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**Semiotics of the “chain of contempt” in  
Chinese media**

**Master Thesis**

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I hereby declare that I have written this Master's Thesis independently. Within this thesis, all works cited or used have been properly referred to throughout the text, as well as documented in the section entitled "References".

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## 1. “Chain of contempt” in the studies and media coverage

Probably even the author of the article him/herself could not anticipate that once the term “chain of contempt”<sup>1</sup> was summarised and reported, it would have seen such a significant impact on the Chinese Internet. Currently, most media articles on the Chinese Internet generally believe that this term originated from an article published by *Southern Metropolis Daily* on April 7, 2012, entitled “*chain of contempt - a sociopsychological analysis of those subtle senses of superiority in life*”<sup>2</sup>. This article brings a phenomenon in life to our vision that stays unclear whether it is intriguing or absurd: people who share a particular hobby or habit of purchasing goods are described to be divided into small circles spontaneously, according to the nuance of choice or preferences, and then despise each other. Take the preference of watching TV dramas, as an example, those who care about British TV dramas despise those who watch American ones; then they hate those who watch Japanese and Korean TV dramas. These Japanese and Korean drama fans despise those who watch TV dramas from Hong Kong and Taiwan, while the latter despise those who watch Chinese mainland dramas – do not rush to feel sad for them; Thai drama aficionados, at the bottom of this chain, despised by them. This phenomenon of the downward transmission of superiority and attitude of disdain is described as a chain then summarised as the “**chain of contempt**” (*Southern Metropolis Daily*, 2012).

### 1.1. Overview of the popularity of the term and literature review

As a term summed up by media, the “chain of contempt” has naturally become popular in media coverage; on the three vastly used social platforms by Chinese, especially youngsters,

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<sup>1</sup> “鄙视链” in Chinese language

<sup>2</sup> This title in the original text in Chinese language: “鄙视链——生活中那些微妙的优越感之社会心理分析”

WeChat subscriptions, Weibo and Zhihu<sup>3</sup>, it is not any difficult to find lots of posts, articles and Q&As concerning the “chain of contempt”, such contents can cover almost all domains and scenes in everyday life. In the early stage, although the term “chain of contempt” prevailed, there was usually only one chain in every field, as media articles stated: among different departments of a unit - *The “chain of contempt” among the various departments of the hospital, see where you are (medsci.cn, 2015)*; among different fields of industry - *The ubiquitous “chain of contempt” in the Internet industry, which level are you in? (gelonghui.com, 2016)*; or among the consumers of a specific product - *What is the “chain of contempt” in the circle of watches like? (xbiao.com, 2015)*. Later, the “chain of contempt” became further subdivided among the urban population, bottom-class workers, ways of travelling, taxi drivers, and even the usernames of social media, “chain of contempt” could be observed as *The Encyclopaedia of the “chains of contempt” in China! You would never know before but will be shocked after reading (163.com, 2020)* shows. Another manifestation of the popularity of this buzzword is that, in a variety show named “*National Treasure*” produced by *China Central Television*<sup>4</sup>, which has always been relatively serious in content production, the guest, curator of China National Silk Museum, used the expression “standing at the top of the chain of contempt”, while introducing an ancient handicraft of outstanding value (*China Central Television, 2019*).

Despite media content and entertainment products, we are more concerned about how academia views this buzz term. Unfortunately, there have not been many academic articles explicitly published on the “chain of contempt” in Chinese academic circles, and even fewer discussed the media’s role in forming and disseminating the “chain of contempt”. To exemplify, three articles have been found to display the commonalities and limitations of the articles. In Wu Si’s research, she reviewed previous studies on the analysis of the relationship between the formation of the chain of contempt and social, cultural and economic capital, in the light of Bourdieu’s relevant theory, and combined with the process of producing the “chain of contempt” to reveal some explanations on the issues that had not been dealt with before, for example, in the “chain of contempt” of TV series as we mentioned, Korean-drama fans would not abandon watching their favourites even if they realise they are under contempt. She referred to all the chains of contempt that “existed and are widely accepted by the public” collectively as the “information chains of contempt”<sup>5</sup>, and analysed their typology and significance of primary

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<sup>3</sup> A person living outside China may regard WeChat, Weibo, and Zhihu as Chinese versions of Facebook, Twitter, and Quora, respectively

<sup>4</sup> It will be further introduced in the analysis part hereinafter

<sup>5</sup> In her article, she translated the term as “information disdain chain”, instead of “information chain of contempt”

group in meeting the demand of identity construction. Individuals and information chains of contempt are connected to each other through the operation of social, cultural, and economic capital, simultaneously promoting the reproduction of the information chains of contempt (Wu 2018). Jiang Shuyuan pointed out that, the chain of contempt is represented by mutual or self-mockery, generated by the differentiation and reshaping of social classes and the diversification of lifestyles, and such mentality is repeatedly strengthened through the diffusion of homogenised information (Jiang 2018). Lü Yingwei's research is relatively distinctive among peers' articles, adopting a quantitative research method, she studied the main channels of dissemination of the chains of contempt, and particularly, she found out that the expressed value and ways of expression have apparent differences across the narrative parts, comment parts of media articles and comments of netizens (Lü 2018).

Although both the “chain of contempt” and discrimination are derived from prejudice, there is a fundamental difference between the two. Discrimination has evolved from negative attitudes to hostile behaviours, and the “chain of contempt” only reflects the collective mentality of contemporary Chinese youngsters, basically staying at a conceptual level<sup>6</sup> (Jiang 2018).

However, it should be pointed out that, the above literature has an obvious limitation, that is, the “chain of contempt” was directly adopted as an objective and institutionalised existence within the society, then blending them with other terms in their analysis without examination of mass media, where it was initially presented. But it was highly likely that this term was only a media gimmick that had been mechanically applied and repeated, to vaguely explain all the discriminatory behaviours in life by merely presenting the Internet buzzword over and over again. The authors of previous literature did not conduct linguistic analysis before researching them, leaving a methodological loophole for their research.

The “chain of contempt” was initially summarised and named by mass media, as is an action to be wary of, related to the **naming** of objects and the power and system of classification behind it - the power of naming was recognised not only as a personal issue but a political one as well, who possesses such power to speak is worth noticing since the language is one of the mechanisms by which dominant groups kept others “in place” (Zola 1993). Noam Chomsky once warned that the major media - particularly, the elite media that **set the agenda** that others generally follow - are corporations “selling” privileged audiences to other businesses. It would hardly come as a surprise if the picture of the world they present were to reflect the perspectives and interests of the sellers, the buyers, and the product. The concentration of ownership of the

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<sup>6</sup> In Chinese language: “尽管鄙视链和歧视都源于偏见，但二者之间有着根本的不同。歧视已经从负面态度发展至敌意行为，而鄙视链反映的只不过是当代青年人的集体心态，基本停留在观念认知层面。”

media is high and increasing, those who occupy managerial positions in the media, or gain status within them as commentators, belong to the same privileged elites, and might be expected to share the **perceptions, aspirations, and attitudes** of their associates, reflecting their own class interests as well, and influence of advertisers is sometimes far more direct (Chomsky 2013: 18-19). Therefore, how do we imagine that the media that concocted these articles and the supporting forces behind them were only to simply output some social non-fictions, without considering attitude shaping and behaviour vectoring at all. Another “coincidence” is that the groups where the articles representing the “chain of contempt” are widely circulated “happen to be” the groups of the educated middle class, meeting another warning from Chomsky, as he pointed out, the **primary targets of the manufacture of consent** are those who regard themselves as “the more thoughtful members of the community”, the “intellectuals”, the main body of articulate intellectuals tend towards one or the other of poles with shrewd rhetoric, avoiding “democratic dogmatisms” about people understanding their own interests and remaining cognizant of the “stupidity of the average man” (Chomsky 2013: 69-70). In this sense, it is difficult for us to regard articles related to the “chain of contempt” as attitude-neutral or ideologically innocent products any longer. What we need to do next, is to find a set of theories that can explain both what was reported in the articles, the contempt, and even discriminatory behaviours - that is, inequality, as well as the inequality that the use of language in the articles implies, in the meantime, can also interpret the interaction of these two sorts of inequality.

## **1.2. Pierre Bourdieu’s “capital, habitus and field” and relations to the research problem**

Although we have methodologically criticised the previous studies on the “chain of contempt”, we need to simultaneously acknowledge their merits, take Wu Si’s research as an example, her adoption of **Pierre Bourdieu**’s theories was appropriate. Indeed, whether at the workplace or in leisure, consumption preferences or aesthetic orientations, the “chain of contempt” is a sort of symbolism of differentiation of lifestyles, in these cases, Bourdieu’s cultural classification theory of distinction of taste is explanatory. Firstly, he pointed out that lifestyles, as social practices, are the systematic products of habitus, which, perceived in their mutual relations through the schemes of the habitus, become sign systems that are socially qualified (as distinguished, vulgar etc.) (Bourdieu 1984: 172), the structure of the lifestyle characteristic of an agent or class of agents, that is, the unity hidden under the diversity and multiplicity of the



set of practices performed in *fields* governed by different logics and therefore inducing different forms of realisation, in accordance with the formula:  $[(\textit{habitus}) (\textit{capital})] + \textit{field} = \textit{practice}$  (Bourdieu 1984: 101).

If we disassemble this formula, *habitus* is a *system of schemes* of perception and appreciation which is the embodiment of the objective laws whereby their value is objectively constituted (Bourdieu 1984: 471), which is closely related to *similar dispositions* led by similar positions in social space. On the basis of these two concepts, Bourdieu introduced a privileged empirical domain for studying them, *taste*, which makes dispositions and schemes of appreciation tangible – including the objects in the “chain of contempt”. As for capital, Bourdieu defined it differently from that of traditional economists and categorised it into three, *economic capital*, *social capital*, and *cultural capital*. Economic capital is symbolised by money and institutionalised by property rights; social capital is symbolised by social prestige and titles, institutionalised by social conventions; while cultural capital is symbolised by works, diplomas, and academic titles, and degrees are its institutionalised form. From an individual perspective, three fundamental dimensions of confirming an agent’s existing and potential position in social space are *volume of capital*, the *composition of capital*, and change in these two properties over time (manifested by past and potential *trajectory* in social space) (Bourdieu 1984: 114). Economic capital is the driving force among the three. Still, in his demonstration, Bourdieu paid more attention to the role of cultural capital, as he stressed that income tends to be credited with a causal efficacy which it only exerts in association with the *habitus* it has produced, as the same income is associated with very different patterns of consumption (Bourdieu 1984: 375) because the real principle of preferences is *taste* (Bourdieu 1984: 177). *Field* is a network or structure formed by objective positional relations, agents’ positions in the field, are determined through their existing or potential situations in the distributional structure of *capital* and their relationships with other positions. Such a determination works significantly for agents when they try to obtain interests within the field.

With Bourdieu’s analytical formula, we might try to understand the working process of the “chain of contempt”: since Bourdieu stated that *habitus* and *capital* can interact and are manifested in the gaming process within the *field*, then practice, when we understand this formula reversely, is the externalisation of an agent’s position in social space (by *capital*) and the mental structure shaped by it (namely *habitus*, *disposition* or *taste*), under a specific interest gaming situation (a certain part of a *field*), that is, the representation of social position, indicating his power and potential for further profit grabbing. In the social events involved in the “chain of contempt”, those who actively despise usually possess an advantage in two or

three sorts of, in Bourdieu's sense, capital, in the meantime: more generous income, more complex social relations and higher educational background, and successfully gained greater power through these. The reason they popped up in the public media, was because these subjects explicitly exercise these power derived from social inequality through a certain occasion – in an opportunity-seeking, consumption or aesthetic scene, and drew a clear distinction with evaluations, and are regarded as means to consolidate existing power and exacerbate social inequality.

Bourdieu not only discussed the influence of culture in the classification of society, as we briefly reviewed his three core sociological concepts above, but further pointed out **the role of language** in this process, which can be the way, not “chain of contempt” itself, but the content representing it works. In Bourdieu's later works on the relationship between language and power, we could have more findings regarding *habitus*, *capital* and *field*. The *field* is also a sort of social structure made of verbal signs, from a linguistic perspective, revealing the “**discourse order**” as the lingual representation of the entire social order. *Habitus* refers to a sustainable, switchable system of dispositions that tend to make *structured structures* function as *structuring structures* (Bourdieu 1990: 53). In other words, *habitus* is constantly evolving, a subjective structural system formed by the internalisation of social structure in the actor, which can also guide the behaviour of the actor in future practices; whether it is the process of internalisation or guidance of the system, the actor does it in **an unconscious way**. Besides, Bourdieu emphasised that the key to the **complicity** of language and power lies in **legitimation** and **authorisation**, that is, the market confers legitimation and authorisation on the speech of actors, power is thus transformed into symbolic form, and actors use this legitimacy and authority to compete for profits in the market, namely, the rise of *capital* (Bourdieu 2005).

Semiotics of the “chain of contempt” in the media articles should thus be the main concern of our **research problem** on the basis of what we have reviewed so far: since the “chain of contempt”, as we examined it with the help of Bourdieu's arguments, is likely to be a semiotically purposeful construction in media discourses by the forces behind them, then, like all discourses, there is supposed to be **power use** by media themselves and their sponsors, when outputting the content concerning the “chain of contempt”. How this concept was applied, and the communication was influenced by the **intentional arrangement of signs**, is the approach that we can detect such power use, only then can we be alert to the deceptiveness of those texts and gradually transition to an action-taking stage, with the exposure of power use. As we already demonstrated in the last section, media always involves explicit or covert attitudes to exert influence on their viewers to manufacture consent, that is, to deploy **manipulation**.

Furthermore, media content reflects the interest of those who are powerful enough to set the agenda, thus, **social structures and inequalities** can be represented **textually and contextually** in the content, the articles concerning the “chain of contempt” should not be exceptions. This is what we ought to find out, as is a prerequisite for us to better understand the “chain of contempt”, also a non-existent step in previous studies but indispensable for the academia to do a more in-depth study of it – as research aiming at discussing some social practices (of discrimination, for example) could be misled to merely distorted representations of them. Not to mention, it is also fairly necessary for us to be **more vigilant and get rid of the manipulation of media**, in general. We can be inspired by Bourdieu’s statement of “discourse order”, that the “chain of contempt” itself, is highly likely to be only a way of discursive construction by media, thus fairly essential, to be first examined by **discourse analysis**, instead of rashly being applied into social sciences, and only when we break through the deceit of language can we finally understand it accurately, then start solving a series of problems hidden behind.

In order to clarify our research problem, we need to further propose research questions as the handles for unfolding our analysis. Following the corresponding concept by Bourdieu, *capital*, *habitus* and *field*, we might put forward these questions to guide our following research, and they will be analysed in detail in *Chapter 3* and answered collectively in *Chapter 4*: **which category of capital or habitus** was the basis of contempt, as the corresponding article reported? And, how did media articles describe the discriminative social events and the causes of contempt by relating to those categories? **What have been legitimated or authorised**, as the essential step for discourse construction to gain more moral power or rational ground to persuade the viewers, during the process of describing the “chain of contempt”? Media in contemporary China has two main forms, public and private, **what are the purposes of power behind them** to exert influence (in the *field*), respectively? Bourdieu explained discourse and society can interact and social changes can be implemented into language use at the micro level, his theory addresses these issues by introducing *habitus*, linking social structure to everyday language use, and illustrating how symbolic power functions in the social practices. But as a sociologist rather than a linguist, Bourdieu did not, or he did not have to, go deep into the structure of discourse, dismantling its semiotic elements for more detailed analysis. Therefore, the analysis of discourse itself requires the adoption of theoretical frameworks from linguists, which offers us an opportunity to introduce two masters of linguistics and discourse analysis, **Theo van Leeuwen** and **Teun A. van Dijk**, who will be highlighted in Chapter 2, *the analytical framework*.

## 2. The analytical framework

Leeuwen's work examines in detail how discourse as recontextualisation is produced by social institutions and has an impact on social relations and social practice (Leeuwen 2008: 12-17). We however hope that in this thesis can we not only explore the technical possibilities of analysing the target discourse, but also grasp the nature behind discourses - **the operation of power**, as Van Dijk stated the significance of it, *critical discourse analysis* (abbreviated as “CDA” in his works) is discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated, and resisted by text and talk in the social context, with such dissident research, we can take an explicit position and thus understand, expose, and ultimately challenge social inequality (Van Dijk 2015).

A central notion in most critical work on discourse is that of power, and more specifically the social power of groups or institutions (Lukes 1986; Wrong 1979). Many levels and structures of context, text, and talk can in principle be **controlled** by powerful speakers and institutions, and such power may be abused at the expense of specific recipients, groups, or civil society at large. Members of more **powerful social groups** and **institutions**, and especially their leaders - the **symbolic elites** (Van Dijk 1993), have more or less exclusive access to, and control over, one or more types of public discourse. These notions of discourse access and control are very general, and it is one of the tasks of CDA to spell out these forms of power and especially their abuses – that is, forms of domination. Thus, if discourse is defined in terms of complex **communicative events**, consisting of text and context, access and control may be defined both for the relevant categories of the **communicative situation**, defined as context, as well as for the structures of text and talk. The communicative situation consists of such categories as **setting (time, place)**; **ongoing actions** (including discourses and discourse genres); and the **participants** in various communicative, social, or institutional roles and identities, as well as their goals, knowledge, opinions, attitudes, and ideologies (Van Dijk 2008a, 2009a). Controlling the communicative situation involves control over one or more of these categories – for example, deciding on the time and place of a communicative event, or on which participants may or must be present, and in which roles or identities, or what knowledge or opinions they should (not) have, and which social actions may or must be accomplished by discourse (Van Dijk 2015).

More specifically, such control may focus on the subjective definition of the communicative situation – that is, the **mental models** of the participants – because it is the

mental model that in turn controls the *pragmatic appropriateness* of the of discourse (Van Dijk 2008a, 2009a). Van Dijk believes that mental models are subjective and social constructions of communicative situations by participants, and can be divided into two categories, one is “**personal situation model**” and the other is “**personal context model**” . Personal situation model, which synthesise experiences and opinions in the domain of personal memory, through abstraction, generalisation, and decontextualisation, make some concrete and verifiable hypotheses, and further construct knowledge and attitudes. However, van Dijk believes that the personal situational model is not always completely consistent with the discourse structures, in **communicative events**, participants selectively activate memory according to the common ground of knowledge to construct the semantic model of the discourse, which is the personal context model. Van Dijk also argues that mental models are shaped by **social representations** (abbreviated as “SR” by him, e.g., **social attitudes, ideologies, sociocultural knowledge**) and influence social behaviour and discourse structures about “the other” (Van Dijk 1990). Therefore, examination of the influence of discourses on **personal and social cognition** requires simultaneous analysis of both, which closely integrate individual behaviours with social order, individual viewpoints, and collective viewpoints (e.g., power, control). To illustrate all the relations mentioned above, he sketched the theoretical framework below in Figure 1, concerning the discursive reproduction of power and domination that links social structures of groups and institutions to their control of the structures of context, text, and talk of communicative events, and indirectly to the influence of the personal models and the socially shared attitudes, ideologies, and knowledge of individual recipients and whole groups. Personal and social cognition influenced may finally in turn control the social actions that are consistent with the interests of powerful groups in general, and of the symbolic elites, in particular, thus closing the circle of the discursive reproduction of power and domination (Van Dijk 2015).

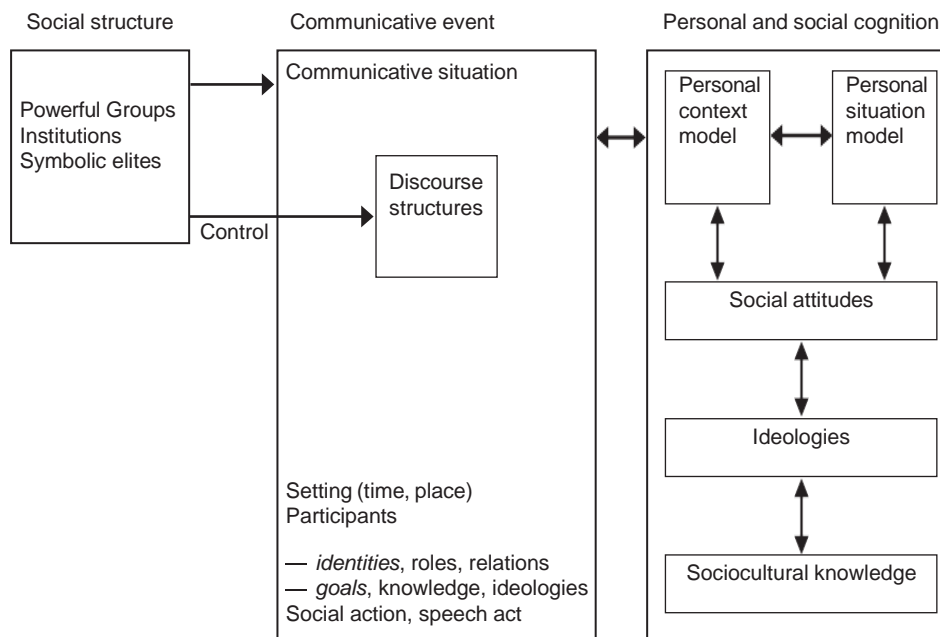


Figure 1. Van Dijk's schema of the discursive reproduction of power (Van Dijk 2015)

Van Dijk's schema reveals relationships of reproduction of power in discursive construction to us but considering that we are about to do a detailed discourse analysis next, we might also combine the demonstration from Van Dijk's other works and from Leeuwen, the scholar that offers a greatly detailed guide to analysis of discursive construction, as we have already introduced, to add more necessary particulars to this macro framework to form a more suitable one specifically for this thesis. The highlight of Leeuwen's part is his valuable distinguishing legitimations and purposes in the **transformation** of elements of various categories in communicative situations when structuring discourses, from the discursive construction of legitimation and the purposes of controlling the discourse structures. He emphasised that legitimation involves not just the transformation of social practices into discourses about social practices, but also the addition of **contextually** specific legitimations of these social practices (Leeuwen 2008: 105), and the discursive distribution of purposefulness has everything to do with the distribution of power in concrete social practices and in society generally (Leeuwen 2008: 135), thus **legitimation** and **purposes** should be marked out as well to be separately regular parts in following case analyses. If controlling the contexts and structures of text and talk is the first major form of the exercise of power, controlling people's minds through such discourse is an indirect but fundamental way to reproduce dominance and hegemony (Van Dijk 2015). In this sense, power operates as a closed loop in the society-

discourse-cognition relationship, as it is shown in figure 2, which will be adopted as the final analytical framework for the cases.

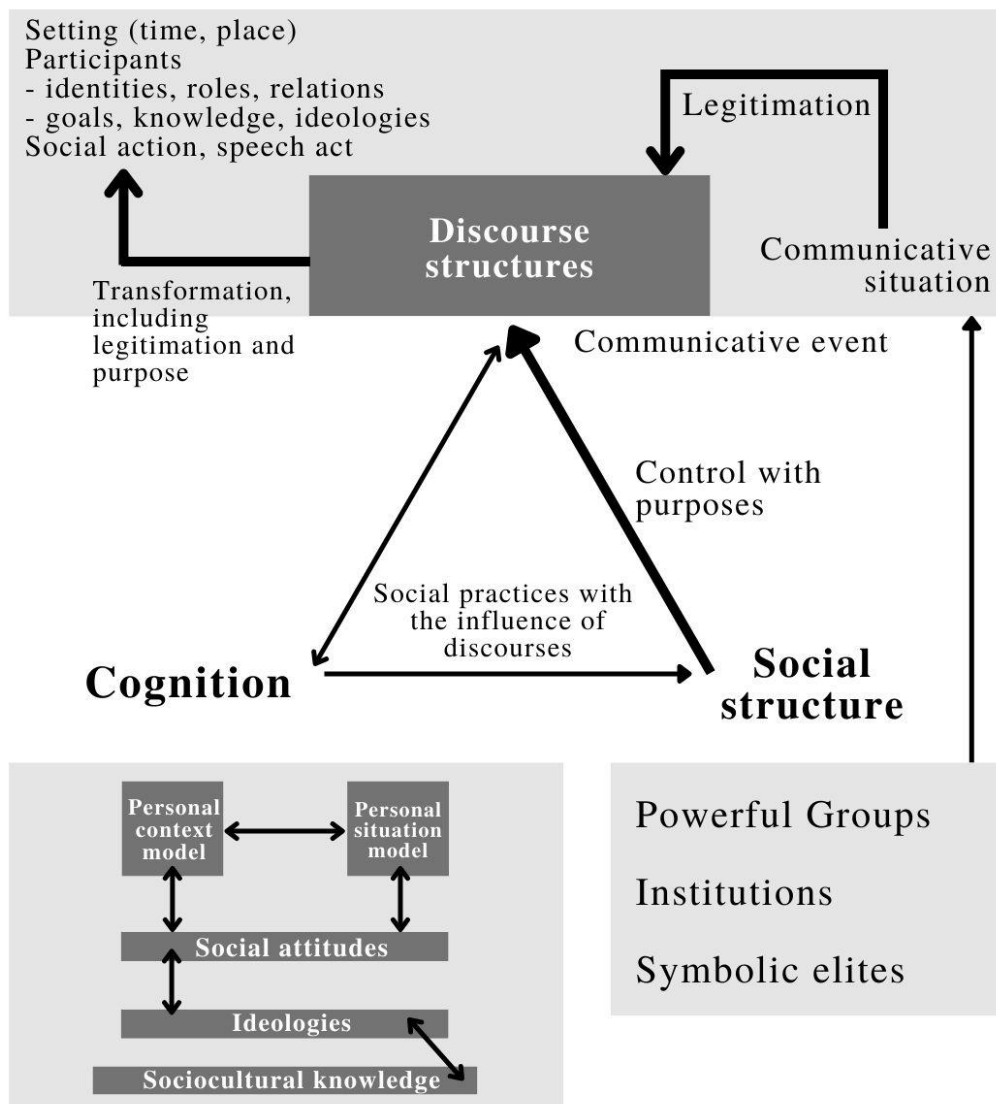


Figure 2. The remediated schema of discursive reproduction of power

Although we combined Van Dijk’s initial framework and Leeuwen's discussion to set up the overall framework used for the case analysis in this thesis, it does not mean that we have to analyse every element involved in the framework. Since the gist of this thesis is to do discourse analysis, as Van Dijk mentioned, the issues that are the relations between social macro- and microstructures, domination as abuse of power, and how dominant groups **control text and context** and thus also the mind (Van Dijk 2015), we shall pay most of our attention to the domain of communicative event and the discourse structures within it. As for the internal

relations of the elements in the domains of *cognition* (especially the personal situation and context models as highly individually mental processes) and *social structure* are thus not the focus of this thesis, even though we shall mention their effects on the discourse structures as well. The specific steps will refer to the relationships indicated by the bold arrows in figure 2, by which we shall get to know that, in the discursive construction of selected articles in the media involving the “chain of contempt”, what semiotic elements are quietly transformed, what communicative situations are created and how they legitimise discourse structures, for what purposes the social structures need to control discourses, and, although not the main aim of this thesis, will be briefly mentioned - what sort of social cognitions they target to trigger to influence people’s behaviours. Thus, the next case analysis chapter will then follow a structure like the below to be written:

**1. Discursive transformation of setting, participants, and social actions.** To make it easier for readers, we shall introduce *referent objects* when we do analyses. Given that the most frequent ways of transformations in discursive construction are *substitution* and *addition* of elements of the actual social practice with semiotic elements, the objects to substitute or add can appear repeatedly throughout the text to form an impression. As soon as these happen, new meanings are added, though in some cases more drastically than in others this is a series of repetitions, a series of synonyms, but when, as in this example, different expressions are used to refer to the same element of a social practice, substitution and the addition of new elements are also involved. New angles, new semantic features are added each time a new expression is used, gradually building up a more multifaceted concept (Leeuwen 2008: 17), then, an ongoing concept formation takes place, with the resulting concept fusing the semantic features of all the expressions used as synonyms (Leeuwen 2008: 19). By finding out these synonymous expressions and concluding them into referent objects, we may go on a quick approach to grasp the transformations and understand the purposes of power, which will relate to the following sections.

Besides, in this section, a small difference that we need to pay attention to is the difference between **written texts** and **multimodal texts**. Berger once made his point that multimodal texts can provide the things that “need to be said in so many words”, multiple interpretations, ideologically coloured angles, and they do so not explicitly, but by suggestion, by connotation, by appealing to barely conscious, half-forgotten knowledge (Berger 1972), hence Leeuwen suggested another method to analyse them. Nevertheless, the methods of analysing written texts and multimodal texts are different in detail though, their purposes stay the same and do not contradict the analytical framework we have formed, that is, to semiotically transform the



settings, participants (namely social actors in Leeuwen's sense), and social actions, with the operation of power behind them. We could therefore continue to use this framework when analysing multimodal texts.

**2. Discursive construction of legitimation.** The difference between legitimation and purpose. In order to serve as legitimations, purpose constructions must contain an element of moralisation (Leeuwen 2008: 113), they also explain and legitimate (or delegitimize, criticize) them. We mentioned above that, in the Leeuwen's sense, legitimation and purpose adding (in discourses themselves) or realising (in control of discourse structures) can occur in two different processes, in the case of legitimation, it can occur in both texts and contexts. The same social practices, or parts thereof, may be legitimized in different ways, depending on the concerns of the recontextualising practice; the role of legitimation in texts may vary in importance, legitimation can link social practices with discourses of value (Leeuwen 2008: 121). Though language plays a central role in legitimation, some forms of legitimation can also be expressed visually, or even musically (Leeuwen 2008: 119), all these situations may occur in our selected articles to analyse in detail.

**3. Analyses of the purposes of control and social structure.** Like legitimation, the analyses of purposes can also be distinguished into two circumstances, the analyses of the discursive construction of purpose will be in the "transformation" section, if there is any, while the analyses of the purpose of control **will be the main content** in this section, since some analyses of social structure have to be involved, with a certain length of content to understand the purposes of control, notwithstanding, as mentioned above, not the focus of this thesis. In some cases, we shall mention a bit of social cognition as well, which is used by Van Dijk and adopted in this thesis, represented by social attitudes, ideologies, and sociocultural knowledge, as we have already introduced. A text is, in the sense of social cognition, "a socially constructed knowledge of some social practices" (Leeuwen 2008: 6), developed in these specific social contexts, we shall have a look into this domain, and see how they are related with discourses of the "chain of contempt".

### 3. Discourse analyses of the mass media articles concerning the “chain of contempt”

Since we have made it clear to deem the “chain of contempt” firstly as a discursive phenomenon, we shall follow the steps of Leeuwen, the author of the most detailed discourse analytical methods, to conduct our analysis. He pointed out that discourse is the recontextualisation of social practice, and the difference between social practice and the representation of social practice is often glossed over (Leeuwen 2008: 6). It is important to analyse when a discourse with a specific semiotic structure attains enough power to persuade the public (Buzan et al. 1998: 25). However, studying the discursive construction of the “chain of contempt” does not implicate that the phenomenon itself does not exist, what we concern about is how these processes become perceptible and accepted by the public as part of reality. After all, if this relationship is not clarified, it will be in vain to understand the “chain of contempt” and come up with countermeasures. As for how to select the materials from a huge amount of relevant information for analysis, this thesis will adhere to one general principle: to cover the **sources** from official media to private ones, **viewer groups** from the general public to the niche, and the **content format** ranges from text to a combination of graphics and text. Each selected article must conform to its own selection principles, which are listed here following the timeline. Thus, eight articles have been selected as per different selection principles for the discourse analysis in the following chapters, we divide them into two sections, “official media” and “private media”, as a necessary step discussed in the 1.3.1 section. The official media and their private counterparts follow standards and consider purposes differently when publishing articles: the official media’s task is to cooperate with the government, and the articles they publish ought to conform to the prevailing ideology, public order and customs of the country, therefore. Their formats are usually relatively uniform, with a more serious style of wording; By contrast, the core purpose of private media is to gain profit, the larger one private medium is, the more it ought to take into account different target subscriber groups and customise corresponding content catering for their tastes.

**From private media** (reasons for selection are bolded):

*Encyclopaedia of “food chain of contempt” on the Internet: those who play Douban despise those who play Tianya (Southern Metropolis Daily, 2012).* This article comes from a comprehensive daily newspaper in South China, recognised by other ones **as the first media**

**article to start the discussion** of the “chain of contempt” on the entire Internet. *Southern Metropolis Daily* began its trial publication in March 1995 and officially launched its publication on January 1, 1997. It is an organ of the Guangdong Provincial Communist Party Committee, a child newspaper of *Southern Daily*. The newspaper belongs to the *Southern Press Media Group*, a private media, covering Guangdong Province, and is the most influential newspaper in the Pearl River Delta region, currently headquartered in Guangzhou. Standing at the forefront of “reform and opening up<sup>7</sup>”, this newspaper is known for its **liberal stance**, in 2012, before smartphones and new media became prevalent, it had a great influence.

*The “chain of contempt” in recruitment” is divided into 5 layers, which layer are you in?* (Zhihu.com, 2019), selected from Zhihu, a **question-and-answer** website founded on January 26, 2011, whose product form is similar to that of U.S.-based online question-and-answer website Quora. “Zhihu” means “do you know” in classical Chinese, as of September 20, 2017, Zhihu had more than 100 million registered users, based on this high-frequency interaction and highly targeted content, it receives popularity, particularly among **youngsters and the educated**.

*Tencent’s internal “chain of contempt”!!!* (Sohu.com, 2019), selected from the portal website of Sohu, a giant Internet enterprise, which was officially launched in 1998, and in 2000, listed on the Nasdaq Stock Market. Sohu is one of the largest portal websites in China and is currently **one of the top five** video websites<sup>8</sup> across the country. Aside from the influence of the website itself, what is interesting about this article was to intentionally write the title in a **highly emotional form** with three exclamation marks, and the content is about its **competitor** Tencent.

*The encyclopaedia of the chains of contempt in China! You would never know before but will be shocked after reading* (163.com, 2020), selected from the portal website of NetEase, another Internet giant, **one of the largest** internet technology companies in mainland China. This is another article that used exaggeration in the title for attention-attracting, besides, presented **illustrations** to clearly mark the directions of the “chains of contempt” in various scenes.

**From official media** (reasons for selection are bolded):

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<sup>7</sup> Literal translation of Chinese economic reform that was officially launched December 18, 1978 and implemented till present day

<sup>8</sup> The other four are: Youku, iQiyi, Tencent Video, and Mango TV

*What is more hurtful than insults? The “chain of contempt” thrills China* (*People.com*, 2015), selected from *People.com*, a medium company owned by *People's Daily*, a newspaper of Chinese Communist Party, formerly known as the online version of *People's Daily*, officially entering the Internet on January 1, 1997. *People.com* is currently the largest official medium with 17 versions in 16 languages, 31 branches in mainland China and overseas. The medium takes a **nationalist stance**, and this article can also be regarded as **the first official media response** after the topic of “chain of contempt” has been brewing online for several years.

*Weakening the mentality of “chain of contempt” in career* (*huanqiu.com*, 2017), selected from *huanqiu.com*, whose parent medium is *Global Times*, a newspaper focusing on publication in both Chinese and English languages, directly under the Central Committee of Communist Party of China. It was founded in Beijing in January 1993, with **considerable influence** in mainland China, *Global Times* has a **strong stance** on Chinese nationalism and official ideology, and its style of wording is more **popular, straightforward**, or sometimes, **radical** than other official media.

*Square dance<sup>9</sup> also has a “chain of contempt”? Retain a bit of morality for our parents* (*cctv.com*, 2017), selected from China Central Television, a state-owned television medium of China. Founded on May 1, 1958, it has 49 TV channels, which is the TV station with the largest number of TV channels in the world. Due to the **unique position and influence** of China Central Television, the television itself and its news have often become the focus of attention of other media. Central television has an indelible influence on middle-aged and elderly Chinese nowadays, and the reports from it also seem to be more and more **oriented to elder age groups**, for example, this article is in line with its constant passion for themes such as “parents”, “family”, or “kinship”.

*“985 Blind Date”, the short-sightedness of a group of highly intelligent people* (*xinhuanet.com*, 2020), selected from Xinhuanet.com, a website hosted by Xinhua News Agency, which serves as one of the main national news agencies of China, now a ministerial-level institution directly under the State Council of the country. Xinhua News Agency has more than 100 branches across mainland China and around the world and is **one of the most important** Chinese news websites. This article on blind dates can be seen as the official media’s **attempt of catering** to a topic of concern to young people.

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<sup>9</sup> Square dance is a rhythmic dance usually performed by middle-aged or elderly participants in open spaces, accompanied by high-decibel music, mostly bare-handed fitness, sometimes with hand-held light equipment

### 3.1. Discourses in private media

Private media have five characteristics (Zhang, 2017) - making profit as the **ultimate** goal, and winning advertisers is the basic way to manage that; taking circulation or ratings as the direct goal of media activities; rich in diverse forms with a lot of sensational content, attracting audiences as the basic principle of reporting operations; taking monopoly competition as its basic operation mode and having a certain degree of supervision over the administrative sector. The first four of the five characteristics require private media to spare no effort to get viewers' attention, for example, the most basic step is to insert more images in the articles that are convenient for viewers to read. Bell believes that contemporary culture has been becoming a **visual** culture, not printed (Bell 1996), especially in the omni-media marketing that came with the Internet tide mentioned above, the *institutions* that concoct discourses would not let go of this form. Admittedly, many conveniences can be observed in the transmission of information by multimodal texts, specifically, **images** in this thesis' discussion, in a natural state, it is easier for people to grasp images than words, as the vision associated with images is innate, human beings have the innate ability to accept images (Zhao 2021).

#### 3.1.1. Discursive transformation of setting, participants, and social actions

To analyse the official media discourses regarding the “chain of contempt”, we could firstly delineate two principal domains of referent objects represented as the cause of contempt, the influence it brings, and “the proper response” to it, as we have planned in the framework chapter. The first domain of referent objects was *sense of superiority*, which was considered by media articles to be the subjective motivation of despisers. Some articles, such as the originator of articles regarding “chain of contempt”, by *Southern Metropolis Daily*, conducted a “psychological analysis” of people on the active side of the chain of contempt and stated seven senses of superiority that motivated them to despise others: “superiorities of IQ, age, fashion, originality, taste, being international and being niche” (*Southern Metropolis Daily*, 2012). The *163.com* article also provided a similar “analysis”:

Why do we fall into a cycle of contempt? Because: everyone has an inherent prejudice, everyone adds a sense of superiority to themselves, so while we despise others, we will also be despised by others (*163.com*, 2019).

In these two examples we see that social actors are represented as an unspecified, generic pronoun as “everyone”, or anonymous when *Southern Metropolis Daily* gave an attribution to the psychic dynamics of “chain of contempt” without the **presence of subjects** of it, which is

christened as *indetermination* of social actors (“participants” in our analytical framework) by Leeuwen (Leeuwen 2008: 39). Through indeterminating the social actors, the responsibility of individuals or groups involved as active parties in the communicative events represented as “chain of contempt” issues, is diluted, and apportioned by all members of society, and the actual or mental damage and negative social influence caused by them are described as normal. Besides, by repeating the causes of occurrence and “inherent nature” of discrimination, the social actors are *abstracted* and *impersonalised*, represented by means of a quality assigned to them, a “sense of superiority”, by and in the representation across the articles (Leeuwen 2008: 46). That is to say, the emergence of discrimination and generation of the “chain of contempt” are not a problem of social structure or specific situations, but only an unchangeable problem deep in human nature named “sense of superiority”, thus no specific person or social group should be responsible for it.

Having discussed the aspect of social actors, we turn to the aspect of social action, while leading to the second domain of referent objects, which is related to *acceptance of contempt*, not appearing to be a moral appeal by the media, but rather a **state of helplessness** they portray:

“At the moment when contempt has become blatant, fearless, and unscrupulous, it seems that one's excellence, high-endness and success cannot be proven without contempt.” (*Southern Metropolis Daily*, 2012).

This text gave an *assertion* of reality, emphasising the unalterable disadvantage of most people in the face of contempt, in addition to it, more similar examples can be found, “contempt is not only like a food chain, but also a vicious circle of current social fate” (*Southern Metropolis Daily*, 2012), and “this is a tightly chained society. Everyone always labels people unconsciously or has already been labelled without knowing it” (*163.com*, 2019), the author even borrowed discourses from biology and psychology such as “food chain” and “to label unconsciously”, to indicate the natural attributes of the “chain of contempt”, Van Dijk once mentioned that metaphors are used to indicate power differences which force the recipients to be obedient to the speakers' will (Van Dijk 2015). All these examples emphasised the *inevitability* of contempt, meeting Leeuwen's definition of *existentialisation* of social action. In the case of *existentialisation*, an action or reaction is represented as something that “simply exists.” The action or reaction itself is objectivated and fills the slot of the “existent” (the entity predicated to exist) in “existential clauses” (Leeuwen 2008: 67). That is to say, the “chain of contempt”, “simply exists”, inherently and inevitably, the power difference is not anything that we can challenge as ordinary people, or one might be at risk of certain sort of loss, therefore we can consider fairness and equality in thought, but should still accept its existence in action.

One more notice-worthy point, across these articles, certainly like social actor and action, temporal and spatial elements were transformed, either intentionally added or hidden to shape the entire discourse structure, in order to obscure the *accuracy* within the communication event, misleading readers and justifying the *sense of superiority* and *acceptance of contempt*. Nevertheless, since they also happen to be related to *legitimation* that we need to discuss in the next section, we thus arrange them thereafter.

Visual representation, as a fairly frequent way that private media tend to use as we mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, needs to be analysed separately from written texts. Settings and social action can be also seen directly from images and represented by those three major relationships, to find out them by revealing the transformation of semiotic elements, as well as to answer the research questions we posed in section 1.2, we shall start with the images inserted in the article selected from *Sohu.com*.

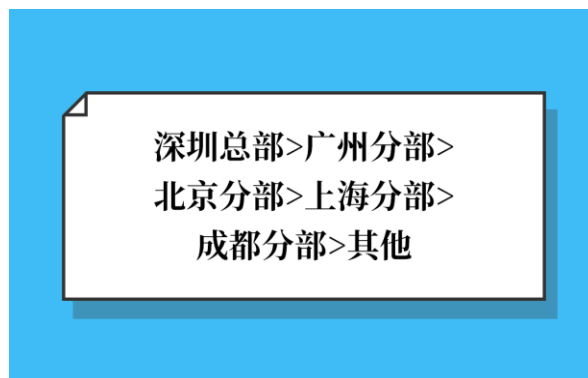


Figure 3. The “chain of contempt” of headquarter and branches of Tencent

Translation of the written text: Headquarter in Shenzhen “greater than” branch in Guangzhou “greater than” branch in Beijing “greater than” branch in Shanghai “greater than” branch in Chengdu “greater than” others.

The Guangzhou branch is generally referred to as “**Guangzhou Tencent**”, the Beijing branch is generally referred to as “**Beijing Tencent**”, the Shanghai branch is generally referred to as “**Shanghai Tencent**”, and the Chengdu branch is generally referred to as “**Chengdu Tencent**”.

“Tencent” is **only short for** the Shenzhen headquarter (Sohu.com, 2019).

Figure 3 by *Sohu.com* directly marked the upstream and downstream relationships of the “chain of contempt” in the clearest way possible. In the text below the image, the headquarter and branches were highlighted with power difference between “centre” and “periphery” by *naming*, and such difference was emphasised again within the image. Mathematical notations, greater than and less than, were used instead of words to indicate the relationship between the “superior

and inferior”, while adopting only blue as the base, with white background and black words, not only making the words conspicuous, but also giving the viewers a calm and rational delusion through the combination of cold colours. They also produced a series of pictures in this format throughout the text. Although there were no characters in the figure, people involved were all straightforwardly categorised - the “headquarter in Shenzhen” at the top of the “chain of contempt” in figure 3 referred to “people working in the headquarter in Shenzhen and the most respect they receive”. In this sense, social actors should also be regarded as anonymised, mathematical notations gave a feeling of objectivity, but such an abstraction ignored other complex situations, e.g., the individual differences were overlooked, which was of similar impersonalisation of social actors used in the articles with only written texts.

The transformation of settings and social action was also apparent, time was not marked, namely, deleted; location was locked down to the inside of Tencent, such arrangement stayed the same in the next few images; social action became absolutely mere and unilateral – only a consecutive chain of contempt but nothing else. As for the category of capital by Bourdieu, since this example dealt with prestige brought by the workplace, it fell under what he referred to as **social capital**.

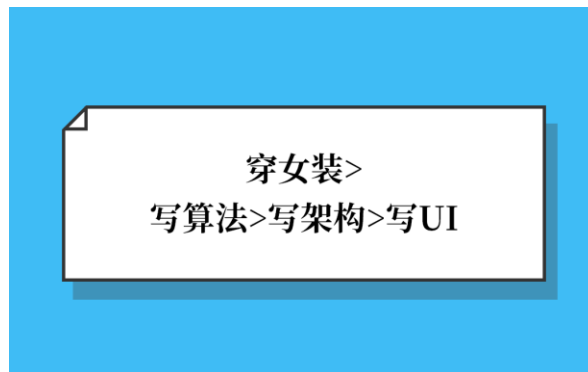


Figure 4. The “chain of contempt” of Tencent staff’s expertise

Translation of the written text: **Wearing female dressing** “greater than” **writing algorithm** “greater than” **writing architecture** “greater than” **writing UI**<sup>10</sup>.

Apart from the aforementioned semiotic transformations, a distinct feature of figure 4 lies in the absurdity of labelling “wearing female dressing” to the group at the top of this “chain of contempt”. In contrast, “writing algorithm”, “writing architectures”, and “writing UI” are all

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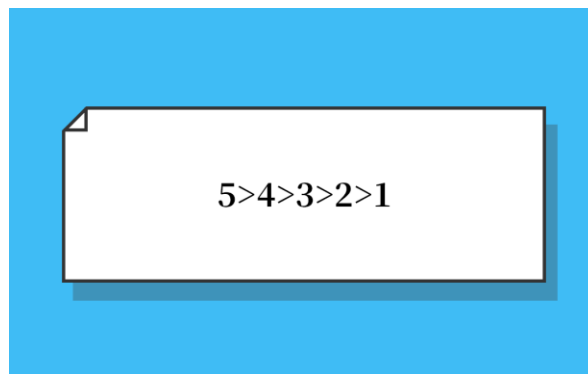
<sup>10</sup> Short for “user interface”



specific working tasks, which were distinguished in accordance with the difficulty of the job, but wearing female dressing, is an action of a different category than several other items, mixing niche culture, gender expression, and Internet career. This came from a long-running joke in the programmers' circle, saying that top-notch programmers are often immersed in their own imaginations, not caring about other people's comments, dressing up with female attire<sup>11</sup> based on mimicry of anime characters (see figure 5). Once again a gimmick, this way of arrangement of content used by the author was to attract viewers.



Figure 5. A male programmer dressing up in female attire



<sup>11</sup> The programmer seems to be, not only in contemporary China but globally, in a biased opinion, a “male occupation”, this is the reason we particularly discuss the cases of males wearing female attire

Figure 6. The “chain of contempt” of KPI assessment in Tencent<sup>12</sup>

The words in figure 6 do not have to be translated, since they were displayed in descending order of natural numbers, in line with everyone’s mathematical common sense. But if we had known more about the context, we might feel that such a direct appeal to common sense would be even more impressive, when viewers were stunned by this purely arithmetic expression and saw the explanation of the KPI calculation method, in the next second, they would be more likely to remember this concise and seemingly more objective statement. Back to Bourdieu, the contempt, in this case, was reported to be caused by salary, thus a form of **economic capital**.

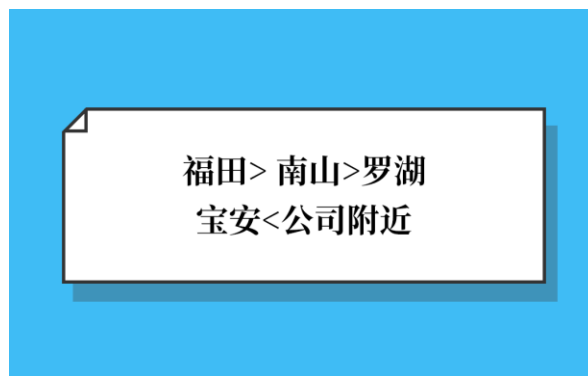


Figure 7. The “chain of contempt” of housing address among Tencent staff

Translation of the written text: (Those who) living in **Futian** “greater than” living in **Nanshan** “greater than” living in Luohu “greater than” living in **Baoan** “**less than**” **near the company**. Figure 7 stressed on the distance between the employees’ home addresses and the company, the proximity to the company could mean a more expensive rental – namely, one could be financially better, and not have to suffer from long commuting time. Therefore, in order to emphasise this point, it used a less-than sign to highlight, forming a reverse top of a “chain of contempt”. This example was way more superficial to be examined and reflected Bourdieu’s **economic capital**.

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<sup>12</sup> These are the final assessment levels of KPI when Tencent issues year-end bonuses to employees. 5 is the highest, and the bonus is 12.5 months’ salary, while 1 is the lowest, and the bonus is 0.5 months’ salary



Figure 8. The “chain of contempt” in showbiz

Translation of the written text: (People who) acting in stage plays “rightward arrow, **look down upon**, (less in meaning<sup>13</sup>)” acting in films “recurved arrow, **despise**, (1234567)<sup>14</sup>” acting in TV series “leftward arrow, **look down on**” active in variety shows “excurved arrow, **despise**, (**fans: mama loves you**)<sup>15</sup>” idols “upward arrow, **despised**, (‘beauty of the appearance is justice’)” by pop singers “rightward arrow, **despised**, (‘as long as the intonation is fine’)” and by Rappers “rightward arrow, **looked down upon**, (‘not real enough’<sup>16</sup>)”.

<sup>13</sup> A piece of dialectal expression of Mandarin in Beijing and surrounding areas

<sup>14</sup> Some TV series do not use the original voice of actors but ask dubbing actors to dub them, which makes some unprofessional actors not memorise the lines seriously but get through by reading numbers. This usually happens to some actors who have gained a lot of fans for their good looks and need to catch more than one set of shooting in a day. Because of the original sound recording and big screen playback of the film, good lines are required, the aforementioned phenomenon has come into a meme that film actors tease TV series ones

<sup>15</sup> Some female fans, elder than their favourite idols, refer to themselves as “mom fans” and in many informal texts refer to idols as sons or daughters

<sup>16</sup> “Not real” is slang in the fandom of rappers

Figure 8 was a classic illustration of the distinction of *taste*, covering **habitus** shaped by **all categories of capital**<sup>17</sup>, adopting the style of hand-painting, and also using their corresponding icons to indicate different fields, which might look childly innocent. The words it presented were dialects, puns, swear words, subculture slang and memes from showbiz, forming a text named *carnivalised* text. According to Bakhtin, the carnival is a manifestation of “folk laughter” and “folk humour”; it embodies a popular, folk-based culture which is defined by its irreverent antipathy to hierarchical structures of everyday, noncarnival life (Stevens 2007). A carnivalised text is filled with grammatically incorrect or newly invented words, messily mixed quotations, and changing perspectives of the person (first, second and third), in addition to figure 8, figure 4, figure 6 and figure 7 hereinbefore also shared these characteristics. Such texts did not need to obey the logic of social actors, settings and social actions at all, and even these elements themselves could be absent, thus the ambiguity in these figures was self-evident. Moreover, carnivalised texts were direct representations of the plebeian culture, and this origin itself was a sort of *legitimation*, which will be discussed in detail in the next subsection.

### 3.1.2. Discursive construction of legitimation

In contemporary discourse, moralisation and rationalisation keep each other at arm’s length (Leeuwen 2008: 113), so do they in media’s articles regarding the chain of contempt. The role of *legitimation* itself is fairly simple, it makes those **transformed semiotic elements** look more deceptive, do not conflict with the mainline logic of the stories, and can simultaneously arouse viewers’ resonance and identification. But in many circumstances, legitimation is not easy to be detected by viewers, e.g., the text shown below, excerpted from the *Southern Metropolis Daily* article, nicely combined these two frequent types of *legitimation*:

However, what would you do to those with tacky middle-fingers, disdainful eyes, and those who always pose in a solemn posture?

Sitting in a corner, regardless of what happened? Too calm.

Jump out, blame, or fight? Uncivilised!

Then, what should you do? (I am) afraid that (you) can only mutter in the heart with a “hum”, secretly accuse the other party of lack of standards, and then kill the unequal crimes with the

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<sup>17</sup> Take watching stage plays as an example, one must go to the theatre buy a single ticket to watch (economic capital), and needs to know which play is highly rated from the social network related to art (social capital), and also has to attain a certain education to understand the meanings during the performance (cultural capital)

“split vision” that is full of “the light of modern thinking of fairness and equality.” (*Southern Metropolis Daily*, 2012).

In this text, *instrumental rationality*, which legitimates practices by reference to their goals, uses, and effects came first (Leeuwen 2008: 113). In the same way as what we analysed in the “discursive transformation” section, the author started with a few *impersonalised* negative scenarios, then told readers about the responses that were highly evaluated (“too calm”, “uncivilised”), pointing out that they were all ineffective, concluding that **silence** was the last resort, and one may also comfort himself with modern ideas. Interestingly, we can also observe a negative rationalisation with reprobative meanings, such as: “**in fact**, many women can not only handle the kitchen, but also lead a team, improve performances, and work hard to win benefits for the company!” (*Zhihu.com*, 2020), and “**tragically**: a second ago, you just found someone who made you feel superior, the next second, you suddenly fell into the eye roll of another person.” (*163.com*, 2020). These two texts tried to express that, although people had the reason to respect specific individuals and groups, their discriminatory nature would still drive them to do so. Therefore, since they could not resist their instincts, the *acceptance of contempt* should be the helpless but only choice. Consequently, the passive *acceptance of contempt* was rationalised and legitimated.

After *rationalisation* there came *comparison* as *moralisation*, referring to an activity belonging to another social practice, and the positive or negative values which, in the given sociocultural context, are attached to that other activity is then transferred to the original activity (Leeuwen 2008: 112). The author displayed two social actions at the beginning and the end of the text respectively, one was “to express contempt with certain body language” (with negative adjectives), and the other was “thinking of fairness and equality”, adding “the light of” and “modern” in front of the latter to express positive evaluation, through the comparison of social actions at the beginning and the end, the initially irrelevant moral evaluation was successfully transferred, moralised the silent *acceptance of contempt* as a new social action, and, as this text appeared in the first part of the article, legitimated the full article as well.

There were two covert types of legitimation used in the text, *legitimation by space* and *time*, as mentioned at the end of the last section, we shall analyse their roles in the discursive construction of legitimation other than the transformation of elements of the communicative event. For example, “[...] and this sort of differential treatments in ‘face value’<sup>18</sup>” has **long** become a ‘hidden rule’, most ordinary people acquiesce to its existence [...]” (*Zhihu.com*,

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<sup>18</sup> A slang among Chinese netizens to describe a person’s facial beauty, if someone is regarded as good-looking, then he/she is said to have a “high face value”

2020), a suggestion of *inexact timing* is realised by a duration epithet like “long” (Leeuwen 2008: 80), turning appearance discrimination into a historical issue, a norm accepted by all, weakening the necessity of solving it. Then another example concerning space from the already-displaying excerpted text from *Southern Metropolis Daily*, “**sitting in a corner**, regardless of what happened? Too calm. (segment) **Jump out**, to blame, or to fight? Uncivilised!” (*Southern Metropolis Daily*, 2012). Regardless of strong evaluations at the end of every sentence, we can also see that spatial elements were selected not only to link them to specific actions and to stress their functionality, or to “interpret space,” but also to stress **hierarchy** (Leeuwen 2008: 101), as both “sitting in a corner” and “jump out” have references to spatial differences, representing the relations of “centre and periphery”, “upper and lower”. This implied a legitimisation of the current social order, combining with the previous analysis, we may summarise that, as the social order is hierarchically differentiated, the sense of superiority of powerful groups is reasonable, and the acceptance of contempt is inevitable, thus, we have to resign to the “chain of contempt”, **as is both rational and moral**.

### 3.1.3. Analyses of the purposes of control and social structure

The aims of control of text and context of discourse are the exercise of mind control and reproduction of dominance (Van Dijk 2015), in many situations, there are no public discourses or media that may provide information from which alternative beliefs may be derived (Downing 1984), continuously for a long time, recipients may finally not have the knowledge and beliefs needed to challenge the discourses or information they are exposed to (Wodak 1987). Speakers of powerful groups may want to control not only specific knowledge and opinions represented in the subjective mental models of specific recipients, but also the generic knowledge, attitudes, and ideologies shared by whole groups or all citizens (Van Dijk 2015). It is precisely this sort of “semantic tricks” that the private media use in the discursive construction concerning the “chain of contempt” in the articles: highly homogeneous content-based, constant repetition and emphasis on the *sense of superiority* and *acceptance of contempt* lead readers to a pale moral introspection, ignoring the inequalities in the social order, forming a helpless compromise of those inequalities, should be their aim, in accordance with our analyses above. These articles seemed to spark discussions on the “chain of contempt” issues, but no actual development in **the dialogue between** social members who have the upper hand in the discriminative communication events - *powerful groups* and *symbolic elites*, **and** the recipients, in other words, these “dialogues” were only monologues, only representations of

social discipline. Based on the content of these articles involving diverse cultural demands and scenes of consumption, and their decently literary or lively wording, we might infer that the target readers of these articles should be **urban, educated, middle-class young people**, then we need to discuss which exactly in powerful groups want mind control on them. In light of Wang and Liu's studies (Wang, Liu 2019) we find that since 2009, China's media industry has ushered in a wave of great changes with the rise of the mobile Internet, among which the most mentioned change was the big reversal of landscape in the media advertising industry. Advertising had become omni-media marketing, with greatly enriched resources, being new favourite of capital, attracting them to settle in a great amount, accordingly, the media giants continued to expand, and as a result, a group of Internet elites had emerged, bringing issues of monopoly, naturally including the monopoly of information, which is conducive to their bombardment of consumerism. Quoting a story from a marketer, Heath mentioned that this marketer learned three basic incentives of consumption: sex, greed, and fear (Heath 2007), in the case of discourses of "chain of contempt", leaving aside sex, greed and fear have seemed to be successfully aroused by the discourses - helpful in stimulating consumerism for **further exploitation of the middle class**.

The analysis of mind control presupposes the usual distinction between personal or autobiographical memory, on the one hand, and generic, socially shared "semantic" memory, on the other (Tulving 2002), Therefore, to better understand discourses of the "chain of contempt" should we not only examine their arousal of greed and fear in the personal mental model but also examine the social contexts behind this process, such as social attitudes, ideologies, and their fluxes. As we shall keep using "social cognition" in Leeuwen's sense like we have discussed in the analytical framework part ("a socially constructed knowledge of some social practices" [Leeuwen 2008: 6]), we ought to clarify its relationship to other categories beforehand. In the interest of outputting discourses which aim at the pain points of target readers, the institutions need to accurately capture the subtle changes in social attitudes and ideologies, as the role of discourse is the interplay between social cognition and **situated interaction in processes of** societal reproduction, includes a set of strategies for their effective manipulation in social interpretation (Van Dijk 1990). Attitudes about different social issues may feature the same basic opinions, similar explanations and, especially, the instantiation of the same general norms or values (Van Dijk 1990), thus, whether they emphasised the insurmountable nature of human beings ("*sense of superiority*"), or provided "sane advice" for public's plights ("*acceptance of contempt*"), their purpose had stayed the same – "domesticating" the generic knowledge of the public, which had been inseparable from their

constantly updated grasp of social attitudes and ideologies. Only in this way can discourses succeed in persuading the public, influencing their social practices, which obey the goals of *powerful groups* (nouveau Internet elites) and *institutions* (Internet giants) and to keep gaining power and profits.

The changes in social attitude also deserve some of our concern. Today's generation of Chinese youngsters as the target recipients of discourses of the "chain of contempt" has seen a major change in their attitudes towards social issues, e.g., *inequality* that these discourses seek to legitimate (as we have discussed above), thanks to the rapid development of higher education. According to Qu's studies, between 2010-2015, among new entrants to the job market, 45% of them had attained higher education (Qu 2021). Ideology, works as another key domain when examining social cognition, also in this field, Chinese scholars discovered some phenomena that are worthwhile to ruminate over, for example, in his research, Li found that there had been a subtle tension between the consumerist ideological appeal and the official ideological expression in contemporary Chinese advertising, the institutions of official ideology only expressed their cultural stance concretely when they appeared at a specific "advertising accident" (an apparent violation of law or public order and custom), or when in a political need during a certain period, and more often, it had remained in a hidden state and took a passive attitude of avoidance (Li 2018). This may explain why in China, where the socialist ideology could have somehow restrained the unscrupulous discursive reproduction of consumerism, the institutions which produce discourses of the "chain of contempt" can still take advantage of such passiveness in the ideological domain. On the basis of Rogers' findings of *agenda setting*, that media agenda influences public agenda, and may eventually influence policy agenda (Rogers 1997), we may infer that after figuring out the changes in the social attitudes of contemporary youngsters and considering the ebb and flow of power in the ideological domain, the nouveau *powerful groups* and *symbolic elites* rising in the Internet tide, through their mouthpiece *institutions*, producing discourses of the "chain of contempt" with high pertinency, influencing the public's judgment on "what matters the most", reshaping their hierarchically generic knowledge, and notion and behaviours of consumption based on such knowledge. When they succeed in taking a significant market share through these methods and in exercising mind control over the public, they can thus force policymakers to designate policies in their favour to **further consolidate and capture profits.**



## 3.2. Discourses in official media

The official media generates and disseminates official discourses and mainstream values mainly on the orders of the ruling party. When it comes to major social issues or hotspots, official media usually focus on grand narratives and are more willing to emphasise positive details while describing (Zhang 2016). Meanwhile, the criticism of official media mainly focuses on the following aspects: they tend to use a pan-political tone, using stereotyped cultural symbols to convey content, rather than a personalised and life-like narrative style that the public are in more favour of (Gao & Jiang 2022). In addition, Li Guowei found in his research that, although official media usually have lower click-through rates than private media due to their less interesting content, but, when significant social events occur, such as some officials, enterprises or celebrities violating the laws, or facing a serious public relation crisis, the official media intervenes by their commentaries, can rapidly awaken public sentiment and raise the litigants' or involved persons' crises to a new height (Li 2021). As a popular buzzword, the "chain of contempt" would naturally not lack the attention and commentaries from official media, how the official media construct their discourses in this process, and what their purposes could be, need to be analysed in detail in this section.

### 3.2.1. Discursive transformation of setting, participants, and social actions

Due to the relatively rigid writing style of the official media articles, the objects referred to in them might be highly similar, thus we can find out one more referent object in official media articles than those of the private media – three in total. The first domain was related to *social gap* which was considered by the articles to be the most fundamental reason for the appearance of the "chain of contempt". Such gaps are manifested in many aspects, mainly the gap of economic status and income, for example, the article by *People.com* concluded that:

This backward ideology is directly related to the current divide between the rich and the poor and the difference between urban and rural areas in China. If the income of sanitation workers is not lower than the average income of the general public, then the psychological basis of discrimination will no longer exist (*People.com*, 2015)

Coincidentally, in the article from *huanqiu.com*, the author also gave out a view similar to the article from *People.com*, "In the final analysis, the existence of the mentality of occupational 'chain of contempt' is mainly a sociopsychological reflection of the widening gap in social class" (*huanqiu.com*, 2017). *Xinhuanet.com*'s statement was more euphemistic, but its meaning came explicitly, "countless practices in life have proved that students in 985 colleges and

universities may not be excellent, and an ordinary college's graduates may not be ungraded" (*xinhuanet.com*, 2020). Two times "may not be" indicated that in this context, "985 students" were usually regarded as excellent and other colleges' students as ungraded, which also led to the gap in income. Age could not be ignored as the other main form of the social gap, it was the notional difference brought by the gap of age that made the behaviours of these middle-aged and elderly people not comprehended by today's youngsters, the article from *cctv.com* said that:

This generation of middle-aged and elderly people in their 60s and 70s experienced "three years of great famine"<sup>19</sup> when they were young, caught up with the "down to the countryside movement"<sup>20</sup> when they were in school and encountered "wave of layoff"<sup>21</sup> in their careers. "Thrift" is branded collectively on them by the tribulation of fate (*cctv.com*, 2017).

The second domain of referent objects was *personal qualities*, moreover, it was divided into three categories in the articles, the first category was *potential*, that is, the ability to gain more wealth in the future, also a trait that people value much in the "985 Blind Date", the title of "985 colleges" is regarded as the most eye-appealing sign of this trait, "overemphasising the 985 status is just a manifestation of an increasingly utilitarian marriage" (*xinhuanet.com*, 2020). The second was *vision*, participants' narrow vision foments the motivation to despise others, as they do on a blind date, "to merely materialise and label marriage, on the one hand, is dwarfing the spiritual characteristics of love, on the other hand, reflecting the narrow vision" (*xinhuanet.com*, 2020). The third, as is the most stressed point in the articles, was *morality*. "Powerful and loving, wealthy and courteous, can one be respected, otherwise no matter how much wealth he has, he will be an uncultivated vulgar person" (*People.com*, 2015).

Lastly, *society* as an integrated and abstract unit was the third domain. *Society* was said to be not only the bearer of the consequences of the "chain of contempt", but also the aggregation of agents that were supposed to take action immediately. The bearer of the consequences: "in order for society to gain stronger and sustainable momentum for development, but it is also necessary to consciously weaken this mentality of 'chain of contempt' in careers (*huanqiu.com*, 2017)", in other words, if people did not effectively take

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<sup>19</sup> It refers to a period of nationwide famine in the People's Republic of China from 1959 to 1961

<sup>20</sup> It was a political movement in the early days of the People's Republic of China. It occurred from the 1950s to 1978 and reached its climax during the Cultural Revolution. During the period, the government organised tens of millions of urban intellectual youths (the "educated youth") to settle and attend in labour in the countryside to accept the re-education of the poor and lower-middle peasants

<sup>21</sup> It refers to the layoff of employees caused by the reform of state-owned enterprises or corporate reorganisation in the 1990s. Due to the large number of involved people and the large scope of influence, it was called the "layoff wave". At that time, the state-owned enterprises accounted for an absolute proportion of the Chinese economy, however, due to backward management, they had been inefficient

the spread of this mentality of “chain of contempt” into control, *society* was not about to have stronger and sustainable momentum for development. And, accordingly, the aggregation of agents: “society does not need to give too much connotation to academic qualifications. A high degree does not mean a high EQ, nor does it mean a good character (*xinhuanet.com*, 2020)”, *society* in this case, seemed to have its own will to decide what attitude to adopt towards academic qualifications, as was helpful to cope with the “chain of contempt”.

The principal referent objects, in this thesis, are used to analyse the distribution of active and passive social actors, as per Leeuwen, active actors are represented as dominating and shaping a certain domain or action, those in passive roles are, to the contrary, represented as the recipients and perceivers of a certain event (Leeuwen 2008: 33). But regarding social actors involved in the discourse on the “chain of contempt”, we can only find strong ambiguity of the distribution of roles: the positions of despisers and the despised in the “chain of contempt” were not clear, which resulted in a new question - was it necessary to introduce the term “chain of contempt” in those contexts; in addition to the positions, within the “chain of contempt”, the difference between despisers and the despised remained fuzzy throughout those articles; media and journalists were simultaneously social actors, their roles stayed ambiguous, however. *Social gap* was initially referred to as a relatively explicit domain that people despise based on the differences in objective factors such as economic conditions and age, nevertheless, in view of the definition of the “chain of contempt” we discussed hereinbefore.

*Personal qualities*, by contrast, was a more implicit domain in the analysis of the distribution of social actors. According to the articles, besides economic conditions, being confined by personal qualities - their own vision and moral standards was also an important reason for despisers. Due to their narrow vision, they did not realise that “when you despise others, you are also despised by others, because there are always people who have more sense of superiority over you” (*People.com*, 2015), and as a result of their low moral standards, they were supposed to be despised in another sense, therefore, “people on many nodes of the chain only obtain some sort of self-satisfaction which is not publicly accepted” (*huanqiu.com*, 2017). It is worthy of note that *personal qualities* was also a domain where media and journalists could be **the subject of contempt** when they merged as another actor. From the dog owner who insulted Mr Wang to the participants of the blind date who fastidiously picked out the candidates based on educational background, not the description of specific actions of despisers but journalists’ comments were dominant parts and brought in detail across the articles. Negative expressions were repeatedly used to describe them – despisers who were weak in

personal qualities, such as “pathetic”, “vulgar”, “hostility”, “failure”, “narrow”, etc, which actually reallocated the roles of social actors, since what we could read was more concerning journalists’ contempt, rather than theirs.

In the domain of *society*, social actors could be even more implicitly referred to. The authors initially individualised social actors with apparently discriminatory behaviours and associated them with people who possess an advantage in social gap and have similarly low-grade personal qualities, while unexpectedly assimilating all social actors who were either generalised or personalised in the previous content, collectivising them into one unit, society, at last. This is often used to regulate the practice and to manufacture consensus opinion, for instance, “after all, a truly benign society must be able to accommodate both the ‘square dance’ of the elderly and the ‘scooters’ of the young” (*cctv.com*, 2017), an evaluation was put forward in the lead of commenting, “benign society”, and a phrase with a strong directional meaning, “must be”, was laid between the imagination of future scenario and expected action, revealing some real intent of media.

### 3.2.2. Discursive construction of legitimation

As we have mentioned the role of official media thereinbefore, it is an indispensable step to analyse how the discursive construction of *legitimation* was done in their published material. *Authorisation* was the first form used by journalists to legitimise. In the age of professionalism, *expert authority*, namely, experts’ opinions are significant to be provided, e.g., “however, it should be pointed out that either the popular “chain of contempt” in career or the academic theory of social stratification, there are actually no definite criteria” (*Huanqiu.com*, 2017), the author claimed that his statement represented the “general opinion” of academia but did not give out any concrete citation. Besides, *role model authority* also appeared when a solution to the problem was needed:

In fact, many places have already conducted useful regulations and instruction on “proper square dance”, and gradually began to have guidance, management methods, and autonomous rules (*cctv.com*, 2017).

This text appealed to people not to discriminate against square dancers as the possibilities of gradual improvement had been proven, thus the problem would be solved similarly with more patience. *The authority of tradition* was frequently observed, sometimes conducted by a proverb, “the old saying, ‘honour the elderly in other families as we honour those in our own’<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> In written Chinese: “老吾老以及人之老”, cited from *Mencius* (book), one of the Confucianist classics, but has become a known proverb

is still familiar to our ears” (*cctv.com*, 2017), sometimes by an excerpt from ancient classics of unknown provenance:

**The ancients said:** “One is not certainly noble even if he is powerful as the emperor; One is not certainly low even if he is poor as a peasant. The distinction between high and low is the beauty of one’s behaviour<sup>23</sup>.” (*People.com*, 2015)

Along with *authorisation*, there was also *rationalisation*, which should be prepared for target viewers with different types of personalities. For example, this text was typical goal-oriented *rationalisation*: “since this chain is a closed loop, despising others cannot elevate oneself, so individuals as despisers are very likely to be despised at the same time” (*Huanqiu.com*, 2017). If *authorisation* and *rationalisation* were mildly persuasive ways of legitimation, then direct *evaluation* was an overt declaration of attitude, e.g., “such blind dates, even if happened at a beautiful first-snow night, even if happened at the ‘Museum of Love’, were nothing more than failures” (*Xinhuanet.com*, 2020). In addition to the single forms of *legitimation* displayed above, it should be noticed that *storytelling* worked as a combination of all the ways mentioned:

When former US President Eisenhower was attending Military Academy at West Point, one of his classmates had a barber shop at home, so his hair was always kept neat and tidy. Eisenhower often made jokes about his being a barber’s son, making this classmate embarrassed. But when he wrote his memoir in later years, Eisenhower felt that he was too bastard back then, “to make a person ashamed of his father's job of raising a family.” He deeply regrets this (*People.com*, 2015).

The moral tale of Eisenhower is here not only to analyse the role of the discursive construction of legitimation but also how purposes and legitimation might overlap, although not all - they can serve as legitimations when they make submerged and oblique references to moral values in a frame of instrumentality, to achieve a “strategic-utilitarian morality” (Habermas 1976: 22). This excerpt of Eisenhower’s tale happened to be a typical one which not only legitimated the text itself but also conveys purposes. The author seemed to stand together with the despised, balancing the disadvantaged situation encountered by them to attain legitimation, as we analysed. After establishing Eisenhower as a model of both success and wisdom, the author proposed what he thought was an effective way to solve the problem - imitating or transplanting Eisenhower’s introspective spirit and displaying an imagined scenario as the effect of action. However, he did not present a practical solution, only realising such moralised actions not by

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<sup>23</sup> In written Chinese: “故势为天子，未必贵也；穷为匹夫，未必贱也。贵贱之分，在行之美丑。” originally from *Zhuangzi* (book), one of Taoist classics, but in the article the source was not marked

means of generalisations, but by means of abstractions of expressions which distil from the actions to peripheral aspects – an airy-fairy blueprint (Leeuwen 2008: 126).

Multimodal legitimation, which although only appeared once in our selection of official media articles but works as a significant form of legitimation in general, thus hereon, a brief analysis is still warranted.

In order to fight against the ageing of the body to lighten the burden on offspring, they sweat and exercise in the square. Their destiny is closely connected with ours and has never been separated. We also need to stop, wait a bit for them, and be more tolerant of their panic and slowness in the face of social change and progress (*cctv.com*, 2017).

This text appeared at the end of the article, which was an echo to figure 9 that appeared at the beginning of the article, and figure 9 also depicted a group of people who “worked hard to keep healthy and not cause trouble to their children” in the public space, namely, a crowd of sweating and exercising “parents”. The text used sensationalism to try to empathise with those who might have parents of the same age, genericising all those with the illustrated behaviour as vulnerable and selfless for their children. This image added a yellow filter and used a front horizontal perspective to photograph people, giving the viewers the impression that the crowd was walking towards them under the dim light. In this set of image and text, the author took advantage of public empathy and visual feeling of constriction to conduct a *moral comparison* – “do not be mean to these people, as the younger and educated, your parent could be one of them”, legitimated the text itself, as well as the author’s intention to win the attention of middle-aged and elderly viewers.



Figure 9. The image used in the article selected from *cctv.com*, depicts a group of middle-aged or elderly people who adopted night walking as a form of exercise

### 3.2.3. Analyses of purposes of control and social structure

Unlike private media, which needs continuous growth, the main job of official media is to cooperate with governments and promote mainstream ideologies. Xiao Wei pointed out in his research that the sources of the subjectivity of media are different, such as BBC, under the system of public management, the board of directors is appointed by the government, thus its subjectivity is derived from the administration, and the subjectivity of contemporary China's official media is derived from organisation of the ruling party (Xiao 2015: 313). This also means that in the competition between official media and private media for the resources of public attention, once the official media is at a disadvantage, the occupancy of administrative resources could be involved in the competition to regain the situation. According to Ding Hanqing, the official media, not only as what Li Guowei put forward, their receiving amount of clicks on the content concerning daily life, leisure and entertainment are not as much as that of private media, but even their monopoly as channels for the dissemination of major social events and professional information is no longer there (Ding 2017: 342). He found that official media had also launched "self-defence" against the private media due to the loss of audiences, declining advertising revenue and deteriorating business operations. For example, in 2014, starting from copyright, National Radio and Television Administration released measures to rectify the Internet and television, and in 2016, the Beijing branch of the Cyberspace Administration of China ordered a number of websites that "published information collected and compiled by themselves" to be rectified (Ding 2017: 342), the effect of these measures was unclear, however, according to an investigation of McKinsey, new social media had still been the main way for Chinese consumers to obtain information (McKinsey & Company 2020). The predicament for official media is currently evident; with the intervention of administrative power, the effect showed insignificantly, and such measures that are inconsistent with market laws cannot be taken frequently; after all, as Xu Zhong concluded in his work, the Chinese government must focus on supply-side structural reforms that improve efficient functioning of the market, limiting its administrative intervention in economic activities (Xu 2018: 88), and making room for private economy and the exit of inefficient firms (Xu 2018: 141).

The competition between the official and private media is not only related to commercial interests but also closely bound up with the contention for **discourse power**. The current

amount of discourse power will significantly affect the increase or decrease of the future number of viewers, which made the official media have to adopt some differentiated competitive strategies for producing content. Take the production of discourses on the “chain of contempt” as an example; we mentioned in *section 3.1* that the leading target group of private media producing them was the younger, educated middle-class, who were inclined to be attracted by novel and entertaining content; As for the official media, whose content is relatively serious and didactic, indeed it was not wise for them to target the same group at the priority, even though they had seemed to try hard. From the perspective of narrative style, the objects they produced such discourses were ordinary working-class or middle-aged and older adults, they were either relatively more anxious about life (e.g., concerning remuneration, opportunities, etc.) and more sensitive to inequalities, or they were more accustomed to preaching narratives and appealing to morality when it came to social problem-solving.



### 3.3. Discussion

Since we have examined the articles of private media and official media separately in the sections 3.1 and 3.2, it is **necessary to compare** the two sources to obtain more new findings. First, we compare the part with the most in common, *legitimation*. *Legitimation* was used extensively by both private and official media to deceive viewers from identifying the transformed semiotic elements by the authors of the articles. But the private media articles tended to present more multimodal and carnivalised texts, which were rarely seen in the official media articles. Referent objects are the next to compare, as are useful indicators to see what semiotic elements were added to replace those of social practices, and repeatedly mentioned to shape the impressions and deliver the attitudes, in the articles from different sources. The most confusing pair of referent objects should be “*sense of superiority*” in private media articles and “*personal qualities*” in official media articles, as they both belong to the category of subjectiveness. The private media claimed that a *sense of superiority* was the root cause of the formation of the “chain of contempt” but did not explain the consequences of indulging the phenomenon, only recommending a “solution” - *acceptance of contempt*. In contrast, the official media said that “*personal qualities*” was one of the reasons for the “chain of contempt” (the other was “*social gap*”), and the improvement of personal qualities was also a way to deal with it. In addition, the result of letting go of the “chain of contempt” was that the entire *society* would suffer from negative consequences, such as, microscopically, difficult (for a lot of people) to find a suitable partner (*xinhuanet.com*, 2020), or macroscopically, hard to achieve social equality (*huanqiu.com*, 2017).

When we introduced Bourdieu’s formula,  $[(\textit{habitus}) (\textit{capital})] + \textit{field} = \textit{practice}$  (Bourdieu 1984: 101), we pointed out that *capital* is the externalisation of an agent’s position in social space, *habitus* is the mental structure shaped by *capital* and helps the agent to gain more capital, combining with the discussion above, we can find that the private media tended to associate the “chain of contempt” with the differentiation of *habitus*. Although they sometimes talked about the “significance of a good diploma” or the “sequences of salary”, they still mocked or described the mockery of those agents who were labelled with these things. Absurdly, private media articles usually ended up linking the cause of the occurrence of this phenomenon to something called “human nature”, while the official media tended to associate the “chain of contempt” with the inequality of *capital*; all these actions of media producing the discourses took place in two layers of fields, *the field of texts* and *the field of contexts*, which was consistent with their needs and aims of gaming in the fields. In the field of texts, they were

gaming over whose storytelling was more attractive and whose interpretation of the “chain of contempt” could receive more consent; in the field of contexts, they were gaming over whose position was more in line with the majority of people and even the entire society, to seize more discourse space in the future and to gain more chances to win the game in the two fields, as were also the purposes of the discursive construction of *legitimation* in their articles.

## 4. Conclusion

After the analyses in the entire *Chapter 3*, we have obtained some results on the discourse structures of the “chain of contempt”, and these results will be sorted out and summarised below. Among the eight articles we selected from private media and state media, without any exception, the “chain of contempt” was only an indiscriminately accepted and applied phrase, and a large number of elements in social practices were intentionally added, deleted, replaced, and rearranged by the authors, with the presence or absence of their selected semiotic elements instead, or presented in their preferred orders to influence viewers’ attribution of causalities, and the media that produced these articles were without any suspense, influenced by the power structures behind them, as was analysed out by using the theoretical framework of Leeuwen and Van Dijk, combined with the research results from domestic social scientific scholars in the country, therefore, the “chain of contempt” had been a set of identifiable discourses that were intentionally woven and continuously reproduced across media. The three research questions that were proposed in *section 1.2*, based on Bourdieu’s three core concepts, along the framework of Leeuwen and Van Dijk, and committed to being answered in *Chapter 4*, are grips for our understanding of discourses of the “chain of contempt” and their reproduction.

Regarding **which category of capital or habitus** was the basis of contempt, as the corresponding articles reported, and **how media articles described** the social events and their causes, articles from private and official media consistently **covered all categories** of capital and habitus, but they stressed on different aspects, and the narrative structures of similar articles from peer media were close, so were the repeatedly emphasised “causes of contempt” and the solutions to them, thus for the convenience of our analyses, we used five referent objects, two in private media, *sense of superiority*, and *acceptance of contempt*; three in official media, *social gap*, *personal qualities*, and *society* to create an overview on these repeatedly emphasised parts. The private media mainly emphasised the subjective aspect, namely, *habitus*, stating that as people’s living standards continued to improve, their lifestyles and tastes (*habitus*) also kept differentiating, and there developed the binary distinctions, between the elegant and the vulgar, or the upper and the lower, also accompanied by the former’s contempt for the latter. People’s reason for respecting that had progressed with the development of society should not have allowed such discriminative situations to occur, but the *sense of superiority* was said to be a constant existence and human instinct, thus people had better accept it calmly (*acceptance of contempt*). The official media, on the other hand, emphasised the

objective aspect, namely, *capital*, unfolding stories that, with the rapid development of the economy, *social gap* was also widening, and social stratification based on wealth status and educational background was forming, some people who were at advantage in the formation, their *personal qualities* had not progressed with the economy, they, therefore, tended to express their discrimination on other people, all members of the *society* must face up to and change this plight, otherwise it would be everybody that received harm.

Concerning **what have been legitimated or authorised** during the process of discourse construction, the authors of the selected articles successfully had **both the texts and contexts** legitimated. Legitimation of texts was used to manipulate the narratives to let the stories themselves make sense; legitimation of contexts was to obfuscate the temporal and spatial background of social events, explaining the causalities in them, while also providing moral support for the authors to continue producing more information suiting the logic of their narratives. In contrast, the private media were good at using multimodal and carnivalised texts, which were usually composed of discourses that were popular among ordinary people, and were not concerned with grammatical norms and moral judgments. The use of this type of text was a deliberate pandering to the reading preferences of the public, thus should also be seen as a form of *legitimation*, as was an attempt to make the discourses of the “chain of contempt” seem more credible.

What **are the purposes of power behind private media and official media** to exert influence, respectively? As per our results of analyses, **the purpose of the private media was** to use the discourses of the “chain of contempt” to attract the attention of more viewers, especially educated middle-class ones of younger age, while subtly conveying negative messages to them, making them succumb to various sorts of contempt as an unalterable human nature, in turn, accepting one’s own social class and the inequalities that came with it, clearing the way for the emerging Internet elites behind private media **to further seize power; the purpose of official media was** more passive than that of the private media. After various measures, including administrative intervention, they had been unable to reverse their competitive disadvantage, thus making compromises on topics that cater to young viewers’ favour to try to “win back the hearts of them”, so as **to scramble the discourse power** in the fields to compete with private media. However, in their narratives, due to the inertia of the content production in the past and the dependence on the elder target viewer groups, the transition had been apparently not smooth, as we mentioned above, their content still had the characteristics of preaching, and narratives of theirs tended to be cut through the perspective of the elderly (parents, in some cases).

The title of this thesis is “*semiotics of the ‘chain of contempt’ in Chinese media*”, but we might regard this thesis as a first step to actively exploring the semiotics of any buzzword in any country-specific context, in the light of theoretical and analytical frameworks from Pierre Bourdieu, Theo van Leeuwen, and Teun A. van Dijk. Such an initiative is not unnecessary, as the Danish communication scientist Stig Hjarvard mentioned in his work on *the mediatisation of culture and society*, nowadays not only politics and religion but even games and habitus are undergoing mediatisation. These domains are gradually losing their autonomies, with core functions dependent on the public media, and are shaped by interaction with them (Hjarvard 2013). In other words, the deepening of mediatisation may mean the continuous loss of our own subjectivity, thus we should always maintain a high degree of vigilance on media and their power of discursive construction.

## Resümees

### “Põlguse keti” semiootika Hiina meedias

Alates 2012. aastast on Hiinas Internetis levinud moesõna, mille nimi on “põlguse kett”. Mõjuka ajalehe *Southern Metropolis Daily* algse meediaartikli definitsiooni kohaselt viitab see teatud tarbimiseelistuse või kultuurimaitsega inimeste põlgusele teiste inimeste või rühmade suhtes, kellel on erinev arvamus. Selline põlgus esitatakse järjestikusel kujul, nimelt A põlgab B, B põlgab ka C, samal ajal kui C vaatab D-le alla, seega nähtus, mida nimetatakse “põlguse ketiks”. Seda kuuma terminit oli otsitud ajakirjandusest, nii ametlikust kui ka erasektorist. Sellest tulenevalt mõeldi välja suur hulk “põlguse ketiga” seotud artikleid. Seetõttu äratas see ka akadeemilise ringkonna tähelepanu, mõned sotsioloogia ja kommunikatsiooniteaduse teadlased olid seda järjest uurinud. Kuid käesoleva lõputöö autor märkas, et nendes varasemates uuringutes oli olnud metodoloogiline lünk, st meedia toodetud uut terminit ei olnud uuritud semiootiliselt, vaid meelevaldselt otse oma uurimistöösse üle võetud. See põhjustaks nende uurimistöe algusest peale “**semantilise lõksu**” sattumise, mis kahtlemata mõjutaks tõsiselt nende järeldusi. Käesoleva lõputöö autor kasutas seetõttu **Pierre Bourdieu** ‘*capital, habitus* and *field*’-i argumente kogu sisu ulatuses teoreetilise alusena, kombineeris **Theo van Leeuweni** ja **Teun A. van Dijk**i analüütilise raamistikuga, valis esinduslikke artikleid vastavalt era- ja ametnikest meediast ja tegi diskursuseanalüüse. Analüüsides tulemustes leidis autor, et suur hulk semiootilisi elemente, sealhulgas sotsiaalsed tegijad, sotsiaalsed tegevused ja taustaseaded, on artiklite lõikes erinevaid transformatsioone läbinud, mistõttu artiklid olid kuhjatud mitmetähenduslikkusest. Kuid need artiklid legitimeerisid tekste ja kontekste peenelt ning petsid lugejaid sujuvalt. Samuti leidis autor, et “põlguse kett” diskursuste tekitamine on olnud seotud hiljutiste muutustega meedia taga olevates jõustruktuurides. Kokkuvõttes võib seda lõputööd vaadelda kui nii vajalikku ettevalmistust (puudulikkust) eelnevateks uurimusteks, kui ka ettekujutust edasistele “põlguse kett” või **mõne muu sarnase moesõna uurimisele**.

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