mao Tui in the Biaoqingbao industry. But it is also very revealing of the fact that people, at least those in this fan community, are still not so familiar or comfortable with new forms of community or social organization on the internet. Online communities are often regarded as virtual projections of offline communities (which is why we have Facebook 'friends'), but they are essentially different in the sense that online communities can be extremely light and defy the vast sharedness among participants and the robust structures in offline communities (Blommaert & Varis, 2015; Fernback, 2007; Wellman et al., 2002). The online and the offline spaces influence and shape each other, and they form an online-offline nexus that has great theoretical implications for approaching digital phenomena.

Though Budding Pop has a big fan community (as manifested by the number of followers on Mao Tui's Weibo and WeChat official account), only a handful of fans explicitly report why they give Rewards or buy merchandise. According to the comments, fans give Rewards and pay for merchandise because they love the cuteness of Budding Pop (see Figure 9.18, comments 2, 4 in Figure 9.19).

1	萌死了！立刻发了五元红包！继续加油呀	So méng! I immediately rewarded ¥5! Work on
2	团团 给你赞赏小费啦！要加油出更多新表情哈！	Popling I already tipped you! Please create more Biaoqing!

Figure 9.18 Examples of fans' self-reported reasons for rewarding

9.4 Comparison of the two fan communities

Three major differences are observed between the two fan communities presented above. First, the Budding Pop fan community came into being three years earlier than the Eggy fan community, and it has a much bigger fan base. The second difference is an inevitable outcome of the first one. As the two communities were initiated at different time, they were faced with different affordances of social media in different times. The Budding Pop community appeared on Weibo, and the Eggy community developed on WeChat. The actions and practices performed in the two communities are shaped by the interface, policies and regulations, functionalities and target audiences of different social media platforms. The third difference has to do with the reasons for giving Rewards and buying merchandise. In the Eggy fan community, followers often share why they reward and buy merchandise. While in the Budding Pop fan community, fans rarely tell why they do so. What they do the most is to express how much they are attracted by Budding Pop (see comments 1 and 2 in Figure 9.19), and how happy they are to have the merchandise (see comments 3 and 4 in Figure 9.19), or to show off their merchandise collections (see comment 5³⁶⁹ in Figure 9.19).

1	团子第一书，说什么也要拥有🍡	The first picture book of Pop, I must have one🍡
2	这也太可爱了叭！我要拥有！！	So cute! I must have it!!
3	我的团子要到了	My Pop is being delivered
4	可爱的团子，已下单啦🍡🍡	Cute Pop. I have already placed an order 🍡🍡
5	<div>团🍡❤️🍡: 🍡惊不惊喜🍡 评论配图</div> <div>收起 🔍 查看大图 ↶ 向左转 ↷ 向右转</div> <div></div>	🍡 Amazed or not 🍡

Figure 9.19 Examples of fans’ reactions to merchandise

Though no definite explanation to the behavioral difference between the two fan communities can be directly observed from the actions and practices in the community, the first and second differences between the two communities provide some clues. The two communities develop from different social media at different times. The social media, although they have similarities in the services they provide, are different from each other in terms of their regulations, policies, marketing orientations, features/functionalities, interfaces and audiences. WeChat aims to provide a forum for people who create values (Zhang Xiaolong, 2019), while Weibo focuses on providing a platform for sharing and spreading information and news (Weibo, n.d.). For instance, WeChat, as an all-in-one app, provides mobile payment and finance services, and provides open access to its Sticker

³⁶⁹ In this comment, the fan uploads the photo of her collection of Budding Pop dolls.

Gallery for the general public to contribute Biaoqingbao and cash in on them. In contrast to WeChat, Weibo does not provide payment or finance services, and provides no infrastructure for users to cash in on Biaoqing published on Weibo. These differences in infrastructure, platform affordances and functionality lead to differences in what people can do and will do on WeChat and Weibo.

The different affordances and features of social media are formatted backstage by social media providers and thus often taken for granted by users. However, they play a fundamental role in influencing or even deciding the visibility of and accessibility to contents on social media (boyd, 2010; Poell & Van Dijck, 2014; Tufekci, 2015). These features are woven into the backstage algorithmic actions of social media providers, and they influence and shape the behaviors, actions and norms that are typical of the social media. In other words, each social media platform enables chronotopes of its own, which can infinitely incorporate and combine with other chronotopes, and the resulting chronotopes are governed with their own behavioral norms and rules. The two fan communities are a case in point.

In spite of the abovementioned differences, there are striking similarities between the two fan communities. The affordances of social media, for instance the WeChat Biaoqing Open Platform, the comment function on WeChat and Weibo, and the online shopping support of Taobao, are indispensable to their development. Designers of both Biaoqingbao are active on multiple platforms, which boosts the diversity of the content underlying the communities and the fan base of the communities.

Fans in both communities reward Biaoqingbao and pay for merchandise for similar reasons. The fans' comments clearly demonstrate that the cute temperament of the Biaoqing figures is the strongest attraction for them. In this sense, fans aspire to the characteristic of cuteness to show their aesthetic value, or their taste. When fans use Biaoqing of a special characteristic, the characteristic is accredited to them. Consequently, Biaoqing become resources for fans to perform a micro-hegemonic identity and to establish certain desired persona for themselves. Fans' admiration and aspiration for the cute temperament, good qualities and moral values of the Biaoqing figures are transformed into highly consequential activities. They not only enthusiastically use the Biaoqing, but also generously give Rewards and eagerly buy Biaoqing merchandise. Fans willingly spend money on resources for desired persona and micro-hegemonic identity (Ahuvia, 2005; Fiske, 1992; Richins, 1994; Sirgy, 1982; Veblen, 2005). These economic practices make Biaoqingbao such a lucrative business that many designers have made Biaoqingbao their career, which is native to and typical of 21st-century online culture.

9.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, the fan communities of Eggy and Budding Pop were followed to find out why fans willingly and voluntarily open their wallets for Biaoqing and merchandise. The inspection of the communities shows that fans are not simply paying for the Biaoqingbao and their merchandise, but also sharing their personal interests and pursuing the Biaoqing characteristics they deem valuable (e.g. cute, positive, lovely, excellent, etc.).

Such communities, without robust structures, are open to and undemanding on participants who are attracted to the communities solely for the sake of fun, i.e. their fondness for the Biaoqing figures. In this sense, they are light online communities. In such light communities, people not only share information relevant to their idol Biaoqing figures, they also generously spend money on their idols. But when we look through this surface and dig deeper, we find that they are in fact paying for the ideal role model for themselves (for instance, diligent, positive, caring, etc.), for aspiration to ideal states for themselves (for instance, happy, cute, innocent, etc.), and for their taste of *méng*, which symbolizes their aesthetic judgement (Veblen, 2005). When fans use Biaoqing with the desired qualities, such qualities are projected on them in this process. These Biaoqing are resources for fans to build a desired persona for themselves, and thus constitute a specific kind of knowledge: their cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984, 2011).

The phenomena of the two fan communities are new and old at the same time. They are new in the sense that they develop in an online-offline nexus and they are part of a new industry that has never existed before. They are old in the sense that the logic underlying their development has been running long in culture and history, i.e. people pay for what they value and desire (Belk, 1988; Sirgy, 1982; Veblen, 2005).

Participants of the two fan communities are not the only ones who are after this taste. They are only part of a *méng*-pursuing community. There are various social and cultural reasons behind the fervent pursuit of *méng*, including the need for dealing with stress in life, the aspiration for the expression of one's true self, the desire to demonstrate a distinctive identity, etc. (Cao Wenxin, 2014; Jiang Zhaoguo & Ye Bing, 2010; Sun Ji, 2013; Zhu Qin, 2014). The pursuit of *méng* taste gradually develops into *méng* culture (Wen Qiuping, 2016), and has become part of the mainstream culture in Chinese society (Cao Wenxin, 2014; Sun Ji, 2013). There is no threshold to *méng* culture, and *méng* pursuers do not have shared backgrounds or space. In the light of these facts, *méng* pursuers, or *méng* culture participants, actually form a light community.

To sum up, the two fan communities are part of a light community pursuing *méng*-culture in Chinese society. Participants of this light community spend money on *méng* objects, which are resources for showcasing their desired taste and micro-hegemonic identity. The activities in this light community have heavy consequences. They hatch a new form of economic practice, and spawn new categories in cultural industry, in this case image IP industry and Biaoqing industry, both of which are typical of 21st-century online culture.

PART V

Conclusions

CHAPTER 10

Conclusions

In June 2019, while I was putting together the final draft of this study, I wanted to check some of the data that I had been analyzing in one of my chapters. To my dismay, they had disappeared: the provider had completely overhauled the interface, putting different categories of Biaoqing in a completely new order and deleting several of them.

This example shows both a key feature of the field I have been investigating here, and a key methodological issue in this type of research. Both are profoundly influenced and even conditioned by the technologies that are central to the phenomena discussed here, and it is clear these technologies cannot be overlooked as a factor of agency in the usage of Biaoqing as well as in its study. Practitioners as well as researchers are all operating within an ordered sector of phenomena, the control of which lies in the algorithmic and marketing strategies of those providing the online infrastructure. There is little doubt that the new interface I encountered online will have an effect on how practitioners use Biaoqing, find their resources, learn to understand the rules of their normative usage, and form communities around it; just as there is very little doubt that the same intervention affects the researcher whose initial field of scrutiny was suddenly reconfigured. It forces us into perpetual knowledge work, learning and relearning the rules of social action, the parameters of which are never static in a rapidly changing knowledge economy. In this knowledge economy, the intangible knowledge products (which are a projection of vernacular globalization) and actions generate communities of knowledge, markets and values that are algorithmically mediated and chronotope-specific.

The different chapters in this study have documented diverse aspects of this continually evolving process. In what follows, I shall highlight some of the main findings and suggest lines for further research.

10.1 Knowledge economy

The internet has become accessible and affordable to the general public in China. The internet brings revolutionary changes to the way people communicate and consume, for instance multimodal asynchronous non-face-to-face communication mediated by social media platforms, online shopping, mobile payment, etc. The infrastructures and affordances of the internet and social media are the fertile soil where Biaoqing take root.

Biaoqing and their usage are the result of people's actions of creating, teaching, refining and learning information relevant to Biaoqing: they are knowledge practices. In

this sense, Biaoqing are intangible knowledge products of such knowledge practices and a prime instance of what is known as the 'knowledge society' and/or 'knowledge economy'.

The knowledge economy of Biaoqing takes root and flourishes online, and is entirely dependent on the digital labor (Fuchs & Sevignani, 2013; Terranova, 2000) of Biaoqing users who produce enormous amounts of data. Such labor on the one hand creates virality of specific types of Biaoqing, which can be converted into different types of capital for Biaoqing designers and Biaoqing users. On the other hand, it creates big data for social media providers to cash in on, and (indirectly) for security and surveillance agencies interested in what goes on in society. As we have seen throughout the chapters, such labor is performed with high levels of engagement, individually as well as collectively. Biaoqing practitioners appear to derive great satisfaction from being involved in highly sophisticated learning practices, involving high degrees of personal freedom and creativity. At the same time, they can only be successful learners by allowing themselves to be fully immersed in evolving but highly structured and normatively organized communities of knowledge. Taken together, the labor performed by Biaoqing practitioners is at the same time cognitive and epistemic, creative and artistic, economic, social and cultural.

Though flourishing online, the knowledge economy of Biaoqing extends to both online and offline spaces. First, people's online behaviors and practices are inevitably shaped by what happens offline (as illustrated in Chapters 3, 6, 7, 8). That is to say: what upholds the knowledge economy (i.e. the online knowledge practices) is a result of the dialectics of an online-offline nexus. Second, the knowledge economy of Biaoqing per se is a phenomenon that expands from the online to the offline, as manifested by the facts that being a Biaoqing designer has become a full-time profession, and that people spend and earn considerable amounts of money on Biaoqing merchandise. In other words, the knowledge economy of Biaoqing develops in an online-offline nexus, the perspective of which has important methodological implications for approaching digital phenomena, helping us avoid seeing online phenomena as simply 'mirroring' offline ones and directing our attention to the complex interaction between both the online and the offline.

10.2 Knowledge practices and knowledge products

As the vernacularization of the global cultural forms of emojis, memes, stickers and emoticons, Biaoqing are re-imagined and re-presented in Chinese society with locally constructed accents and social meanings. They are part of a culture scape and part of a global 'supervernacular' of multimodal signs that emerged alongside the rise and spread of mobile (and later smart) phones and have (as emojis, memes and so forth) been incorporated into the repertoires of internet users worldwide. What Chinese people do with this vernacularized cultural form is loaded with localized meanings and reflects the structures of the local sociocultural environment, exploiting the affordances of Chinese scripts, genres and iconographic histories. And what the internet does is to offer tremendous intensity, speed and scope to the distribution and uptake of Biaoqing, with important accelerations and changes whenever platforms and devices are upgraded.

Like their globalized semiotic siblings, Biaoqing are originally designed to make up for what is missing in online communication compared to face-to-face interaction, and to add more fun to online communication. This determines the ludic nature of Biaoqing and Biaoqing-related genres. Since the appearance of Biaoqing, people have explored their communicative functions, for instance, expressing emotions, serving as punctuation marks, cueing certain uptake, etc. Apart from the pragmatic and meta-pragmatic functions, people also explore the ludic functions of Biaoqing, for instance, bantering, Doutu, irony, political participation, etc. These further developments of Biaoqing practices have precipitated and consolidated the ludic essence of the Biaoqing usage norms, giving it sometimes a distinctly carnivalesque flavor.

What I want to emphasize in this study, however, is the aspect of knowledge, and how knowledge is the clue to understanding the complexities and adjustments to rapidly changing platform contexts that control the usage of Biaoqing. In the ludic atmosphere of usage described above, the main actions deployed by people are creating, learning, discussing and spreading knowledge about Biaoqing (e.g. their indexicalities, usage norms, etc.), which are in essence knowledge practices. People using Biaoqing are, in effect, forming, distributing and socially deploying specifically designed online-offline chunks of knowledge.

The knowledge practices and knowledge products are not free-floating pieces and chunks in the online space. Through knowledge practices, people continually negotiate, establish and learn rules and norms concerning the usage of Biaoqing in specific situations. In other words, they create genres, i.e. clusters of formal features which make a communicative event recognizable as an instance of socially and culturally established categories. Genres are the media through which specific communicative events are recognized, expected behavioral norms are invoked, and expected responses are suggested. Put in another way, communication is enacted in and through genres. In Biaoqing-related genres, the usage of specific Biaoqing triggers specific behavioral norms associated to specific genres, and vice versa. Genres function in concrete communicative situations (or time-space configurations) governed with specific sets of behavioral norms and rules, i.e. chronotopes. We can say that genres are an essential dimension of chronotopes. As a heuristic notion, chronotope does not explain or interpret anything, but it directs us to a particular set of phenomena and their situated occurrence, for instance various Biaoqing-related genres, practices, rules and norms as deployed on specific platforms.

In the case of Biaoqing, chronotopes are technologically constructed on various social media. In these chronotopes, the knowledge practices of Biaoqing have two dimensions: they are creatively performed by people on the frontstage of social media; and they are algorithmically mediated by automated machine actions in the backstage of social media. These two aspects of the knowledge practices have fundamental implications for the communities of knowledge of Biaoqing.

10.3 Communities of knowledge

Through observing the knowledge practices and products, we can see communities of knowledge. The term 'community of knowledge' is adopted because it is a congregation gathered around knowledge products and knowledge practices in which we observe the emergence of relationships and roles. Participants have different positions and roles in the hierarchy of the community depending on the actions they perform, for instance producing, learning, discussing or innovating knowledge in the community. Participants of the community of knowledge may come and go, but the knowledge products stay, and the actions and practices of producing, sharing and learning stay. This is a fundamental difference from previous theories on community, such as community of practice and affinity space, where people are the essential components. The shift from people to knowledge, knowledge practices and relationships helps digital ethnographic researchers overcome the limitations imposed by the internet. By focusing on knowledge, researchers are forced to observe concrete products and actions, which overcomes the uncertainties of actors (e.g. demographic parameters, intentions, etc.). A community of knowledge is identifiable by presentation of knowledge products created and accumulated through history, which provides a time dimension and thereby provides a more precise and accurate understanding of the object of study. The shift from people to knowledge practices is a strategic move to keep in step with the change in the loci of ethnographic research (the change from offline fields to an online-offline nexus), and with the shift of research interests (from pure semiotic resources to the society where they operate and circulate).

On Chinese social media, communities of knowledge of Biaoqing are light communities for four reasons:

1. They are extremely open and flexible. They are formed by the fact that the participants in the communities are connected through the internet and through Biaoqing. Participants play different roles, and their roles may shift from time to time. For instance, some participants (can) provide extra information about a painting used in a posh Biaoqing, and some (can only) learn the knowledge produced or spread by others. Their (in-)ability to perform different roles and actions illustrates the e-inequality and stratification of the community of knowledge and of the society in general.
2. Participation is not a matter of subjective decision, but a matter of what people do. People become participants of a community of knowledge through the fact that they perform knowledge practices (which are partly generated and conditioned by algorithms) in algorithmically mediated chronotopes.
3. Communities of knowledge of Biaoqing emerge in miscellaneous forms on various social media with different regulations and market orientations, which endow a chronotopic nature on Biaoqing-related activities performed on these social media.
4. Miscellaneous communities of knowledge of Biaoqing might overlap or compete with each other and they together form a grand but elastic and amorphous community of knowledge. This points to the segmented structure of the community.

In the community of knowledge of Biaoqing, knowledge products are produced, spread, taught and learned, and knowledge practices are performed, innovated and expanded, all of which happen in and through genres which operate within electronically configured chronotopes: the platforms and their affordances and constraints. Chronotope has a layered dimension: “[c]hronotopes are mutually inclusive, they co-exist, they may be interwoven with, replace or oppose one another, contradict one another or find themselves in ever more complex interrelationships” (Bakhtin, 1981: 252). The infinite fractality of chronotope ensures the cross-chronotopic nature of genres with innovated or expanded knowledge practices that are normalized.

The dynamism of the communities of knowledge of Biaoqing is embodied in various degrees of innovations with knowledge practices. Of the newly informed practices, some stay inside ‘pure’ Biaoqing-related chronotopes (e.g. Doutu), some almost break out of Biaoqing-related chronotopes (e.g. Doutu in conflictual situation and Biaoqingbao Battle), and some clearly cross the chronotopes (e.g. Biaoqing for marketing, Biaoqing-hatched cultural industry). The newly developed Biaoqing practices, governed with specific norms, become standardized and thus become new genres, which automatically entail new chronotopes. All these knowledge products, practices, genres and chronotopes feed into a ‘real’ (not in a metaphorical sense) knowledge economy which has different sectors.

10.4 Markets in knowledge economy

People are willing and able to convert the intangible Biaoqing-related knowledge products into various types of capital. In the knowledge economy anchored on Biaoqing, the sectors of financial, fame and attention economy of Biaoqing prosper as a result of the innovated practices with Biaoqing and the enormous communities they generate. In the Biaoqing cultural system, people use Biaoqing not only as semiotic resources, but also as identity-performing and persona-constructing resources, and thus instruments for cultural capital.

Given the inequality characterizing the relationships between participants in communities of knowledge of Biaoqing, in which some participants possess superior skills and capacities to those of others, such ‘leaders’ in the field of Biaoqing design can transform themselves into genuine producers converting intangible knowledge artefacts into for-profit market commodities. Once again we observe what may be the essence of a ‘knowledge society’ and ‘knowledge economy’ here: intangible online products of creative work, performed within an online-offline nexus where people are eager to absorb them and use them in new forms of interaction, can quickly turn into ‘hard’ capital due to the potential identity effects of such products.

Money is spent here *because of* participation in communities of knowledge, and *for* a particular possible set of roles and relationships within such communities. Buying and selling Biaoqing, consequently, are not acts that are detached from the communities of knowledge; they are an integral part of it. By extension, they are not a violation of the general ludic nature of Biaoqing practices, but must be seen as economic effects of such

ludic practices. After all, as Goffman (1961: 39) reminded us, a game of poker can be played “just for fun” while substantial amounts of money are involved.

10.5 Contributions and implications

After having discussed the practices, products, communities and markets in the knowledge economy of Biaoqing in Chinese society, it is time to turn to more general theoretical contributions and implications that we can draw from this research.

In this study, chronotope is a powerful heuristic concept that accurately directs our attention to the practices, rules, norms and genres related to Biaoqing, generating satisfactory descriptive and analytical accuracy and adequacy. The analyses in this study contribute concrete empirical evidence for the theorization of context through the heuristic notion of chronotope. Especially when it comes to investigating online contexts, where platform affordances and algorithmic effects control the background of ongoing social actions, this notion is compelling. The incorporation of norms in approaching digital phenomena provides descriptive and analytical accuracy and adequacy, which the generic concept of ‘context’ would not be able to provide.

The action-centered perspective is adopted as the methodological strategy to analyze the concrete observable data related to Biaoqing. The detailed description of communities of knowledge provides a new way of looking at (digital) organization of groups in society and a new sociological imagination. The action-centered perspective and the notion of community of knowledge are potentially productive tactics for approaching online communities on the basis of concrete, observable actions and knowledge products, and bypassing the uncertainties imposed by the inevitable technological mediation discussed above, for instance the uncertainties of internet users’ demographic features and intentions, etc.

The study of Biaoqing and Biaoqingbao, as a type of graphic semiotic resource on Chinese social media, reveals complicated social textures and a series of on-going socio-cultural transformations projected on the often-overlooked meaning-making system. This research draws attention to the value of multimodal semiotic resources, which were and still are quite often treated as trivial in the field of linguistics, sociology and ethnography. The results of this study promote the re-centering of multimodal semiotic resources in linguistic and ethnographic research, challenges the primacy status of named language, and calls for re-thinking of the philosophical perspective on meaning-making.

Digital ethnographers are faced with a series of problems. The research field is constantly changing, and the data researchers collect and analyze only offer a glimpse of the development trajectory of the field, or the society in general; the vignette with which I open this chapter speaks for itself. Due to the restriction of the ‘screen’, researchers can only make use of what can be observed and reached; the working of algorithms to a large degree decides what researchers can access. Not all of the problems are within the control of ethnographers, for example the issues posed by algorithms. However, the approach of digital ethnography can provide a solution to most of the obstacles through:

1. admission and provision of an accurate realization of the problems;
2. ethnographers' familiarity with and knowledge of the target society (both online and offline);
3. discipline of the scientist community on ethnographers;
4. ethnographers' self-correction in the process of systematic inquiry.

This research contributes to the 'renovation' of the toolkit to describe, analyze and reveal online ethnolinguistic landscapes, and to theorize the agency of semiotic resource users in rapidly changing online space. The limitations and implications of this study are expected to pave the way for other fruitful researches in relevant fields.

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SUMMARY

Biaoqing on Chinese Social Media

Practices, products, communities and markets in a knowledge economy

Biaoqing is the vernacularization on Chinese social media of the global cultural form of what is commonly known as emojis and memes in other cultures. This study approaches Biaoqing as graphic semiotic recourses the widespread usage of which renders them structural phenomena that provide insight to the fabric of Chinese society. The dynamism of online culture forces us into perpetual knowledge work, learning and relearning the rules of social action, the parameters of which are never static in a rapidly changing knowledge economy. In this knowledge economy, the intangible knowledge products (which are a projection of vernacular globalization) and actions generate communities of knowledge, markets and values which are algorithmically mediated and chronotope-specific.

The epistemological premise of this study is that Biaoqing can be best investigated by looking at actions concerning Biaoqing. Meaning making and mutual understanding in interaction and in society at large are realized through the interpretation and (dis-)confirmation of communicative actions. In other words, communicative actions are the portal through which social structure is reanimated and creatively reaffirmed from day to day. In online spaces where anonymity is a rule due to the lack of immediately accessible knowledge as to who the participants are, what remains robust, certain and observable is action. To explore actions concerning Biaoqing and thereby unravel Biaoqing phenomena, the heuristic notion of chronotope, a time-space configuration governed by norms that define the genres performable therein and simultaneously contribute to the recognition and innovation of the genres, will be employed as a roadmap.

The close scrutiny of a wide range of Biaoqing related practices reveals an enormous community of knowledge of Biaoqing that emerges by and through participants' knowledge products and knowledge work in a knowledge economy. A prominent component of the community of knowledge of Biaoqing is instruction communities where practices such as creating, learning, refining and spreading knowledge (e.g. Biaoqing-making resources, usage norms etc.) are continually performed and intensively engaged in by participants. The inspection of instruction communities provides a glance into the grand community of knowledge of Biaoqing: it consists of numerous sub-communities emerging in different shapes and developing in different forms on different social media with different regulations, interface organizations, user items and target audiences. As all the activities in this community are algorithmically converted into normative orders of usage for Biaoqing, and at the same time feed back to the algorithms, such a community

is algorithmically mediated. Different from traditional offline communities defined by robust demographic features such as nationality, class, gender etc., the community of knowledge of Biaoqing has no demarcated boundaries, no participant obligations, and no entry threshold, and therefore is a light community. However, the knowledge shared and acquired in such a community is potent and even binding in influencing the communicative behavior of its participants.

The case of the posh Biaoqingbao community, an emerging sub-community, provides a glimpse into the structure of the community of knowledge of Biaoqing. The community is defined by knowledge practices and roles (e.g. instructor, follower) acquired thereby. Such a sub-community rapidly emerges on social media when increasing numbers of participants are exposed to and/or attracted by the indexicalities precipitated on posh Biaoqing (e.g. being extraordinary and above the plebeian) with differential attitudes and unequal knowledge demonstrated through participants' practices, which present a centripetal, stratified, and segmental structure in terms of resources (or cultural capital) and roles of participants and in terms of the relations between sub-communities.

The prevailing presence of Biaoqing on Chinese social media spawned numerous novel communitive practices, of which Doutu is a conspicuous one. Doutu, two and more rounds of Biaoqing exchange by participants who show clear inclination to extend such interaction, is a highly dynamic grassroots genre that may happen on various social media in various situations between various participants for various communicative purposes with various results. The genre of Doutu may interact with other genres in the process of which the norms of Doutu are being constantly discussed, explored and expanded. Through the creative deployment of Doutu (e.g. Doutu in conflictual communication, Doutu in political participation), participants almost break out of Doutu but manage to stay in the genre, and stay inside the chronotope.

There are numerous cases where people's communicative practices stay inside Biaoqing chronotopes, and there are also endless cases where the interaction between Biaoqing chronotopes and non-Biaoqing chronotopes is palpable, of which the dynamism of the Biaoqing cultural system is an example par excellence. In the cases of non-linear transformation of the wave and smile Biaoqing from friendly phatic expressions to markers of contempt, and the popularity of elder Biaoqing and Chinese-character-based Biaoqing, we see the complex interplay between offline facts (e.g. the growing population of senior internet users) and online facts (e.g. unequal cultural capital among internet users), between traditional Chinese cultural norms (e.g. standing firm at thirty, propriety, politeness) and a new social ethos (e.g. increasing legitimacy of individualism). The dynamism of the Biaoqing cultural system is a corollary of the expansions of usage norms of Biaoqing, expansions of genres and chronotopes (or cross-chronotopes), and expansions from online to offline and vice versa.

A most concrete example of its cross-chronotopic nature would be the economy of Biaoqingbao. The affordance of infrastructures such as the internet, smart terminals, social media, mobile payment technology etc. lays the foundation for the development of the Biaoqingbao economy where Biaoqing is the commodity for exchange of fame, attention and money. A fundamental factory underlying the purchase or value of Biaoqing are the indexicalities of the genre of Biaoqing and the indexicalities of different types of

Biaoqing. The indexicalities of Biaoqing enable them to serve as resources for the establishment of a (desired) persona and for the performance of specific identities, and therefore are cultural capital. Biaoqing – a knowledge product – is turned into a knowledge-economic product in which communities of knowledge are turned into markets.

The cases of two Biaoqing figures (Happy and Budding Pop) that are idolized by enthusiastic users of their Biaoqing provide a crystal-clear illustration of the Biaoqingbao economy. Though the two figures emerge on different social media at different times with different infrastructural affordances, they share the common feature of creating a fan community by and through their Biaoqing and merchandise. In such fan communities, which are an example of light communities, participants generously open their wallets not simply for the qualities of the figures (e.g. cute, positive, lovely, excellent, etc.), but also for the ideal role model for themselves (e.g. diligent, positive, caring, etc.), for aspiration to ideal states for themselves (e.g. happy, cute, innocent, etc.), and for their taste of *méng*, which symbolizes their aesthetic judgement, or cultural capital. Such light communities hatch a new form of economic practice in an online-offline nexus, and spawn new categories in cultural industries, in this case image IP industry and Biaoqing industry, both of which are typical of 21st-century online culture.

To sum up, this study investigates intangible knowledge products and actions that generate communities, markets and values in an algorithmically mediated and chronotope-specific way and that illustrate processes of vernacular globalization. The study of Biaoqing as a type of graphic semiotic resource on Chinese social media reveals a complicated social fabric and a series of on-going sociocultural transformations projected on the often-overlooked meaning-making system. In this study, the action-centered approach, the employment of the heuristic notion of chronotope, and the observation of light communities and emerging practices and industries in an online-offline nexus invite a re-imagination of social facts and a re-thinking of theories for sociocultural research in an era of digitalization and globalization.

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 Kaapverdische 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 case-study 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 'litteraire 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. Concurrentieoordelen 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.
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