



HUMOUR AS NEGOTIATION:
DIGITAL CULTURES OF FRIENDLY POLITICAL HUMOUR
ON THE CHINESE INTERNET

RUICHEN ZHANG

MURRAY EDWARDS COLLEGE

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

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DECLARATION

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my thesis has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the relevant Degree Committee.

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HUMOUR AS NEGOTIATION

DIGITAL CULTURES OF FRIENDLY POLITICAL HUMOUR ON THE CHINESE INTERNET

RUICHEN ZHANG

ABSTRACT

This thesis works on the digital cultures of friendly political humour on the Chinese internet, examining the potential of humour in bridging communication and negotiating the hegemonic relationship between the online public and the state. Previous research mostly emphasises the more extreme cases of digital humour in China, understanding them primarily as grassroots resistance with subversive potential in the authoritarian context. To move beyond the restricted scope of humour practiced by few and far between, my research focuses on non-contentious humour that circulates more widely among the online public. With its creative discourse strategies to repurpose political language for entertainment, non-contentious humour has much less critical or subversive implications and wider impacts on everyday life. I argue that these much-neglected cases of humour are highly relevant to understanding everyday politics in authoritarian societies.

Based on ethnographic observations on Chinese social media, discourse analysis of online humour, and 40 in-depth interviews with cultural participants, I find that practices of friendly political humour can lubricate communication on sensitive and controversial topics, and open up the official rhetoric on socialist ideology in China to personalised reinterpretations and redefinitions. Furthermore, while interweaving individuals' everyday experiences with ideological discourse, these practices of humour reconfigure the socialist hegemony in China from authoritarian coercion to be more firmly based on active cultural participation from the online public in the discourse formation process of dominant ideology. With these findings, I argue that humour plays an important role in enabling the public to negotiate the relationship between the dominant discourse of ideology and the public discourse of diversified voices orchestrated through practices of digital culture. In so doing, humour serves important functions of mediating and negotiating the hegemonic

relationship between the state and the online public in China. Rather than signifying grassroots resistance to the authoritarian rule, friendly political humour can mobilise potentials of humour and digital affordances to steer political persuasion towards benign and harmonious ways of state-society interaction. This thesis on humour as negotiation brings much-needed theoretical nuance to our understanding of the power dynamic in authoritarian societies as well as valuable empirical nuance to the discussion of culture and everyday politics in the digital age.

*to Chinese netizens,
for their exceptional wit and creativity*

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INTRODUCTION

Wit beyond measure is man's greatest treasure.

- J.K. Rowling, the *Harry Potter* series

In December 2015, a group of internet memes repurposing political slogans and posters for amusement went viral on Sina Weibo, the largest and most influential microblogging site in China, quickly causing a digital fever of reappropriating old-fashioned propaganda on Chinese social media. Netizens actively participated in this 'meme-making' competition, combining familiar propaganda phrases with popular conversational buzzwords, rendering this formulaic political language ridiculously funny and down-to-earth. For example, 'You can diss me, but you cannot diss my Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of our nation,' 'Don't bow your head, or your GDP will fall; don't cry, or capitalism will laugh.' They went on to create a variety of memes by putting these words on Maoist propaganda posters featuring a sharp contrast of both visual and textual styles for entertainment. These image macros (user-annotated images, a popular type of digital memes) have also been a big hit across online communities.



Figure 1. ‘Everyone is on holiday, except for me, building socialism by myself.’

就知道吃！
这样怎么建设社会主义！

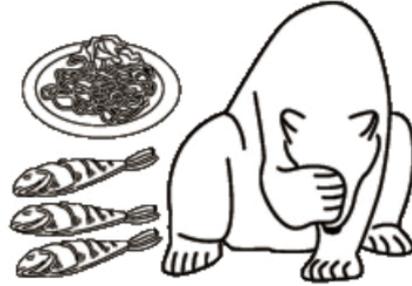


Figure 2. ‘All I wanna do is eat! That’s not the way to build socialism!’

With their continuous circulation and further mutations on the Chinese internet, these digital creations remaking political slogans and/or posters into memes have evolved to be more versatile and have been widely used in everyday conversations and for self-expression on social media. For example, Figure 1 captions a cartoon figure with ‘Everyone is on holiday, except for me, building socialism by myself.’ It jokes about staying at home or sticking to work during the holiday for a political commitment. Figure 2 says ‘All I wanna do is eat! That’s not the way to build socialism!’, which humorously criticises food cravings from a political perspective. These memes and the like are very popular among Chinese netizens for wry self-deprecation. These memes are now commonly known as ‘sassy socialist memes,’ or in short, ‘socialist memes.’

As a ‘social media addict’ myself, I started to notice these memes from the very beginning in early December 2015 when these memes were initially inspired in a ‘sentence-making’ competition on Sina Weibo. I witnessed a large part of the process of their emergence and popularisation on Chinese social media, its media format evolving from textual jokes to image macros and even further in forms of funny videos, its content expanding from romantic clichés to everyday minutiae, and its spread across different social media platforms. From what I could see, many Chinese netizens including myself and a large

number of my friends were immediately attracted to these creative digital artefacts of ‘socialist memes’ and had great fun using and sharing them in online communication. At a time when I was seeking a worthy topic for my PhD proposal in early 2016, I had quite a few interesting topics on my mind but these memes came in as an unexpected surprise prevailing over all my previous plans. I was instinctively drawn to these memes, not just as an ordinary netizen or meme user seeking fun in these rather unusual cases of humour, but also as a researcher interested in their cultural and political relevance. Somehow, it just flashed across my mind that there must be ‘something important’ underlying these memes and that particular kind of humour reappropriating political slogans and posters for digital entertainment. As a sociologist, I was eager to figure it out.

The first question that came to my mind was: were there any other similar jokes, memes or other forms of funny creations on the internet reworking political themes? This was my very first reaction upon having a big laugh over these ‘socialist memes.’ Having enjoyed the amusement from ‘socialist memes’, I wanted to know more and have more fun. Following the first question, I was also wondering: why did I amongst many other Chinese netizens find these memes and other similar jokes funny? Or to move beyond my personal feeling, why could these memes go viral and gain wide popularity on the Chinese internet? Finally, I was intrigued by the third question that led me to this thesis: what was that ‘something important’ behind these memes that I instantly felt upon my first look at ‘socialist memes’? As digital creations from the grassroots about the top-down political language, these memes *somehow* connected the online public to political authority, but how exactly? These questions, however simple and unpolished, laid the basis for this research.

From December 2015, I began looking for similar funny memes and expressions as I spent long hours on social media, which I much later became aware was already part of my background research on this subject of ‘fun.’ After I started my PhD in Cambridge and gained departmental approval to officially kick off my ethnography on Chinese social media, I started systematic data collection and data sampling using methods of thematic

analysis. From the collection of political jokes in various forms and on diverse topics, I began to filter the materials I collected and sort them into workable categories in an attempt to find the best way to conceptualise the kind of ‘fun’ that I wanted to study. In this process, I tried different working definitions—memes, satire, humour, polysemous humour, political humour, etc. It was not easy to find the right name to describe in the most accurate way possible what had drawn my attention as a social researcher in the first place. It was not just a matter of defining what I wanted to study, but more importantly, about finding the best perspective to approach it for analysis in its social context. After a long process of struggles, I decided to perceive them as popular culture on digital media, and finalised my definition for analysis in this thesis: *digital culture(s) of friendly political humour*. Starting from this finalised definition, I continued with my data collection, did my research in the relevant literature, delved into empirical materials, and went back and forth between what I read in existing works and what I saw in empirical data for analysis, all of which got me here in a fully prepared position to officially introduce my research as follows.

This research investigates a unique type of friendly political humour on the Chinese internet featuring a) creative use of discourse strategies to reappropriate official political language for fun and b) little subversive implications of criticism or dissent. While it can be viewed from multiple perspectives as literary work, discourse formation, or cultural creation, it is examined in this research as popular culture mediated through digital social media. My overarching research question is: *what role does this culture of friendly political humour play in mediating the relationship between the online public and political authority in China?*

Centred upon this question, this thesis examines the potential of humour in bridging communication and mediating the hegemonic relationship between the online public and the state in the context of China. Previous research mostly emphasises the more extreme cases of digital humour in China, understanding them primarily as grassroots resistance with subversive potential in an authoritarian context. To move beyond the restricted scope of humour practised by few and far between, my research focuses on non-contentious

humour that circulates more widely among the online public. With its creative discourse strategies to repurpose political language for entertainment, non-contentious humour has less critical or subversive implications and wider impacts on everyday life. I argue that these much-neglected cases of friendly political humour are highly relevant to understanding everyday politics in authoritarian societies.

Based on ethnographic observations on Chinese social media, discourse analysis of online humour, and 40 in-depth interviews with cultural participants, I find that practices of friendly political humour can lubricate communication on sensitive and controversial topics, and open up the official rhetoric on socialist ideology in China to personalised reinterpretations and redefinitions. Furthermore, while interweaving individuals' everyday experiences with ideological discourse, these practices of humour reconfigure the socialist hegemony in China from authoritarian coercion to be more consensual, that is to say, more firmly based on active cultural participation from the online public in the discourse formation process of dominant ideology. With these findings, I argue that humour plays an important role in mediating the relationship between the dominant discourse of ideology and the public discourse of diversified voices orchestrated through practices of digital culture. In so doing, humour enables the online public in China to negotiate their hegemonic relationship with the state. For clarification, here 'negotiate' refers to the ways in which ordinary netizens use different tactics, expedients, wits to manoeuvre through the many vague and uncertain restrictions, risks, pitfalls to have their voice in the discourse formation of dominant socialist ideology in Chinese society. Instead of using the more common definition of 'negotiate' as trying to reach an agreement or compromise through discussion, I adopt the second meaning of this word in this thesis: managing to find a way through obstacles. This process of negotiation takes place among these Chinese netizens through their creative use of humour as well as the Chinese state with their increasingly strategic techniques in internet governance and discourse (re)construction. Instead of telling the whole story from both sides in which 'negotiation' might be understood as bilateral communication towards a communal understanding or agreement, this research

particularly focuses on the netizens' side of the story, presenting how the online public engages in the discourse formation of socialist ideology via cultural practices of political humour. Rather than signifying grassroots resistance to the authoritarian rule, the friendlier and more moderate types of political humour can mobilise potentials of humour and digital affordances to steer political persuasion towards benign and harmonious ways of state-society interaction. This thesis on humour as negotiation brings much-needed theoretical nuance to our understanding of the power dynamic in authoritarian societies as well as valuable empirical nuance to the discussion of culture and everyday politics in the digital age.

These reviews, analyses, and findings are organised in this thesis in the following structure:

Chapter One provides a literature review on political humour especially in the digital age, laying out the research background of friendly political humour on the Chinese internet. I point out the problem of the dominant control/resistance framework in previous research that sees humour as resistance in unequal social relations. This understanding is particularly biased towards the subversive end in studies of authoritarian societies. I argue that this framework fails to capture the ambiguity and complexity of political humour in China. The authoritarian gatekeeping of political discourse in China has given rise to vibrant cultural practices of incongruity humour. To move beyond the control/resistance binary, I particularly choose non-contentious cases of political humour on the Chinese internet for analysis, seeking to reveal its political relevance in mediating power relations.

Chapter Two introduces the poststructuralist theoretical approach to the politics of fun that I develop for analysis of digital cultures in this thesis. This approach consists of a macro-level framework that addresses the workings of power in cultural practices, and a micro-level framework that is oriented towards the analysis of digital humour. The former is built upon theories of culture, ideology, and discourse, interweaving cultural struggle, hegemonic domination, and meaning construction to account for the power dynamic between the online public and the ideological power that operates through discourse. The

latter draws on humour studies, affect theory, and contemporary media research, bringing out the importance of meaning multiplicity of humour, uncatalogued feelings of ambiguity, and the affordances of digital media in facilitating cultural (re)formation in an iterative process. While integrating these two frameworks into the theoretical approach for this research, I argue that it is necessary to take a poststructuralist stance to account for digital humour characterised by polysemy, uncertainties, and ambiguities in a cultural dynamic.

Chapter Three explains and justifies the qualitative methodological approach of this research that combines ethnographic strategies and critical discourse analysis (CDA) methods to study friendly political humour as a cultural practice. I adopt qualitative methods for my research for their unique advantages in producing contextual understandings of not only the meaning making process of humour formation but also the audience's cultural experiences of humour practice. I integrate qualitative methods of audience-focused ethnography and text-based CDA for a better theorisation of humour as practice. As they are problem-oriented methods, I tailored research designs of data sampling and analysis for the three different empirical cases of friendly political humour. Finally, this chapter explains the ethical considerations about privacy issues and potential political risks.

Chapters Four, Five, and Six present three independent case studies, each taking a slightly different angle to probe into the ways in which these cultures of friendly political humour interact with state power manifested in censorship, propaganda, and hegemonic narratives.

Chapter Four looks at euphemised humour that strategically reworks official language to legitimise transgressive topics that would otherwise be censored on Chinese social media. Moving beyond the political logic that foregrounds a contentious interactivity between censorship and the online public, I adopt a cultural logic that understands these euphemisms as cultural recodings in a process of meaning making. Based on analysis of three cases of euphemised humour— 'socialist pornography,' 'socialist brotherhood,' and 'socialist Venom'—I argue that these cultural recodings, while masking contents that are

considered problematic in the current system of censorship, unsettle its meaning regulation and mediate the interactivity between the online public and the dominant power in China.

Chapter Five focuses on ‘socialist memes,’ a specific meme genre popularising on Chinese social media in recent years. I conduct a discourse analysis of ‘socialist memes’ drawing on the notion of affective repetition, examining how humour disrupts official language, encourages interweaving between personal experience and dominant narrative, and engages the online public affectively in its continuous repetition on the internet. The memetic reappropriation of the Chinese official language on the internet enriches its meanings and reifies this increasingly abstract language of socialist ideology for it to be incorporated into everyday cultural experiences. I argue that practices of memetic humour can potentially redirect the ineffective propagandistic repetition towards wider cultural participation in reiterating and reasserting the ideological language, and in so doing reconfiguring the socialist hegemony in China.

Chapter Six is a case study of the ‘toad worship’ culture of former Chinese President Jiang Zemin. Originally emerging as political ridicule of Jiang in the early 2000s, this culture has gradually developed into a popular internet phenomenon of remaking this Chinese political leader into a variety of memes for diversified cultural representations. Based on discourse analysis and interviews with ‘toad worship’ participants, I demonstrate how friendly ‘toad worship’ memes deconstruct the official narratives of Jiang as a stereotypical Communist Party leader, opening the representation of Jiang to diverse interpretations and humorous remakings in the memetic process of cultural participation. I argue that these subcultural practices—in decentring the official presidential image—reshape the ideological discourse formations in China from their rigid and formulaic rhetoric towards an appealing internet culture that is more widely accepted and appreciated among the public. Therefore, these cultural practices of friendly ‘toad worship’ humour, while reconstructing the official ideology, also help with the building of socialist hegemony.

Finally, these three case studies are integrated into the **Conclusion** to address the umbrella question about how humour mediates the relationship between the online public and political authority in China. Analysis of three different cases of political humour reveals a comprehensive process in which netizens deploy the meaning multiplicity of humour to negotiate and manoeuvre their way in the discourse formation of the socialist ideology which used to be monopolised and safeguarded by the state: netizens use censorship-related humour to negotiate the right to speak by reconstructing the discursive boundary of what can and cannot be said; they use propaganda-related humour to negotiate the right to resignify official discourse by depoliticising its ideologically bound meanings and neutralising it in daily contexts; and finally, they use humour related to hegemonic narratives to negotiate the right to reinterpret and represent political leaders and hence to reconstruct official rhetoric. These three steps from being able to say, being able to unfix the ideological signification in language, and then, being able to understand and remember differently, constitute this memetic process of meaning negotiation.

My key argument in this thesis, then, is that digitally mediated political humour plays an important role in enabling the online public to negotiate their way in reshaping the discourse of socialist hegemony in authoritarian China. Rather than voicing criticism and fuelling activism for subversive purposes, political humour—especially its friendly and moderate representations—has important conciliatory and intermediary functions in bridging communication and negotiation rather than intensifying conflicts and contentions. Furthermore, in reshaping official discourse as cultural enjoyment in everyday life, friendly political humour facilitates willing reassertion and meaningful reproduction of socialist ideology and its permeation in Chinese society. Therefore, this thesis argues that humour ultimately contributes to an evolving hegemony of socialism in China that is not only constructed by the state but also constantly reconstructed by the public with their diversified voices integrated into the formation of official narratives.

Starting as a study *for fun*, this research of humour unfolds in the following chapters of

this thesis as a study *of* fun, aspiring to a politics of fun that does not read it into any serious claims or motives but simply appreciates fun for its own sake. Overall, what I present in this thesis is a ‘story’ of fun as the protagonist in bridging friendly communication, inspiring civic creativity, enabling meaning negotiation and essentially power negotiation. The ‘plot’ is set in the context of China where the online public tries to outwit political authority for cultural enjoyment in their everyday life. I quote from the Harry Potter book series, ‘*wit beyond measure is man’s greatest treasure,*’ to salute their creativity and also to prize the values of ‘fun’ in our society.

CHAPTER ONE

POLITICAL HUMOUR ON THE CHINESE INTERNET

Introduction

Following the brief introduction of friendly political humour in the opening chapter, this chapter provides a more thorough introduction of digital cultures of political humour that my research investigates and explains why it is defined this way. To begin with, this chapter situates political humour in the contemporary landscape of ‘everyday politics’ where politics takes place no less importantly through the mundane activities of ordinary people. Political humour has expanded in both its form and content as part of the everyday politics practised through digital media. To narrow down the broad range of political humour, I suggest a working definition of ‘political humour’ in this research based on the narrow conception of ‘politics’ as activities related to the government of a society. Instead of jokes and memes about asymmetric power relations in general, ‘political humour’ in this research is restricted to those that are directly associated with the government.

After laying out the background of political humour, this chapter reviews the literature on political humour particularly in the digital era when politics and culture are increasingly merged on a popular basis in close relation to the lived experience of individuals. In this context, it is important to theorise popular culture and politics as mutually constitutive. Previous studies of political humour as popular culture originated from the mass public primarily follow a dualist framework of control and resistance, understanding humour as power struggles in unequal social relations. This problem is particularly prominent in studies of humour in authoritarian societies. Next, this chapter zooms in to map out the sociopolitical context in China that differs from other (mostly liberal-democratic) societies, and therefore, nurtures a unique style of political humour. The authoritarian rule in China

works through the construction, implementation, and maintenance of an authoritative language of its socialist ideology. This fixed and formulaic language safeguarded by the party-state is sharply distinct from other discourse genres, which lays the basis for the humour of incongruity in reworking this authoritative language for alternative uses.

Finally, this chapter distinguishes between humour and satire—the latter is more commonly used to conceptualise political jokes as an independent literary genre—and explains why it is more accurate to define what I want to study as humour instead of satire. The strict regulation on media content in China creates barriers for cultural creations of political humour, which forces them to take various, often more euphemised and non-contentious forms than political humour in other societies. Compared with satire, more general—especially the friendlier—types of humour have better communication potentialities as they can survive longer on the Chinese internet. I argue that in the Chinese context, political humour has its unique significance that has received inadequate attention in studies of contemporary digital cultures and I aim to fill this gap with a comprehensive analysis of political humour on the Chinese internet.

1.1 Political humour and everyday politics

Political humour has a long history in both East and West and has been systematically studied in various disciplines not only as language, as art and literature, as philosophy, but also in social sciences as a critique to resist domination (Griffin, 1994; Raskin, 2008; Tang and Bhattacharya, 2011). In a digital age when ordinary people are encouraged to shape, share, reframe and remix messages online, creating and circulating their own expressions (Jenkins et al., 2013), political humour has become a cultural practice as part of our everyday life, expanding and mutating in various areas and diverse forms (Gray et al., 2009). This change in the development of political humour is deeply rooted in the contemporary landscape of ‘everyday politics’ where political topics are increasingly framed around individuals’ own experiences and interests (Highfield, 2018).

The notion of ‘everyday politics’ has two senses. First, politics has become prominently *populist* as grounded in everyday settings owned by the ordinary people instead of the professionals, and *civic* as individuals’ self-interests are weaved into the production of politics (Boyte, 2005). This development is enhanced by the digital affordances of spreadability and popular participation that open the production of media and culture to the mass public, and in so doing, disrupt the hierarchical relationships between media producers and consumers (Deuze, 2006; Hall, 2001; Jenkins et al., 2013). The idea of ‘everyday politics’ stresses the impacts of individuals’ informal and mundane activities on the production and reformation of politics (Highfield, 2018). This brings us to its second sense: the overlap between various topical discussions of politics and other multiple non-political areas. The development of digital media has blurred the boundaries between the cultural, the political, and the popular (Hamilton, 2016). As individuals frame political themes in everyday settings, politics is discussed in a highly informal and tangential manner beyond its traditional formal domain (Highfield, 2018). For example, Dean (2019) has noticed how politics is frequently ‘memeified,’ i.e. enacted in forms of shareable visual content through digital media, which implies a central role of visual digital cultures in everyday politics. More specifically, many scholars have examined how the Harry Potter Alliance—an online fan community—uses its fictional setting to frame real-world issues related to social justice and human rights, turning fan culture into activism (Bird and Maher, 2017; Jenkins, 2015; Terrel, 2014). These internet phenomena demonstrate that politics can be a subtheme within more mundane and often non-political subjects, and vice versa (Highfield, 2018).

In this landscape of everyday politics, political humour has expanded in both its form and its content. On the one hand, digital practices of political humour have exceeded the restricted genre of irony and satire featuring explicit social critiques for persuasion purposes (Gruner, 1965). Contemporary digital cultures contain a considerable part of more elementary types of humour like wordplay, witticisms, and even nonsense that are more about creating laughter and amusement than serious motives of criticism or

discontent (see for example Guo, 2018; Katz and Shifman, 2017). On the other hand, political humour, like all other cases of digital humour and entertainment, is no longer confined to traditional political themes like the work of politicians, government activities, or civic political events. It spans a broad range of topics in netizens' everyday conversations and digital activities. This is not only manifested in the politicisation of the personal, i.e. political talks and discussions drawing on individuals' interpretations and experiences. What Highfield (2018) argues about the personalisation of the political should also take into account the depoliticisation of politics as it merges with the non-political mundane, particularly when it is repurposed primarily for fun and aesthetic experience.

The expansion of political humour in both form and content as part of everyday politics creates much difficulty for accurate conceptualisation regarding what is political. I am not going to go through all the rigid definitions in the discipline of political science. What I am providing here is a working definition for my analysis of humour. Broadly speaking, politics is associated with power relations between individuals and social groups. It ranges from macro-level inequalities in areas like race, gender, class to micro-level power struggles between individuals in places like schools or workplaces. However, for analytical purposes, I adopt the narrow conception of 'politics' as restricted to activities related to the government of society and the management of public affairs. Political humour, then, is humour related to political ideology, government policies, politicians, political events, etc. Simply put, the 'political humour' this thesis aims to study is much closer to the 'capital-P' Politics, or major themes of politics, than politics with 'a small p,' in other words, the micro politics of everyday life (Janks, 2012). I suggest this working definition for two main reasons. First, this restricted definition of 'capital-P Politics' is used to narrow down the otherwise broad range of political humour deeply immersed in our everyday life in the digital era. For example, with the same topic of queer fandom, there can be different types of humour—expressions directly about LGBTQ rights using alternatives words to circumvent censorship (see for example Gleiss, 2015, Zhou, 2022), and expressions of 'socialist bromance' or 'socialist brotherhood' using the official ideological terminology for

protection (see Section 4.3 in Chapter Four). Both strategically formed discourses are inherently political as they talk about the rights of sexual minorities in our society. However, it is the humour of ‘socialist bromance’ that I want to study because they use the official term ‘socialist’ to reframe LGBTQ contents as a strategy to show ‘Political’ conformity. In other words, by focusing on the humour of ‘socialist bromance’ instead of other types of satirical or humorous practices related to queer fandom, I am not in any way questioning that queer-related humour is political. The narrow definition of ‘politics’ here is for analytic purpose only—to target this one particular type of political humour that directly reappropriates official discourse from the authoritarian state for expression of incongruity as the main research focus. The other cases of ‘political humour’ that are more generally concerned with power relations that take place outside the realm of the government or are remotely related to the ‘capital-P Politics’ are not my primary concern.

Second, and also more pertinent to my research topic, as Section 1.3 in this chapter will further explain, the emergence of political humour in China is deeply rooted in its state-sponsored political discourse and its authoritarian saturation across society. As a result, a particular genre of political humour in China takes forms of incongruity humour by contrasting the official discourse with other unrelated discourse genres or topics. In other words, it is this official language which represents state power that netizens have been playing and messing around with while practicing this genre of political humour. And this official language along with the way it is implemented in Chinese society belongs to the ‘capital-P Politics’.

That said, it is important to make it clear that while using this working definition that restricts political humour to the realm of government-related politics, I have no intention of creating a binary between the major themes of ‘Politics’ and minor topics of ‘politics,’ or implying in any way that the former is more important than the latter. On the contrary, what I want to stress throughout this research is how entwined the two fields of politics are and how important these mundane practices of joke making and meme sharing on the

internet could have significant role in nudging changes to the major themes of ‘Politics.’ In the case of China, scholars have also discussed the ‘surface’ of China—government politics, social institutions, market activities—vis-à-vis the perceptual and emotional experiences of the Chinese people, proposing a ‘deep China’ approach that transcends the ‘surface’ to delve into the moral lives of individuals (Kleinman et al., 2011). As Yang (2015) argues, however, this approach cannot transcend the ‘surface’ after all. Deep analyses of individuals’ emotional and moral lives are framed and reshaped in the very contexts of institutions and policies, the same way as everyday politics is inevitably rooted in and entwined with the government-related and institutional dimensions of politics. This is also the vantage point of my research: to follow what Yang calls a ‘deep approach’ to the Chinese internet that does not just delve past the major political themes into the minor ones but examines the internet as a facet of a deep China consisting of both dimensions. ‘By paying attention to the “depth” of people’s experiences and practices with the Internet,’ ‘deep internet studies’ reveal the contestations over the Chinese internet as ‘manifestations of the multiple ways of doing politics and being political’ (Yang, 2015: 14).

In my research of political humour specifically, this ‘deep approach to the Chinese internet’ is manifest in two aspects. First, this genre of political humour remixing official political discourse with other discourse genres and reappropriating it for alternative utterances on the internet is essentially pulling these ‘capital-P’ topics into daily life issues such as consumption of pornographic contents (see Chapter Four), self-expressions on work-related anxiety (see Chapter Five), and even offline social networking (see Chapter Six). The intertextuality of incongruity humour itself proves how ‘capital-P Politics’ is closely intertwined with everyday politics and that it cannot be easily disentangled from it. My research is not to peel off ‘Political’ humour from interwoven practices of political humour in general, but rather, to use the particular genre of ‘political humour’ that emerged from ‘capital-P Politics’ as a useful lens to probe into this complicated interwoven relationship between state-sponsored field of ‘Politics’ and the everyday practices of ‘politics.’ Second, with political humour as the research topic and the role of humour in mediating state-

society relationship as the overarching research question, this thesis is acknowledging that these everyday cultural practices of humour are inherently political in the first place, and what this thesis aims to reveal is how voices are raised among the online public vis-à-vis the state, although not in radical criticism or subversive satire as extensively discussed in the existing studies, but or in forms of friendly amusement, harmless jokes, light-hearted laughter. In other words, what I aim to do in this research of political humour is exactly to unpack how the everyday politics of 'humour' draws from the 'capital-P Politics' and then exerts its influence back onto this field in a moderate way, at a minor scale, but with no less significance.

1.2 Political humour as popular culture

One prominent feature of political humour in the digital context of everyday politics is that politics gets increasingly remixed with entertainment in forms of digital cultures. The digital enables a more inclusive process of cultural convergence where ordinary people are given 'tools to archive, annotate, appropriate and recirculate content' (Jenkins, 2004: 93). This has resulted in personalised ways of not only talking about politics but also having fun with politics in an everyday manner, notably in various forms of cultural practices on the internet. Digital political humour, therefore, is more than just humour or politics. It extends into the realm of popular culture that is deeply saturated in the realm of politics (Hamilton, 2016). The intersection of popular culture and politics—as manifested in digital political humour—has important sociopolitical implications. There is a political dimension inherent to the popular participation in digitally mediated cultural practices as it aligns with a shift towards an active voluntarist citizenry (Deuze, 2006). The fact that netizens are able and also willing to voice their concerns and weave their personal feelings and experiences into the public narrative (Milner, 2013c; Papacharissi, 2015) reveals an important dynamic not only in the narrow sense of political engagement but also more widely regarding the rise of individuals in discourse and cultural formation in public life. Although I have confined political humour in this research to a restricted domain

concerning government activities, the participatory authorship of digital political humour in a process of cultural production and circulation nevertheless brings us back to politics in its broad sense as workings of power.

The interweaving of culture and politics has already drawn considerable attention from scholars in multidisciplinary backgrounds to study politics through the prism of digital culture that usually features entertainment and pleasure. Regarding political humour, in particular, previous research has mainly focused on its potentials in promoting political participation, communicating political dissent, and forming polyvocal public discourse. For example, Milner (2013c) discusses how internet memes helped the mass public voice their concerns in the Occupy Wall Street movement; Tay (2014) discusses how humorous viral texts on social media as popular culture empowered individuals in agenda-setting in the presidential election in the United States; James (2014) analyses how disaster humour in the United States as counter-discourse to the mainstream media cultivated historical understandings and critical reflections upon the 9/11 event; Dynel and Poppi (2020) address how digital humour contributed to a collective expression of subversive ideologies in the 2019 protests in Hong Kong. However, other studies also find these potentials rather paradoxical and ambiguous, not necessarily leading to explicitly positive effects in social change. For example, Tsakona and Popa (2011) particularly attach equal importance to the role of political humour in reproducing and reinforcing dominant values in politics compared with its widely acknowledged and extensively explored subversive potential to resist the political status quo; Higgie (2017) demonstrates how popular satire can be co-opted by politicians in their interest in a way that neutralises the critique of satire; Gal (2019) finds both inclusive and exclusive functions of ironic humour in bridging communication between the left-wing and right-wing groups as well as deepening their divide. The role of humour in facilitating agonism and antagonism remains ambiguous.

These debates about the affordances of political humour in a digital age, however diversely elaborated and accentuated based on different empirical cases, seem to fall into the same

dualist paradigm of control/resistance, understanding humour as either subversion of or submission to the political order. This duality is fundamentally rooted in not only the understanding of humour as both a social corrective that deviates from the norm and disrupts order (Tsakona and Popa, 2011) and a safety valve that ‘provides temporary relief but stabilises potentially conflictive situations’ (Kuipers, 2008: 369), but also the theorisation of popular culture as struggles in a social hierarchy of class, ethnicity, and gender based on the Birmingham tradition (Jensen, 2018). Political humour signifying the mixture of politics and entertainment is in fact an attempt to balance between criticisms towards political power and the light-hearted pleasure of culture/media consumption (Jones, 2010; Tsakona and Popa, 2011). However, previous studies as briefly reviewed above tend to emphasise the paradox or incompatibility between these two ends with relatively less attention paid towards the balance per se and how practices of humour attempt to achieve and manage to keep this balance. This problem is especially prominent in studies of political humour in authoritarian societies as they usually tend to foreground the context of oppression, which brings out the aspect of humour as critique or even rebellion. As I shall argue in the following section and more comprehensively in my analysis in Chapters Four, Five, and Six of this thesis, this understanding of political humour fails to account for its unique political background in authoritarian societies. The authoritarian rule in Chinese society in fact gives rise to a particular type of political humour that differs from its counterpart in liberal-democratic societies in terms of both its mixture of political and entertainment and the ways in which it emerges and evolves through digital media.

1.3 Political humour on the Chinese internet

The Chinese internet features a paradoxical combination of rigid state control and vibrant online culture or activism (Yang, 2006), which provides a complex sociopolitical context for humour practices of various kinds. The media landscape is under strict scrutiny by the authoritarian party-state for information regulation (Roberts, 2018), most prominently exemplified by internet censorship. Rather than a monolithic system of blocking

problematic websites and deleting unfavourable contents, internet censorship in China has developed into a comprehensive infrastructure that is operated at multiple layers by multiple parties to filter online information (Yang, 2016). First, it delegates not only to government sectors at different levels but also a variety of private companies including individuals working for these institutions (MacKinnon, 2008, 2009; Miller, 2019; Sun and Zhao, 2021). As a result, censorship in China is highly decentralised, fragmented, and contentious with wide variation between different online platforms depending on their degree of flexibility for how they implement it (MacKinnon, 2009; Knockel et al., 2015; Miller, 2019; Tai, 2014). Second, Chinese internet censorship features a complex mixture of technological, administrative, as well as manual efforts. These means include built-in mechanisms of online platforms like automated algorithms, manual filtering and moderation by human actors of internet police, and other various strategies for opinion-manipulation to outweigh negative information (Hui and Rajagopalan, 2013; Li, 2021; MacKinnon, 2011; Mina, 2014; Roberts, 2018). A part of censorship even operates through self-censorship from both digital platforms and individual internet users. Digital platforms are considered responsible for their users' behaviours in internet governance in China and therefore need to set higher bars for internal information regulation to meet the requirements from the government (Han, 2018). The ambiguity, uncertainty, and sometimes inconsistencies resulting from decentralised censorship naturally give rise to self-censorship among not only journalists but also ordinary netizens (Deng, 2018; Han, 2018; Repnikova, 2017). Third, censorship operates in a changing dynamic between internet censors and users. It is expedient and strategic based on events as online platforms carefully balance between their own commercial interest and censorship requirements from the government (Li, 2021). It is also constantly evolving as censors and users try to outrun one another in a cat-and-mouse game by deploying technological, cultural, and linguistic affordances (Wu and Fitzgerald, 2021). Altogether, these multi-agency, multi-means, and dynamic features constitute a sophisticated, extensive, but also porous and flexible system of internet censorship in China.

This sophisticated yet porous system has important effects on the behaviours of the online public precisely because there are ambiguities, inconsistencies, and variation: instead of draconian punishments or accurate information regulation, the system creates disturbing inconveniences and discrepancies that can be circumvented or dealt with minor adjustments (Roberts, 2018). This also explains the vibrant digital cultures on the Chinese internet as the other side of the coin. With the rise of the internet and social media in Chinese society, netizens have taken great enthusiasm in creating and participating in a broad range of digital cultures, most notably the ‘egao’ culture of creative parody that subverts normality (see for example Gong and Yang, 2010; Meng, 2011; Yu and Xu, 2016). Partly because online content always needs to outrun censorship rules to survive, digital cultures in China deploy various strategies, take various forms, and encourage active participation from the online public. The two aspects of Chinese cyberspace—sophisticated censorship and vibrant digital cultures—are mutually constitutive in a co-dependent relationship in a similar logic of pruning, as censorship preventing popular cultures from continuing in certain directions helps with their vigorous growth in alternative directions, which are then subject to new rules of censorship. The internet culture in China, therefore, provides an important prism for scholars to probe into the interplay between the mass public and state power, particularly regarding a dynamic of power struggles under repression (Yang, 2009).

As for political humour which emerges from this rigidly scrutinised landscape of vigorous digital culture as its subgenre, it has its historical and institutional roots in its unique way of engaging with politics and dealing with state power. In socialist China with its one-party system and its single hegemonic ideology, public culture is highly institutionalised and monopolised, which is a common feature in late-socialist countries (Boyer and Yurchak, 2010). Not only is the realm of politics under strict control with the party-state as its gatekeeper; the apparatuses of media and cultural production and circulation are also strongly integrated by party-state institutions so that ideological control can extend beyond political communication for mass persuasion (see for example Boyer, 2005; Sparks, 1998;

Wolfe, 2005). This is, as Yurchak (2005) argues in his analysis of late-socialism in the Soviet Union, to guarantee recursive normalising pressure of the socialist hegemony on and within political discourse in public culture. At the centre of recursive normalisation practices is an authoritative language of socialism that uses formulaic and ritualised structures to demarcate itself from other discourse genres. Late-socialist regimes typically invest considerable efforts into the crafting, perfection, and regulation of their authoritative language of political communication to implant its political values and convince its people of the legitimacy of the socialist rule (Boyer, 2003; Holbig, 2009, 2013; Taras, 1984; Wolfe, 2005).

The centralised control in public culture through the work of language in late-socialist states is also manifest in Chinese society. With its power in organisational and institutional infrastructure, the Chinese party-state can implement and safeguard its single socialist ideology via disciplinary practices of propaganda and thought work on both administrative and discursive levels (Brady, 2008). This hegemonic ideology is also practised through an authoritative language, i.e. a fixed and normalised discursive system of ideological representations that contain not only textual forms of slogans, speeches, documents, but also visual forms of propaganda and their ritualised practices. The textual language of the Chinese ideology— ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ in its official terms—features rigid semantics, formalities, and pragmatics as the party-state defines one meaning of the very restricted vocabulary as its sole legitimate interpretation and regulates the ‘right’ way this language is used in social contexts (Brown, 2012; Ji, 2003; Holbig, 2013; Schoenhals, 1992). Official slogans, for example, have been not only an important symbolic part of Chinese politics (Karmazin, 2020; Song and Gee, 2020), but also an indispensable part of Chinese people’s everyday life. The textual language is further supported by visual propaganda, notably a particular style of poster art as the iconography of power which is commonly seen in socialist countries to visualise communist values (see for example Bonnell, 1999; Cushing and Tompkins, 2007; Evans and Donald, 1999; Lago, 2009; Landsberger, 2020).

Since the economic reform in 1978, the ideological regulation has gradually loosened in its institutional and rhetorical form, adding more nuances and flexibility to this ideological discourse. Nevertheless, this authoritative language remains identifiable with its signature keywords and vocabulary bearing political forces that are no less important than before (Brown and Bērziņa-Čerenkova, 2018). The Chinese propaganda posters also experienced a shift from political persuasion to moral education, integrating political values with contemporary art and commercial advertising aimed at the increasingly urbanised and media-literacy population (Landsberger, 2018). Nonetheless, the even more spectacular political billboards across Chinese cities and rural areas today demonstrate the state's continuous efforts in exerting sociopolitical control through visual means (Wang, 2018). The state-sponsored poster art remains visible and influential in Chinese society as visualised ideology in distinct forms from other visual genres.

This authoritative language of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'—the official term for the Chinese ideology—has a direct impact on practices of political humour in China. This language is prominently monosemic, ruling out subjective voices and interpretations to ensure the determinacy of meanings and therefore the correctness of the socialist values. The terms convey only official meanings that are ideologically bound with political values. The ways these terms and visual posters are used in everyday life are fixed, predictable, and very much ritualistic. As a result, this authoritative language with its prominent socialist linguistic and aesthetic features is sharply distinct and also distanced from other discourse genres in the public sphere. The contrasts make it easy for the public to rework the socialist language in various ways into 'socialist humour' through incongruity. For example, Link (1993) finds how Chinese people in the pre-digital age have been using the official language in the 'wrong' contexts as the ideological language game in reverse. With the development of the internet in China, scholars have noticed a rise in satirical reuses of propaganda language since the early 2000s, such as the ridicule of the propaganda keyword 'harmony' through its homonym 'river crab' in Chinese (Wang et al., 2016). Chinese video artists have also made parody videos to mock the 'Red Classics,' canonical Chinese socialist literary and

theatrical works, in an attempt to subvert the values they promoted (Li, 2011; Zhao, 2009).

These satirical reuses included, the humorous reworkings of political discourse are variously motivated for political ridicule, sheer amusement, self-derogation, and even nationalist purposes. For example, political humour has been used for cyber-nationalism in 2016 when netizens from mainland China bombarded Taiwanese accounts on Facebook using funny memes remade from socialist slogans to emphasise the Cross-Strait unification values (Liu, 2019). Nordin and Richaud (2014) also find in their interviews with Chinese netizens that even the 'river crab' wordplay about the political slogan and policy 'harmony' or the 'egao' culture of online parody in general does not necessarily constitute a form of resistance. These practices also involve a form of depoliticisation in addition to the repoliticisation potential that has been more extensively investigated in the existing scholarship, reflecting the ambiguity and complexity of political humour on the Chinese internet and the relationships it mediates. Considering the fluid and open-ended process of meaning making in practices of political humour, it is difficult to designate political humour in China to a single dimension of criticism.

As alluded to earlier, this is the major problem with many previous studies of political humour in China that understand it primarily as creative acts of grassroots resistance to authoritarian rule. They either relate it to internet activism and see satirical expressions as an alternative way to voice criticism or political disappointment below the radar (for example Esarey and Xiao, 2008; Lee, 2016; Leibold, 2011; Li and Liu, 2019; Yang, 2009), or analyse it in light of Bakhtin's carnival theory and evaluate its liberating potential against control (for example Gong and Yang, 2010; Li, 2011; Meng, 2011; Mina, 2014). Despite their different theoretical perspectives and arguments on whether humour intends to attack or retreat (humour as activism or cynicism), and, in reality, has worked out or failed (humour as liberation or consolation), they all see humour as politically subversive, only varying in its intentions and outcomes.

This dualist understanding prevailing in current China-focused research is problematic for

two reasons. First, their analysis of satirical humour overstates its political potential, reducing diverse motivations and interpretations to one single dimension of control/resistance. Their emphasis on the antagonistic and struggling relations between state and society has a problem of what Guan (2019) calls ‘authoritarian determinism’ that sees the authoritarian apparatus of a one-party rule as the defining feature of China’s communication sphere. Guan points out that with its narrow focus on the confrontations and significant political events in China’s media ecology, this ‘authoritarian determinism’ perspective unjustifiably ignores the less significant mundane media practices and the benign ways of interactions between the state and the digital public. Many scholars have already noted that political satire can be used and interpreted in different ways among Chinese netizens for purposes of social networking and digital leisure in addition to the expression of criticism (see for example Yang and Jiang, 2015; Yu and Xu, 2016). Even if it is indeed created for political purposes, it can be later shared among the online public for apolitical motivations as cultural practice (Yates and Hasmath, 2017). It would be misleading to assume its political function in cultivating a civic counter-discourse in deliberate attempts to subvert official political discourse (Nordin and Richaud, 2014).

Second, this control/resistance framework seems to confine the analysis of other non-satirical cases of political humour to a purely cultural level, e.g. examining the roles of political humour in promoting cultural values, lubricating interpersonal conversations, constructing cultural identity, and representing changes in social mentality (see for example Chen, 2014; Guo, 2018; Szablewicz, 2014; Yang and Jiang, 2015; Yates and Hasmath, 2017). To move beyond the control/resistance duality is not to deny the political significance of political humour. The nuances and ambiguities per se in practices of political humour, however friendly and moderate they are, embed important power struggles and dynamics over cultural and political meanings, which has received relatively less scholarly attention. As the following section will demonstrate, friendly political humour with less explicit and subversive purposes has no less important potentialities in online communication and hence its political relevance in the Chinese society.

1.4 Humour vs. satire: why friendly political humour?

Before laying out the theoretical framework in this thesis for humour analysis to deal with these problems in existing research, it is necessary to briefly explain my reason for conceptualising ‘political jokes and entertainment’ on the Chinese internet as *humour* instead of *satire*. Both satire and humour are varied concept manifest in different forms and in different cultures across the ages. These two concepts have no properties common to all their uses in reality that can lead to an all-embracing definition (Attardo, 1994; Chesterton, 2020; Condren, 2012; Test, 1986). Despite their many similarities, satire as an analytical concept is more circumscribed than humour because of its close affinity to social critique (Gray et al., 2009). It is essentially a combination of critique and entertainment (Declercq, 2018). Political satire, in particular, always involves criticism of social and political reality, however playful and amusing it may appear to be. This essential feature is particularly manifest in studies of political entertainment in authoritarian regimes that conceptualise political satire as enabling the powerless to protest against the political establishment (Wagner and Schwarzenegger, 2020). Humour, on the other hand, covers a wider range of playful amusement that does not necessarily has social critique as its core feature. While humour also has one of its key functions as a social corrective and can be used as a means of critique and contestation (Tsakona and Popa, 2011), this is not the only predominant dimension of the rich repertoire of humour. In addition to social critique, humour is also more generally about enjoyment and laughter in various playful forms. It is a kind of play that is ‘engaged in for its own sake rather than to reach a goal’ (Morreal, 2005: 68). Although political satire can also cover a broad spectrum (Yang and Jiang, 2015), I use ‘humour’ in this research as an umbrella term to stress 1) the wide range of political entertainment on the Chinese internet in various forms of cultural practice, and 2) the nuances and ambiguities as its essential feature which cannot be pinned down to a simple presupposition about humour as critique.

As previous studies have already put more focus on the overtly critical and subversive

political satire on the Chinese internet, my research particularly looks at these less contentious cases of political humour that are much more moderate and embed more playfulness than serious political messages. However, that is not to say friendly political humour is fundamentally distinct from subversive political satire, as it would be equally arbitrary to rule out possibilities of political critique in friendly political humour due to the ‘inherent ambiguity of humour’ (Tsakona and Popa, 2011) and the inherent ‘surplus of meaning’ in humour that I particularly aim to stress in this thesis. By paying close attention to friendly political humour instead of subversive satire, I do not wish to move beyond the dualist understanding of humour as control and resistance by proposing another dualist divide between friendly and subversive forms of political humour. What I aim to do by focusing on friendly political humour is to reveal to a more comprehensive picture of political humour on the Chinese internet more generally—that is to say, in addition to satirical humour that has been studied more extensively in existing research—and furthermore, to call attention to meaning multiplicity of humour and hence its permanent interpretive indeterminacy and openness.

Therefore, it not easy to distinguish friendly political humour from its satirical counterpart, as they are different only in a very subtle way. In order to draw a finer line between them while at the same time retaining the openness of humour to capture a wide spectrum of content, I relied on virtual ethnography on multiple Chinese social media sites to carefully feel, observe, and articulate the nuances (more on ethnographic methods in Chapter Three). This way, I find that the relevant ‘friendliness’ is usually achieved in two ways, a) through polysemy of humour that conveys several different meanings parallel to the political message, and b) through incongruity that directs politics away to other non-political topics. This way, the serious motive to engage with politics and reflect on reality is largely diluted, making room for alternative interpretations and functions.

For example, regarding polysemic humour, Figure 3 and Figure 4 below are two memes with similar meanings about freedom of speech. Both are commonly used on the Chinese

internet. Figure 3 draws a line from a TV drama: ‘Inappropriate comments on the government can get you beheaded’ and Figure 4 adds a caption to a comic figure: ‘You are banned, this must be banned!’. Figure 3 directly points at criticisms against the government and brings out the fatal punishment to emphasise the point. It specifically raises the issue of the rigid state control over negative political discussions about the government and also exaggerates the consequences of ‘not speaking carefully’ to satirise. This meme not only overtly criticises the suppression of speech in China but also implies dissatisfaction with the repressive government. Figure 4, while also hinting at censorship, does not specify the contents or topics of what ‘must be banned.’ It can be as general as obscene materials and socially offensive language in mundane daily conversations. It can also be context-based, referring to specific contents that are considered inappropriate within a certain (sub)cultural group or a personal network. While Figure 4 can of course be used in the same way as Figure 3, in reality, it is more often used in localised and personalised contexts, for example, to tease friends by claiming what they previously said is ‘offensive’ and ‘must be banned’ in a joking manner. Therefore, Figure 3 with explicit criticism about political censorship is more radical than Figure 4 which is more euphemised and ambiguous in terms of the target of ridicule.



Figure 3. ‘Inappropriate comments on the government can get you beheaded.’



Figure 4. ‘You are banned, this must be banned!’

Here we can see that monosemic meaning structure generally favours humour with strong

motives because the message (of criticism in this case) easily stands out and aspires to wider recognition and furthermore effective persuasion in social communication. This effect, however, would be largely mitigated if more meanings join in to take a share because one cannot be certain about the message of the joke. The critical message, like criticism about the suppression of speech in Figure 3, is only one possible reading among the multiple meanings in Figure 4. There are various—in many cases non-political—ways that polysemous memes and jokes like Figure 4 can be used in online conversations that cannot be simplified as political critique. The indeterminacy of meaning in memes like Figure 4 to a certain extent tones down the critical voice and intention particularly in its application in non-political conversations. Therefore, even though both contain critical implications, polysemous humour is friendlier and more moderate than monosemic humour when used in online conversations. This technique of polysemy is usually seen in political humour aimed at censorship circumvention. Chapter Four will elaborate on these cases of friendly political humour.

The second way to moderate political discussion is via incongruity. For example, Figure 5 and Figure 6 below are repackaged old-fashioned propaganda posters with a non-political connotation about everyday life. Figure 5 captions a propaganda poster of a peasant, a worker, and a soldier holding their hands up high with ‘The point of getting up every morning is to embrace work.’ It can be used in two ways, either consistent with the positive mood in the poster as self-encouragement, or reverse as self-deprecation to express reluctance to work. Figure 6 ‘Let’s go fight with the product manager’ is usually used in the workplace to joke about tensions between developers and product managers. The caption is compatible with the image sketching three people are ready to march onto the battlefield. Here incongruity comes from the contrast between the image and its connotation. Putting contemporary personal concerns about work against an old and monotonous visual image like this in a ridiculously consistent way creates great amusement. That to a large degree explains why these memes are popular on the Chinese internet for both self-expression and interpersonal conversations. Compared with political satire that delivers a rather

serious political message, political humour like Figures 5 and 6 simply draws on political discourse (of propaganda posters in their cases) to create incongruity laughter. They are more aimed at playfulness in accounting for everyday minutiae that would otherwise appear too plain and boring. In other words, here with these memes, the point is humour rather than politics. More details about this type of political humour featuring amusing contrasts between political discourse and other topics can be found in Chapter Five and Chapter Six.



Figure 5. ‘The point of getting up every morning is to embrace work.’



Figure 6. ‘Let’s go fight with the product manager.’

My research particularly moves away from political satire like Figure 3 to more polysemous and playful forms of political humour such as Figure 4, 5, and 6 because they have their unique political significance that differs from overtly critical and subversive political satire. Either ambiguous and polysemous enough to obscure any clear and recognisable political message, or creatively diverting politics towards non-political topics, friendly political humour is much less threatening or harmful to the political status quo and is, therefore, more likely to survive censorship or at least remain visible for a longer time than humour with explicit rebellious motives. The rigid censorship in China has comprehensively reshaped the general landscape of political humour. State efforts to constrain any potential online activism have only led to more creative acts that extend beyond subversion towards more ambiguous and simultaneously diversified cultural expression to stay below the radar. In this respect, friendly political humour may have better communication potentialities and

a broader social impact in its ability to reach a wider audience and encourage more vibrant popular participation in networked practices of humour. This potential and impact are precisely what I aim to explore in this thesis.

Conclusion

This chapter explains how I have come to conceptualise the political jokes and memes briefly sketched in the Introduction Chapter as digital cultures of political humour. First, I emphasise the importance of political humour as everyday politics and propose a working definition of political humour in this research as jokes and memes directly related to the government. Based on a literature review of political humour in the digital age, I present my research perspective of viewing political humour as popular internet culture emerging from the creativity and participation of the mass public to account for the ways in which cultural practices of humour imply workings of power. The review further moves on to the sociopolitical context of China with its one-party rule and single hegemonic ideology, explaining how the authoritarian gatekeeping of political discourse has given rise to vibrant cultural practices of incongruity humour. I particularly point out the ambiguity and diversity of political humour on the Chinese internet, explaining how it takes various different shapes in a complicated process of meaning making and a networked practice of online communication. Lastly, I specifically distinguish humour from satire for conceptual clarity regarding their seriousness and practicality of function and motive. It is more accurate and also helpful to conceptualise what I want to study as humour instead of satire because it can better account for the diversity and complexity of political humour on the Chinese internet without arbitrarily presupposing any of its serious motives to engage with politics before making analysis.

The literature review in this chapter reveals a problematic framework of control/resistance in existing scholarship on political humour as well as China-focused internet research. Political humour is analysed either as popular resistance to the status quo or submission to political hegemony, and this dualist understanding is particularly biased towards the

subversive end in authoritarian social contexts. In this chapter, I have argued that this dualist framework and the overemphasis on the rebellious potential of political humour would be misleading in understanding cultural phenomena of political humour in China characterised by ambiguity and complexity. In an attempt to overcome this problem and to enrich the understanding of political humour in China, I particularly look at friendly and moderate political humour that has been relatively less extensively studied, seeking to reveal its political relevance in an authoritarian context.

This problem of control/resistance dichotomy in the existing literature on political humour and China-focused empirical studies is also rooted in theories of cultural studies and humour research. The following chapter will continue with my critique on this problematic duality and offer my suggestions to refine the theoretical framework for analysis of political humour in this thesis.

CHAPTER TWO

A POSTSTRUCTURALIST APPROACH TO THE POLITICS OF FUN

Introduction

The literature review of political humour in Chapter One has explained the uniqueness of political humour on the Chinese internet and argues for the need to study friendly and moderate cases of political humour. It is now necessary to develop a theoretical framework to properly account for the ambiguity and complexity of this genre of humour in China. In this chapter, I suggest an approach to the politics of fun that particularly foregrounds how cultural practices of humour denote power struggles in forms of negotiation and manoeuvre through meaning within an existing social order. This approach consists of two frameworks, each integrating multiple strands of theories into a poststructuralist structure to analyse digital political humour as an interplay between culture and power. The first framework addresses the overarching research question about the complicated nexus between culture and power. It draws on cultural studies, ideology theories, and discourse theories that examine from different angles how popular culture interacts with political ideology through discourse practice. I develop this framework as the main structural support for analysing the power dynamics underlying cultural practices of humour. Under this culture and power structure, the second framework more specifically points to the concepts and theories about digital humour, including humour studies, affect theory, and contemporary media research. I draw on these theories to explain the detailed and contextualised mechanisms of how friendly political humour reworks political topics, affects the audience and spreads iteratively on the internet. It is based on these analyses that I make further arguments about how digital humour as cultural practice mediates the relationship between the online public and the ideological power, enables the online public to negotiate their way in discourse formation and reconfigure socialist hegemony in China.

While integrating these wide-ranging traditions of thoughts to develop the theoretical framework for this research, I argue for the necessity of taking a poststructuralist stance in approaching these theories to account for digital humour featuring polysemy, uncertainties, and ambiguities in cultural dynamics. This epistemological orientation emphasises openness, fluidity, multiplicity rather than closure, fixity, uniformity. It is particularly useful to deal with the problems with structuralist theoretical traditions that analyse culture as monolithic and static in a single-dimensional control/resistance or domination/subordination relation with social structures. Rather than constituting an independent part of the theoretical framework, poststructuralism serves as the overarching orientation that I take in critically reviewing different strands of thoughts for the development of this approach. This overall standpoint is stressed throughout the sections in this chapter. In weaving diverse theories on different levels of analysis that essentially revolves around the nexus of culture and power, I argue that this poststructuralist framework of cultural politics can usefully account for the complexity and nuances of digital cultures beyond the simplified control/resistance binary in existing culture studies and media research.

2.1 A poststructuralist framework of culture and power

The first framework of culture and power establishes the structural support for the overall theoretical analysis in this research. It provides analytical tools and references to elaborate on digital humour as cultural practice in close association with wider social institutions and structures beyond the micro-level of media text of humour. This framework consists of three important theoretical traditions: cultural studies (notably the Birmingham School), ideology theories, and theories of discourse. There are considerable overlaps between these three areas of thoughts concerning meaning signification in close relation to power dynamics. However, they have different focuses in addressing this complicated relationship. In brief, cultural studies examine how symbolic aspects of society constitute social formations; theories of ideology look at how these symbolic forms serve to establish and

sustain relations of domination; theories of discourse more specifically probe into the workings of power through meaning making in social practice. As all three traditions range wide and extend in depth into the complex of culture, politics, and society, this review is a sketch of the most pertinent parts of these theories to digital humour as cultural practices.

2.1.1 Cultural studies

My research is first and foremost theoretically situated in the field of cultural studies, especially the Birmingham tradition. This tradition is part of the ‘cultural turn’ in social theory which advances culture as constitutive of social relations and identities and argues for the importance of meaning making and signification processes in everyday experience (Charney, 1994; Nash, 2001). Cultural studies in this light have extended the concept of culture—and hence social research of culture—beyond what used to be called ‘high culture’ to include both popular culture (notably the working-class culture) and the ‘ordinary’ everyday experience (Jensen, 1991a; Rojek and Turner, 2000; Williams, 1958b). Different from the cultural studies approach of the Chicago School that focuses more the urban materiality, the Birmingham School—while retaining class analysis and functionalism of previous generations of cultural studies—has paid more attention to the symbolic aspects of culture (Blackman, 2014; Jensen, 2018). As convergences between different theoretical legacies including Marxism, structural linguistics, discourse theories among other traditions, the Birmingham School has established a paradigm that foregrounds the workings of power in culture and its relations to other social formations (Hall, 1980a). On the one hand, it differs from mainstream sociology in attaching equal importance to the symbolic as to the social following the ‘cultural turn’ that gives culture a determinate and constitutive role in understanding social relations and institutions (Hall, 1997b). On the other, it contributes to existing understandings of culture and society by focusing on the nexus between culture and power (Hall and Jefferson, 2006). In brief, it can be said that the main contribution of the Birmingham School is a profound and multidisciplinary theoretical framework of cultural politics through semiotic readings of cultural forms and practices.

In their discovery of the popular, the Birmingham School followed the pioneering work of Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson (for example Williams, 1958a; Thompson, 1963) to examine the working-class culture and their youth subcultures (Rojet and Turner, 2000). Their primary concern moved away from the material aspects of culture (like youth gangs) towards style-based cultures notably their ground-breaking work *Resistance through Rituals* by Hall and Jefferson (Bennett, 1999). The focus of their analysis can be summarised by the subtitle of another influential work by Dick Hebdige (1979): 'the meaning of style.' In their interpretation, popular youth cultures are social constructs of class relations and the working-class youth's participation in cultural practices reflect their struggles in class structures as symbolic forms of resistance. In other words, the meaning of culture in dispute is a representation of struggles in a power structure at stake. Despite their limitations in failing to account for power struggles in other dimensions of unequal social relations like gender and ethnicity (Jensen, 2017), the Birmingham School has made an invaluable contribution to an analytical framework of what Nash (2001) terms 'cultural politics' that sees culture as the site of potential contestation of normalised identities and social relations of subordination. Their legacy remains influential beyond cultural studies in multiple fields of research regarding the general vantage point of viewing popular culture as grassroots resistance or carnivalesque transgression (see for example Decherney and Sender, 2018; Fiske, 1987, 2004; Jenkins, 2010). In short, the major contribution of the Birmingham School of cultural studies is to raise issues of cultural subordination, marginalisation, and struggles that had been naturalised out of visibility in cultural research prior to them (Hall, 1980a).

Their approach to these power struggles in cultural practices particularly foregrounds the centrality of meaning. Cultural members communicate via shared cultural codes, i.e. language in its broad sense, and language draws on culture as systems of knowledge and beliefs for meaning making purposes (Hall, 1997a, 1997b). Language as signifying practice establishes a set of correspondences between things to be given conceptual meaning, concepts to be represented, and signs to represent (Hall, 1997c). These correspondences

constitute orders of things and therefore symbolic aspects of social reality. As meanings shape and influence what we do, the practice of producing and circulating meaning and the system of meanings established therefrom have significant roles in constructing all social practices and social realities (Hall, 1992b). By the same logic, alterations on the level of meaning making can also lead to destabilisation and reconstruction of existing social reality. Section 2.1.3 will explain in more detail how this reconstruction through signification takes place.

However, the greatest advantage of the Birmingham School in analysing power relations in culture also embeds its biggest problem in addressing cultural practice from a structuralist view as resistance and romanticising its subversive quality (Bennett and Kahn-Harris, 2014; Weinzierl and Muggleton, 2003). This hegemonic model of cultural analysis risks confining cultural practice and cultural participants within a control/resistance binary of power relations, which seems to gloss over nuances and variations of not only culture per se but also its political potentials. Furthermore, it implies a problematic presupposition of social determinism that fails to take into account the complexity of culture in motion and interaction with its audience beyond ideological readings (Chaney, 1994). This problem is particularly acute in the digital age as we deal with much greater uncertainty and ambiguity of the meaning of culture.

To put it in my research background about digital cultures on the Chinese internet, this problem of romanticisation and reductionism with the Birmingham framework is threefold. First, it gets increasingly difficult to characterise diverse and complex contemporary youth cultures by the simple dichotomy of a monolithic mainstream and its resistance (Weinzierl and Muggleton, 2003). As Morley and Robins (1995) point out with great foresight, the interaction between culture(s) and other societal formations takes much more complicated forms in an increasingly globally interconnected world on a scale and with a speed previously unimaginable. The role of media in the construction of culture, which received little attention in the Birmingham tradition, has become particularly crucial

as media develops in various forms (Thornton, 1995). The Birmingham tradition of cultural studies needs to be firmly situated within the current media landscape of the internet for a more comprehensive analysis of digital cultures in complex relations to other structural formations.

Second, another major criticism about the Birmingham tradition is its conceptualisation of culture as a rigid and uniform collective practice (Martin, 2002; Muggleton, 2000; Schiermer, 2014). Its overemphasis on the fixity and coherence of culture and cultural groups fails to describe the variations, fragmentations, and shifting patterns of youth culture (Bennet, 1999; Bennet and Kahn-Harris, 2004; Jensen, 2018; Weinzierl and Muggleton, 2003). Cultural studies in the contemporary context require more than ever a perspective of what Evans (1997) calls 'flight from fixity' to address the fluidity of cultural practice. Although the Birmingham School has already made important theoretical advances regarding its encounters with poststructuralist work that recognises the decentred nature of culture (Hall, 1992a), its analytic model relies too much on the structuralist perspective, linking culture too directly and immediately in a tight relationship with class structure. It leaves aside not only alternative modes of negotiation and resolution as responses to the same structural problem but also alternative possibilities of relations that this culture may have with other social formations (Bennet and Kahn-Harris, 2004). To move away from this conceptualisation of uniformity and stability, the theoretical encounters of the Birmingham School with poststructuralist work need to be further deepened and strengthened to address the variations and nuances in culture.

Third, further into the poststructuralist path, the control/resistance framework is overpreoccupied with structuralist concerns in identifying the structural problem that culture responds to and defining the quality of their relationship. With an emphasis on culture consumption as a 'determinate moment' in the production of meaning (Hall, 1980b), it fails to see culture as an ongoing process of continuous (re)construction. Studies of culture need to properly account for its openness and fluidity as the active audience interacts with

unstable discourse structure in situational settings (Ang, 1991; Couldry, 2004; Schröder, 1994). From this processual perspective, cultural analysis is more than just finding the static social formations where culture arises and defining their relationships in definite terms like conformity, negotiation, or resistance. One indispensable aspect of cultural analysis is to explore how these interactions take shape, vary and develop in a socially constrained way in relation to differential social formations at stake. Even within a binary understanding of control and resistance, it is important to analyse the shifting forms this relationship might take in a developing process. In other words, in a poststructuralist framework of cultural analysis, what matters is not identification or qualification of however differential and diversified meanings, positions, and relationships; the primary focus—as what my research aims to do—is to map out how culture *flows* between these meanings in a ‘curve’ of the social ‘matrix’ and to make sense of this ‘curve’ in consistence with the ‘matrix’ of power dynamics underlying symbolic variation.

2.1.2 Theories of ideology

Following the literature review of studies of culture, it is now necessary to turn to the other side of the relationship that political humour forges—political ideology. Theories of ideology have been markedly controversial and conflict-laden with diverse elaborations of this concept since its origins (Thompson, 1984). The various definitions of ideology are incompatible with each other from different epistemological standpoints, including many pejorative formulations that either define it as false and illusory or disapprove of the concept itself regarding its relevance in human knowledge (Eagleton, 1991). In general, the development of ideology theories can be summarised in three steps. The concept of ideology emerged as a neutral term when it was coined by the French philosopher Destutt de Tracy in 1796 as ‘a science of ideas’ to understand human nature. It soon developed to convey a negative and oppositional sense—primarily owing to Marx’s elaboration—referring to abstraction, misrepresentation, and illusion in the interest of the dominant power. Later both within the tradition of Marxism and other emerging fields of social

sciences, ideology is neutralised in various ways towards a more general understanding as a ‘world view’ (Thompson, 1990; Williams, 1977). For example, ideology for Mannheim is regarded simply as socially determined systems of thoughts and modes of experiences (Eagleton, 1991; Thompson, 1990). Broadly speaking, there are three common versions of ideology: 1) a system of beliefs that belongs to a particular social class or group, 2) a system of false beliefs as contrasted with scientific truth, 3) the general process of meaning production (Williams, 1977). Where these formations converge reveals the essence of ideology—the mobilisation of meaning structured in the social world.

Despite differences and even conflicts between this wide range of meanings of ideology, they are intellectually situated in their discipline with their specific focus or concern. As Eagleton (1991) points out, it is impossible and unnecessary to compress its wealth of meaning into a single adequate definition. What is helpful, then, is to draw on the senses of ideology that are closest and most applicable to one’s specific research area and develop a working definition for research purposes. In the case of my research, as I want to examine how digital political humour in China reworks the official political language, the approach to ‘ideology’ is needed primarily to account for the official language and to shed light on the process of meaning struggles and negotiation related to the alteration of this language via humour. To this end, it is useful to take a critical orientation of ideology that focuses on how meaning is mobilised to establish and sustain asymmetrical relations of power (Thompson, 1984, 1990). This orientation does not point to any single definition of ideology, but rather, entails a thread of conceptions from different courses of research. I particularly bring out the three aspects of ideology that are most pertinent to my research topic: the *cultural* aspect of ideology as ‘lived’ practice, the *political* aspect of ideology as persuasion, and the *hegemonic* aspect of ideology as transformational processes of constant contestation and negotiation.

First, I want to stress the culturalist definition of ideology to better support my analysis of digital humour as a cultural practice. Ideology, in its cultural sense, broadly refers to the

whole complex of signifying practices in a certain society, particularly the symbolic processes in which individuals live their social practices (Eagleton, 1991). Unlike approaches more specifically to culture, here the focus goes beyond signifying practices per se with wider concerns with their connections to the material structure in symbolic forms, i.e. of ways they are weaved into everyday life as representations of materiality. This is close to the theory proposed by Althusser (1969) that understands ideology as the ways that individuals 'live' their relations to society and thereby acquire their subjectivity in a constrained social structure of dominant relations. By emphasising the word 'live,' he refers to 'the life of experiencing, within culture, meaning and representation' and make sense of the social relations and conditions in which they are placed as subjects (Hall, 1985: 104). This links back to the previous section of cultural studies, weaving cultural practice in close association with political ideology, which is at the centre of my research.

Further to the cultural dimension of ideology, it is important to acknowledge that signifying practices are not just for cultural communication or entertainment, but more profoundly 'a social-historical phenomenon which is embroiled in human conflict' (Thompson, 1984: 2). The relations that are 'lived' in the Althusserian theory of ideology are fundamentally asymmetrical, pointing to relations of domination. Signifying practices of ideology, therefore, are essentially the conflicts and contestations that revolve around unequal power relations. Thompson (1990) conceptualises ideology as the production of symbolic forms to maintain relations of domination. As Eagleton (1991: 5-6) well explains, the production and manipulation of meaning take different strategies of symbolic construction to achieve this goal:

A dominant power may legitimate itself by *promoting* beliefs and values congenial to it; *naturalizing* and *universalizing* such beliefs so as to render them self-evident and apparently inevitable; *denigrating* ideas which might challenge it; *excluding* rival forms of thought, perhaps by some unspoken but systematic logic; and *obscuring* social reality in ways convenient to itself. (italics in the original)

This essential logic of ideology is what I call the political aspect, the second important dimension of ideology that is central to my research. The cultural politics of digital political humour is firmly situated in the wider sociopolitical context of socialist ideology in China, i.e. how official language takes shape as the representation of socialist rule in China. The political aspect focuses on the suasive or rhetorical dimension of ideology in terms of the production of effects in promoting and legitimating the dominant norms and values (Eagleton, 1991). In my research, the socialist ideology refers to the state-promoted institutionalised language in the Chinese society for political persuasion. As shall be seen in Chapter Five on the formation of socialist language, ideological persuasion is not necessarily accomplished in practice, and it cannot be simplified as a one-sided imposition from the state. There are always power struggles at the level of signification as the individuals participate in insipient forms of critique, seeking to diffuse the force promoting ideological representations (Eagleton, 1991; Thompson, 1990). This brings us to the third aspect of ideology—hegemony.

Hegemony is conceptualised by Gramsci (1971: 195) to refer to the ‘ideological complex’ that transcends the purely political activity, the economic materiality, and the articulate formal system as ‘manifestations of individual and collective life’ (p.328). It includes a whole body of everyday living in practice across fields of reality (Williams, 1977). ‘This is a conception of the field of ideologies in terms of conflicting, overlapping, or intersecting currents or formations’ (Hall, 1988: 55-56). In the hegemonic sense, ideology is perceived as a process of cultural battles and political struggles in diverse directions not limited to binary oppositions and rivalry. It points out the processes of change as these complexes are continuously ‘structured and restructured, articulated and rearticulated’ (Fairclough, 1992: 93). In this regard, the concept of hegemony as an elaboration on ideology embeds in itself a poststructuralist orientation. It sees relations of domination and subordination as transformational processes of contestation and negotiation that in effect saturates the whole area of lived experience.

This understanding of lived hegemony as a process of change has three poststructuralist senses. First, it highlights that hegemony can never be singular as one determinate relationship of dominance and its passive resistance. Instead, it is continuously ‘renewed, recreated, defended, and modified,’ and ‘also continuously resisted, limited, altered, challenged’ from both within and outside the hegemony itself (Williams, 1977: 112). In other words, this conception of hegemony rejects any a priori totality or exclusiveness of domination. This requires research to cast aside any once-and-for-all assumptions or methodologies and to examine ideology in its practice, in motion, in dynamics throughout the fabric of society as a whole.

Second, Gramsci’s conception of hegemony particularly points to how a ruling power gains consent, which implies that ideologies are not necessarily forcibly imposed (Eagleton, 1991). Hegemony, as a comprehensive leadership encompassing the economic, political, and cultural domains of society, is more than simply dominating subordinate groups through coercion; rather, it is about ‘constructing alliances and integrating’ (Fairclough, 2013: 61). The cultural processes are not necessarily oppositional as manifested in the so-called ‘counter-hegemony’ or ‘counter-culture.’ They can be adaptive and incorporative more as intermediation than confrontation. This combination of coercion and consent implied in Gramsci’s conception is particularly important for my research of political humour that seeks to move beyond the control/resistance binary.

Third, and most importantly, as Williams (1977) points out as the major theoretical problem, any oppositional initiatives—or ‘counter-hegemony’—are fundamentally tied to the hegemony itself. In providing alternatives to the dominant culture, the ‘counter-culture’ is immediately reasserting the dominant culture and it seeks to alter. By the same logic, the ‘counter-culture’ limits its forms of counter-culture when performing itself as the ‘counter-culture.’ This paradox relates to the influential poststructuralist argument of Derrida (2001) that denies logocentrism and suggests the ‘decentring’ of the ‘centre.’ Simply put, ‘we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already

had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest' (p.354). This argument brings to the fore the complicated relationship between hegemony and counter-hegemony, culture and counter-culture as mutually incorporative and constitutive. In this sense, it might be more accurate to term it alternatives instead of 'counter-' to tone down the rather arbitrary and determinate indication of opposition. Also, research of hegemony and its alternatives needs to acknowledge their limits and carefully evaluate how these limits affect the formation of an evolving hegemony. This process is iterative as alternatives to hegemony contribute to its further reification in lived experiences and further development towards a more comprehensive leadership.

2.1.3 Discourse and representation

After critically reviewing theories of culture and ideology, I shall now turn to their interface on the level of signification—representation and discourse. As alluded to multiple times in previous sections, both culture and ideology have at their core the power play within language (although their effects and practices go far beyond meaning making). Slightly different from the rather macro-level theorisation of culture and ideology above, this section looks into the specific mechanisms of how power operates through meaning. Roughly speaking, we can distinguish two traditions of analysing signification level of power play from slightly different perspectives: discourse theory developed from the Marxist theory of ideology, and representation theory more commonly applied in cultural studies and media research. There are considerable overlaps between these two theories, as representation theory to a large extent draws from theories of discourse. The following review begins with the concept of discourse before later moving on to the more detailed and semiotic perspective of representation.

As Thompson (1984) points out, the analysis of ideology is fundamentally concerned with language. For ideological analysis, the concept of discourse emerged as an attempt to integrate the two traditionally divergent understandings of ideology as disembodied ideas and human behaviours (Eagleton, 1991). Perceiving ideology as discourse stresses both the

importance of meaning signification and its materiality as deeply rooted in social structures. The discourse theory dated back to the Soviet philosopher Voloshinov who defines ideology as ‘the struggle of antagonistic social interests at the level of the sign’ (ibid.: 195). We can see that from its beginning, discourse theory mainly deals with the power play within language, particularly looking into the ideological power of meaning making. As alluded to above, because meaning is essentially open and indeterminate, it can be mobilised to legitimate, dissimulate, or reify material realities for purposes of sustaining domination (Thompson, 1984). Following Voloshinov, the French linguist Pêcheux suggests the concept of ‘discursive formation’—a set of rules that determine what should be said from a certain social position. It constitutes a ‘matrix of meaning’ where material practices take place (Eagleton, 1991). Their pioneering thoughts about language and ideology further inspired theorisation of discourse that specifically looks into the discursive construction of ‘fixed’ meanings for a dominant ideology. Ideology seeks to close off the signifying chain, repel the disruptive and decentred forces of language, and implement the fixed meanings to be received as natural and spontaneous (ibid.).

Finally, Foucault moves beyond ideology and uses instead the concept of discourse to theorise the workings of power. This shift is not only terminological but also reflects a poststructuralist understanding of power. First, power is no longer confined to the apparatuses of state violence, but rather, ‘a pervasive, intangible network of force which weaves itself into our slightest gestures and most intimate utterance’ (Eagleton, 1991: 7). It works through a circulation of discourse in practice that infiltrates our everyday living. Second, instead of a presupposed relation of the powerful and the powerless, the relation of power is fluid and performative practised through discourse (Mills, 2004). In its overthrow of the totality and stability of power as imposition and domination, the Foucauldian concept of discourse highlights the struggles in the workings of power. In arguing that power inherently contains resistance, Foucault (1978: 101) refers to the dynamic process of power imprinted in the process of discourse formation: ‘Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it,

renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.' More importantly, he furthers the importance of discourse as the site of contestation: 'discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle' (Foucault, 1981: 52-53).

The theory of discourse has been hugely influential across different fields of research. It is particularly widely applied in cultural studies and media research. The concept of discourse refers to not only the production of knowledge through language, or in Hall's term representation, but also the way that knowledge gets institutionalised, shaping social practices and initiating new practices (Hall, 1992b). This way, this concept also overcomes the distinction between text-oriented semiotic perspective and examination of social systems and institutions in analysing culture and media. This theoretical bridging is premised upon a constructionist approach to language representation. Different from the reflective and intentional understandings of meaning making, the constructionist approach holds that meaning arises not from things themselves or the speaking subjects, but the practice of signification, and therefore within discourse (Hall, 1992b, 1997c). It is by and through language articulation on real relations and conditions that what we come to know as 'reality' are produced and mediated (Hall, 1980b). Discourse not only defines things through meaning production, but also regulates the way language texts are practised and individuals as speaking subjects conduct themselves (Hall, 1997c: 44): 'as a discourse "rules in" certain ways of talking about a topic, defining an acceptable and intelligible way to talk, write, or conduct oneself, so also, by definition, it "rules out" limits and restricts other ways of talking, of conducting ourselves in relation to the topic or constructing knowledge about it.' This is where analysis of power comes in at the core of discourse.

Drawing on this constructionist conception of discourse, Stuart Hall (1980b, 1997c) develops his representation theory that addresses in detail how the regulation of discourse takes place and power operates through meaning making. The theory argues that power works through legitimating a particular meaning or interpretation among others to be the

preferred or dominant one. On the connotative level of representation, there is usually more than one available meaning and these meanings are subject to (re)signification and transformations (Hall, 1980b). Any culture tends to impose its classifications of the world on discursive domains as the dominant or preferred meanings. In other words, the system of these preferred meanings has the whole social order imprinted in them and has itself become institutionalised in the very practice of discursive articulation: ‘The structure of meanings in a text is a miniaturization of the structure of subcultures in society—both exist in a network of power relations, and the textual struggle for meaning is the precise equivalent of the social struggle for power’ (Fiske, 1986: 392).

Further, as the encoding process of attempting to ‘pre-fer’ one meaning over others cannot guarantee this message to be decoded in the very same way, the system of preferred meanings along with the dominant social order constituted within this discourse is constantly contested in the practice of interpretation. Laclau and Mouffe (1985) further suggest a permanent contingency of meaning and a partial closure of articulation in an ongoing process of struggles among an infinite collection of meanings. Elaborating on Foucault’s conception of discourse as a site of contestation, they view discourse as ‘a differential ensemble of signifying sequences in which meaning is constantly renegotiated’ (Torfing, 1999: 85). In their rather post-structuralist theory of the incompleteness of discourse formations, the surplus of meaning embeds in itself subversion to the attempt to fix differential positions to certain discourse (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). As social reality is constituted through discourse, alterations in the hierarchical system of meaning can fundamentally lead to reconstructions of the previously established reality. It is my aim in this research of digital cultures to dissect how meanings are contested in cultural practices of political humour and analyse the potentials of these meaning struggles in reconstructing social reality beyond the cultural dimension. Meaning struggles take place in different types of signification practices. In my research of digital cultures in particular, meaning alteration works primarily through humour.

2.2 A poststructuralist framework of digital humour

In the previous section, I have explained the framework of culture and power based on three strands of theories in cultural studies, ideology, and discourse. It lays out the core structure for my cultural analysis of digital humour on the macro level with regards to the power relations between the online public and the ideological power that are manifested and mediated through discourse. In addition to these rather 'big' concepts of culture, ideology, and discourse, my analysis also needs theoretical support from relatively 'smaller' concepts and notions that specifically deal with humour on the internet. In this section, I develop a more problem-oriented framework of digital humour that draws on humour studies, affect theory, and the notion of participatory media in contemporary media research. Like the first framework, this one also has a poststructuralist orientation, stressing the multiple functions of humour beyond control/resistance, the potential of ambiguities through affect, and the iterative dynamic of cultural participation in digital media.

2.2.1 Humour and its functions

Scholarship on humour has distilled three major approaches to humour: *superiority*, *relief*, and *incongruity* (Berger, 1993; Monro, 1951; Morreal, 2009). Instead of categorising humour into three mutually exclusive groups, these approaches address humour from different perspectives: *superiority* focuses on the relations between the speaker and the receiver; *relief* is concerned with the psychological aspects of humorous effects; *incongruity* explains the textual structure required to create humour (Raskin, 1985). Building on Kant and Schopenhauer, Monro (1951) concludes that humour of intellectual pleasure occurs whenever we put together two ideas that are usually understood to be utterly different. The humorous stimulus comes from contrasting elements building up expectations that are then surprisingly frustrated. This contrast is further developed by Attardo and Raskin (1991) from a linguistic perspective as a coherent combination of conflicting or incompatible scripts. In this regard, humour is often understood to be inherently associated with meaning multiplicity (Boxman-Shabtai and Shifman, 2014).

Scholars have explored different social functions of humour, understanding humour as a paradox with two dualist functions: identification or differentiation, and control or resistance (Lynch, 2002; Meyer, 2000), leading to two slightly different but closely entwined approaches. The identification/differentiation approach focuses on how humour can simultaneously estrange and reinforce social norms of classification, resulting in divisive and also unifying functions (Eagleton, 2019; Meyer, 2000). As Lorenz (2002: 284) puts it, 'laughter forms a bond and simultaneously draws a line.' Humour, therefore, is always simultaneously solidarity and antagonism. More specifically, studies in this approach have examined humour's effects in highlighting shared values, constructing communal identities, promoting social consolidation, and at the same time on the other hand, expressing pre-existing boundaries and deepening segregation (for example Gal, 2019; Guo, 2018; Katz and Shifman, 2017; Miltner, 2014). Many of these studies also imply at different levels that humour with its identification/differentiation functions is pertinent to the workings of power (for example, Gal, 2019; Gal et al., 2016; Meyer, 1997), which leads to the second approach that further brings out humour as simultaneously control and resistance. This approach deepens the identification/differentiation understanding by situating the cultural dimensions to humour in its contextual power structure (Lynch, 2002). As humour represents shared norms within a culture and safeguards its group boundary, it also controls membership while at the same time acting as safety valve resistance to these norms, and hence to the system of control. In short, the control/resistance approach particularly brings out power relations and power struggles in cultural practice and social communication. For this reason, this approach is frequently seen in humour studies in repressive social contexts, such as Nazi Europe, institutional racism, gendered workplaces (see for example Bryant, 2006; Merziger, 2007; Watts, 2007; Weaver, 2010), and authoritarian societies. Research in nondemocratic countries often sees humour as a vehicle for expressing criticism (for example Davies, 2007; Dinç, 2012; Eko, 2015; Lee, 2016; Pearce and Hajizada, 2014; Sorensen, 2008; Tang and Bhattacharya, 2011), or as liberation from state control (for example Gong and Yang, 2010; Li, 2011; Meng, 2011; Mina, 2014).

These dualist approaches, whether focusing on cultural relations or more fundamentally power relations, are both grounded in a functionalist understanding of humour as safety valve resistance that allows relief of tension but at the same time serves informal control (Lynch, 2002; Morreal, 2009). The safety valve metaphor has been ubiquitous and influential in existing literature accounting for the political effects of humour and related forms of cultural production and practices, including satire, carnival, cartoon, comedy, etc. (Bakhtin, 1968; Double, 2020; Griffin, 1994; Julin, 2018). In this perspective, humour is often seen as a double-edged sword for celebrating liberation against dominant norms and consolidating the established order it only temporarily escapes from. This viewpoint is sometimes considered a conservative understanding of humour's political effects as it implies humour as tolerated repression helps maintain the status quo (for example Freedman, 2008; Griffin, 1990). On the other hand, this conservative implication has also been criticised by arguments such as: humour can powerfully express resistance (Rodrigues and Collinson, 1995), stimulate political action (Rhodes, 2002), have no material effect but can signify failure of a political system (Davies, 2007), or have multiple dimensions of being conservative, progressive or neutral (Stallybrass and White, 1986; Scott, 1990). Due to the opaqueness and elasticity of the metaphor, all these arguments are encapsulated in the concept of 'safety valve,' which remains the dominant paradigm to unpack humour's social and political impact (Declercq and El Khachab, 2021).

Despite their ubiquity in scholarship on humour, these approaches as well as the underlying safety valve understanding of humour have two major problems of reductionism. First, as Declercq and El Khachab (2021) point out, the safety valve metaphor—while extensible and versatile enough to include a variety of arguments about humour's political effects—glosses over the historicised nuances of its complex and diverse influence on power relations and politics in general. They argue that the safety valve concept fails to capture how cultural productions of humour take place, get interpreted, and take effect in the evolving historical context. Their criticism raises the issue in humour research that entails historical, dynamic, and processual analysis. This is also where humour research can benefit

from a poststructuralist lens of theorisation that foregrounds fluidity and openness of cultural studies. Second, like criticisms of the Birmingham School, studies of humour also have the problem of reducing polysemy to a singularity for an oversimplified analysis of power relations behind humour. Lynch (2002) points out that sociological theorisation of humour in its critical tradition of research often tends to reduce the control/resistance paradox to its control end. He therefore proposes a communication research perspective that focuses on how humour emerges and unfolds in its social setting, and stresses that humour is simultaneously control and resistance, with its position only moving along the continuum. While this perspective rightly balances these two sides and interprets humour not by rigid definition but by degrees of control and resistance, it falls into another problematic paradigm of simplifying the multiplicity of power struggles in humour to this one single spectrum, i.e. a relationship of opposition and rivalry. As mentioned in Chapter One, the Chinese internet features a complicated interplay between multiple parties in a moving dynamic. Instead of a one-on-one battle, internet culture in China is more like a multilateral negotiation in which each party manoeuvres their way to keep a balance between their own interest and requirements from others. Even if this dynamic is generalised as a relationship between internet censors and users, as Section 1.3 explains, it is far from a rivalry with the censors imposing strictest sanctions on users and users attempting to subvert the censors. Censorship is porous, ambiguous and flexible, leaving enough room for circumvention and adjustment without causing serious backlash (Roberts, 2018); and netizens are creative, open-minded, and clever, coordinating digital, cultural, and linguistic affordances to outwit censors (Wu and Fitzgerald, 2021). Their relationship, as this thesis aims to reveal, is more complicated than control and resistance.

To capture the nuances of power play that reside outside the control/resistance spectrum, I particularly bring out the polysemy of humour and the diversity of humour practices, and further situate them in a hegemonic framework of power analysis as stated in the previous section. As alluded to earlier, polysemy is of vital importance in analysing cultural politics because it makes meaning struggles possible (Fiske, 1986) and embeds the potential

of meaning alterations in discursive practice. Just like other cultural formations, humour also has a political dimension inherent to it where power struggles over contrasting meanings take place. It represents strategic ways of dealing with the fixity of norms and statements (Papacharissi, 2015). While situating humour in the framework of culture and power, it is particularly important to move beyond the control/resistance binary implied in the safety valve metaphor of humour research and analyse how multiple meanings and diverse interpretations in cultural practices of humour potentially mobilise and reconstruct the dominant meaning, and further, how the interactivity among different meaning denotes dynamics of power struggles, contestations, and negotiations beyond the realm of humour and culture.

2.2.2 Affect and the potential of ambiguities

The fragmentation and diversification of contemporary cultures increasingly mediated through digital media result in nuances and ambiguities, adding much difficulty in cultural analysis. While researchers have realised the need to move beyond fixity and have suggested different ways to conceptualise contemporary cultures, to a certain degree these attempts remain rather fragmented and dispersed. More often than not they simply attend to the case-by-case nuances in their specific context instead of these nuances as a whole with more generalisation potential. We need to find a way not just to investigate the new variations that are unexplored in this field, but more importantly to aggregate analyses of these variations and make a general sense of the nuances and ambiguities. My research of humour, for example, deals with the multiplicity of meanings and their variations in cultural practices of decoding. While trying to discern the case-by-case preferred meaning(s) and their alternatives as well as their interactivity, the analysis also needs to make a general argument of diversified ambiguities as a whole. In other words, it does not simply suffice to present what these ambiguities *are*, but more importantly to argue what they *do* in relevance to the workings of power. To this end, the concept of affect provides a useful lens to analyse the potential of ambiguities embedded in practices of humour.

Affect is essentially concerned with the in-betweenness in a process of becoming and concentrating on unfolding events instead of static things (Massumi, 2015), which is one of its advantages in addressing digitally mediated cultures. In research on feelings and emotions, the concept of *affect* is often used interchangeably with *emotion*, but here in my research, it is important to distinguish between them. According to Massumi (2002: 28), emotion is a subjective content whose intensity is owned and recognised and therefore can be defined as personal, while affect is unqualified; ‘it is not ownable or recognizable and is thus resistant to critique.’ They are ‘emerging and shifting intensities rather than named discursive entities’ (Pedwell, 2017). Their first difference is regarding awareness and realisation. Papacharissi (2015: 21) offers a good example: ‘We might think of affect as the force that drives the unconscious tap of the foot to the music, the bob of the head as we listen along to conversation, the rhythm of our pace as we walk.’ It is feelings and emotions in their formation before they are consciously ‘felt’ and realised with clear labels of category by the human subjects. In short, affect is a ‘non-conscious experience of intensity’ (Massumi, 2002; Shouse, 2005). This is particularly suitable for analysing humour.

In my ethnography when I asked myself and other people how we felt about certain memes and jokes and what exactly we were laughing about, I found that most of the time we could not explain our experience of humour in clear words. The common case was that we got the point to laugh about without realising what it was or what it involved. This was particularly prominent in the experience of humour like witticism rather than more formal and serious forms of satire (see Section 1.3 in Chapter One for the distinction between humour and satire). As people usually say, ‘do not explain a joke.’ The emotional intensity triggered by humour was to a great extent unlabelled and unqualified. And in many cases, the fun is ruined by attempts to label them in clear articulation.

Second, affect differs from emotion in terms of its continuation. Affect accumulates in habit and tendency in an all-rounded way whereas ‘emotion is the way the depth of that ongoing experience registers personally at a given moment’ (Massumi 2015: 4). In other

words, emotion applies to the determinate moments of articulate expression while affect is the ongoing flow of intensity. It sustains energy and mood for possible feelings and emotions in subsequent development (Papacharissi, 2015). Affect, therefore, has been argued to have the potential of mobilising intensities in transformative social engagement towards material change through the sedimentation of ephemeral and minor affective responses (Bennett, 2005; Blackman, 2013; Pedwell, 2017; Wetherell, 2012). This potential is particularly relevant in the digital age with networked practice, iterative communication, and participatory culture. For example, Ash (2015) argues that GIF images with their repetitive and automated qualities can amplify the potential for affect, altering visual content into new rhythms of sensation. Rentschler and Thrift (2015) demonstrate how feminist digital memes with their propagative nature and networked community building on the internet can enhance affective power and political efficacy.

From the conceptual distinction between affect and emotion, we can see that affect is by its nature fluid and ambiguous, signifying a status yet to be recognised and confirmed. This aligns with humour because its amusing affects to a large extent can and do remain inexplicable and ambiguous, particularly when compared with political satire or parody whose articulate ‘point’ is immediately recognisable. It is also useful to account for the interpretive multiplicity in cultural practice, as it is impossible to anticipate or control how others would elaborate the meanings of public acts and performances—it is inherent in the hermeneutical nature of human interaction (Dolan, 1995). In bringing out the unformed and unrecognised status of formation, the concept of affect overcomes the problem of dichotomy that swings between control and resistance, reproduction of the status quo and subversion of the established order. Instead, it focuses on the potentials and implications of the flux and messes in-between.

In addition to the fluid and ambiguous qualities, affect is also inherently relational. Drawing on the Spinozist definition of affect as ‘the capacity to affect or be affected,’ Massumi (2015) explains that the experience of intensity comes from the point of encounter with a

differential force, which triggers the movement of affecting or being affected. It signifies emergent interactions of social actors that are productive of diverse sensations (Pedwell, 2014). In this regard, the affective techniques are fundamentally participatory, as they apply more directly to situations that involve co-occurrences of individuals encountering this event in their personal way. Papacharissi (2015) further elaborates affective attunement as ‘polyphonic interlacings between the individual and the social.’ While interweaving personal experience and storytelling into the existing narrative, this affective participation allows individuals to feel their place in the narrative, and the ambiguity with its potential for contagion further invites others to tune in and develop the stories. This also resonates with Rentschler and Thrift’s (2015) empirical study of how memes crystallise an ad hoc feminist networked public through practices of culture jamming. These works illustrate how ambiguous and ephemeral moments of affect can have an enduring effect of engaging a wider population and amplifying the visibility of alternative interpretations.

Affect with its focus on ambiguities and relationality is a useful theoretical tool for interpretive research and critical field of social study (Pedwell, 2017), especially studies of digital cultures. As Papacharissi (2015) points out, digital media gives rise to a kind of networked public formations that are mobilised and connected or disconnected via affect. In a digital context featuring participatory culture and memetic media, cultural practices iterate via affect, promoting and propagating increasing ambiguities. It is in this iterative process that ambiguities per se have the potential of altering power dynamics through accumulating intensity through repetition. As mentioned above, affect by its nature implies a permanent incompleteness of narratives-in-the-making that are partial and contemporary. This responds to the poststructuralist approach to discourse mentioned in Section 2.1.3 above about the infinite surplus of meaning and its potential of bringing about social change in the transformational processes of meaning alterations (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Fairclough, 1992, 2013). That is what makes it so difficult to analyse discourse and culture that are always subject to open-ended resignification and participation. However, if we consider digitally-mediated cultural iteration inspired via affect (of humour for example),

these temporary and unregistered moments of ‘affect or being affected’ are sustained and connected in a memetic chain of communication, and its intensity intensified in this snowballing practice of participation. That is how ambiguities in digital cultures potentially mobilise affect to make a difference—not only by interweaving dispersed narratives into a collective one but also by accumulating intensity to empower the formation of culture. Chapter Five will further look into how ambiguities work through affect to construct the digital culture of political humour in relation to the dominant political rhetoric in China.

2.2.3 Participatory culture and memetic media

Finally, all the theories above are situated in a contemporary context of digital media for specific analysis. In this section, I review the core features of contemporary media that are most pertinent to the poststructuralist analysis. Rather than using participatory culture and memetic media as theoretical tools for analysis, I draw on these concepts primarily to pave for my analysis in empirical chapters about how the logics of digital media may influence the dynamics between culture and power. Specifically, by weaving in cultural participation and memetic media, this theoretical framework can fully elaborate on how the openness and fluidity of cultural practice, hegemonic ideology, discourse formation, as well as humour interpretation and affective intensity, are amplified in digital affordances.

The development of information and communication technologies has not only altered the media landscape towards digitally-mediated ‘networked publics’ (boyd, 2011) but also more profoundly changed the social structure regarding communication, organisation and power relationships towards what Castells (2009) calls ‘the network society.’ The collapsing of traditionally segmented contexts as one of the core affordances of digital media brings about the regular and unpredictable collision of diversely differential contexts not only with regards to the medium of communication (boyd, 2011) but also more widely concerning social formations ranging from economies to political authorities. This trend of convergence has no endpoint; it is a process that flows onwards (Jenkins, 2006). This feature highlights the increasing complexity of relationships between media and other

social formations, arguing for a social complex of culture, media, politics and other structural formations in dynamic reconfiguration. Furthermore, it points out a poststructuralist concern about the in-betweenness of social phenomena and the incompleteness of social formation in the digital age.

The complexity of relationships mediated through the digital can be conceptualised from various angles focusing on different aspects, e.g. ‘affective publics’ (Papacharissi, 2015), ‘surveillance capitalism’ (Zuboff, 2019), ‘data politics’ (Ruppert et al., 2017), etc. Among them, the participatory and memetic features of digital culture are most pertinent to cultures of political humour on the Chinese internet under study in this research. The term ‘participatory culture’ was initially used by Jenkins (1992) in his pre-digital work on the culture of television fandom. He further refines participatory culture as featuring relatively low barriers to expression and engagement, strong support for personal creations and their sharing within a certain degree of social network (Jenkins, 2009). This quality of digital culture is enabled by contemporary media affordances of spreadability that emphasise and encourage dispersion, diversification, social connection, and open-ended participation (Jenkins et al., 2013). On the one hand, as mentioned above, participation in digital cultures leads to networked storytelling, weaving diverse individual experiences into a collective narrative and attuning individuals further into these textures of storytelling (Papacharissi, 2015). On the other hand, it also fosters the divisions in culture beyond the previously monolithic understanding particularly within the Birmingham School of cultural studies. With the emergence of different contemporary cultures and niche communities, they do not necessarily have to be resistant to the status quo, because there is no longer a unified mainstream against which subcultures can be defined (Jenkins et al., 2016). The emphasis on participation, therefore, has displaced this focus on resistance, opening up a more multivocal paradigm for cultural studies to deal with complex interactions between diverse alternatives (Jenkins et al., 2013). I connect the participatory quality of digital culture specifically to the hegemonic model of discourse and ideological analysis laid out in the above sections. My research, in this framework, focuses on how undecided and

unpredictable public-produced interpretations— ‘a surplus of meaning’ in Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) term—mutate and propagate through cultural participation on digital media to exert an influence on the dominant meaning/culture/ideology.

Further to the concept of participation that addresses the formation of culture in a more general sense, Milner (2016) suggests the idea of memetic participation, zooming into the detailed logics or affordances of digital media in the process of cultural participation. Memetic participation describes how small strands of individual participation are intertwined with established ideas ‘moment after moment, representation after representation, dialogue after dialogue’ (p.2) to form whole tapestries of digitally-mediated conversations. Premised on participation by reappropriation, this concept brings out the iterative nature of digital communication, and hence the iterative nature of digital culture. Milner points out the five fundamental logics underpinning this memetic process: *multimodality* (multiple modes of communication), *reappropriation* (cultural poaching of existing materials), *resonance* (cultural appeal to participants), *collectivism* (social connection), and *spread* (iterative circulation through networks). With these logics, digital media is particularly powerful in widening participation, inspiring new creations, and weaving them together into disperse collectives of niche cultures or integrating them into a collective culture comprising diverse subcategories. The idea of ‘memetics’ is particularly important in understanding digital cultures as it implies the endless variations of cultural reappropriation and the endless process of participation that embrace alterations.

Conclusion

This chapter lays out the poststructuralist theoretical structure of cultural politics for my analysis of friendly political humour on the Chinese internet. This structure consists of a macro framework drawing on theories of culture, ideology, and discourse, and a micro framework specifically for analysing digital humour drawing on studies of humour, affect, and contemporary media. I develop the first framework that addresses the nexus of culture and power as the main body of my theoretical structure. This framework is built upon

theories of culture, ideology, and discourse that are closely associated with each other regarding the power play on the level of signification. Cultural studies—notably the Birmingham School—raises issues of power struggles in cultural domination and subordination. Theories of ideology address how power relations of domination are established, sustained and negotiated through meaning construction and contestation. Discourse theory more specifically unpacks the process of how meaning structures constitute structural formations and how contestation over meaning potentially leads to alterations at the level of signification, cultural practice, and beyond. Weaved together in this framework of culture and power, they form the core structure for my analysis of digital humour on the macro level with regards to power relations between the online public and the ideological power that are manifested and mediated through discourse.

In addition to these rather ‘big’ concepts, I develop a more problem-oriented framework that specifically deals with digital humour on the internet. Theories in this framework include humour studies, affect theory and the notion of participatory media in contemporary media research. I critically review studies of humour and its function, stressing the importance of meaning multiplicity in analysing the fluid and multiple interpretations and motivations of humour in cultural practice. Building on the effects of humour, I consult the theory of affect to unpack the unrealised and uncatalogued feelings and meanings of ambiguities in friendly political humour, exploring their potential in mediating power relations. Finally, I highlight the spreadable and memetic features of digital media as the communication context underlying cultural practices of political humour to emphasise how the logics of digital media may influence cultural formation in power dynamics with other social formations.

These two frameworks are integrated into a poststructuralist theoretical approach to account for the fluidity, openness, and incompleteness of cultural formation, particularly focusing on how power relations take shape and further develop in an ongoing process as culture incessantly spreads and evolves. It is particularly important for my research to move

beyond structuralist cultural analysis that sees culture as static in a binary relationship of control/resistance with the dominant power. With this overall orientation, this two-level theoretical structure provides a comprehensive and practical approach to closely investigate the role of friendly political humour in mediating power relations between the online public and the authoritarian state in China. Before delving into the intriguing empirical cases of political memes and jokes, it is necessary to explain in detail the methodology of how these cases were found, sampled, and analysed.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODS

Introduction

This chapter explains and justifies the methodological approach of this research to analyse the processes of cultural participation and cultural formation of friendly political humour on the Chinese internet. As introduced above, the object under study is friendly political humour that features a multiplicity of meanings, aesthetic pleasures of witticism, and versatility beyond serious political discussion in online conversations. This area of online expression has received relatively less attention in existing studies compared with political satire and non-political content on the internet. However, as discussed in Chapter One, these less rebellious types of political humour have their unique advantages in reaching a wider audience on the Chinese internet which is well known for its rigid censorship, and therefore have great social and political potentials that are yet to be fully explored. The primary focus of this research is to understand how netizens as active cultural participants interact with the political discourse to create friendly political humour on the internet and examine the underlying power dynamics of negotiating and reconfiguring the socialist hegemony in China through cultural practices of humour.

This research of friendly political humour starts with an explorative concern to identify qualifiable cultural phenomena of humour before developing and refining the research questions revolving around friendly political humour, and finally providing explanations of how humour is formed and practised as digital culture and how it bridges popular culture with the ideological discourse. I develop a qualitative methodological approach that involves ethnographic strategies and critical discourse analysis (CDA) methods to study friendly political humour as a cultural practice. This chapter begins with an introduction

of the qualitative research approach for its unique advantage in producing insightful contextual understandings of not only the cultural meaning making of humorous text but also the audience's cultural experiences of humour. I introduce the qualitative methods of ethnography and CDA, explaining why they were necessary for the analysis of humour and how I combined audience-focused ethnography with text-based discourse analysis for a better theorisation of humour as practice. As both ethnography and CDA are problem-oriented methods, I tailored research designs of data sampling and analysis for the three different empirical cases of friendly political humour. Finally, I reflect on the ethical considerations of this research, including how I dealt with the privacy issue of digital data in internet research and how I minimised the political risks to my participants and myself by depoliticising the research.

3.1 A qualitative approach to digital political humour

For research on digital political humour, I primarily rely on qualitative methods to probe into the plurality and fluidity of humour in a digital age and the power relations underlying these cultural practices. The qualitative approach in contemporary media research focuses on the complex interaction between media text and audience and the constructive practices of media discourse and the audience's subject positions. Because of the fluid nature of media representation and audience, they can never be articulated in a closed structure of analysis (Ang, 1991). The conception of text and audience as infinitely unstable and mutually defining in post-structuralist media research leads to a paradigm shift from analysing determinate moments of media practice towards emphasising the polysemic and polymorphic practices of everyday culture (Ang, 1991; Livingstone, 1993, 1998; Radway, 1988). This change in media research that prioritises the open-ended processes of context-dependent meaning-making and subject construction requires qualitative research methods to address the contingent details of dispersed experiences. Methods in this vein mainly include discourse analysis that is more text-oriented and ethnography (including participant observation and interviews) that is more context-based and audience-oriented.

They are often used together to analyse media text within its specific social context where it engages with its audience (Meyer, 2001; Schröder, 2007; Wodak, 1996a, 1996b). While these qualitative methods are by no doubt powerful in producing contextual understandings of interpretive and constructive media practices grounded in lived realities (Denzin, 1997; Denzin and Lincoln, 2018; Morley and Silverstone, 1991), the accounts generated through these methods are essentially contestable, as they are by nature *contextual*, providing only partial explanations of partial realities (Morley and Silverstone, 1991). The plurality of contested representations, interpretations, and realities is also one of the key features of digital humour.

The qualitative approach is the best way to research digital political humour for its advantage in making sense of humour and its practice in the unique sociocultural context of China. Humour is inherently related to meaning multiplicity and emotional engagement that is to a great extent ambiguous and fluid depending on individuals and contexts. It requires interpretive methods of manual efforts drawing on contextual details to elaborate on this ambiguity and fluidity as a social composition of variations and nuances. Moreover, a large part of digital humour is in visual forms and cleverly crafted Chinese language using different strategies of disguise to stay below the radar, which makes it more challenging to capture, identify and encode data. For these reasons, I adopt a qualitative/interpretivist approach combining methods of ethnography and critical discourse analysis to probe into the culture-specific interpretations of humour and netizens' lived experiences in humour practice. Rooted in the paradigm of theorising media as practice (Couldry, 2004), this approach integrates text and audience, micro and macro, to map out the complicated relationship between text, audience, and context, and the underlying power relations among social groups beyond the boundaries of opposition and struggle (Livingstone, 1993, 1998). While ethnography is usually understood to be audience-focused and discourse analysis text-focused, here in my research text and audience are not studied separately. As mentioned in previous chapters, digital political humour is theorised not simply as discourse or media reception, but as cultural practice mediated through the digital that

encompasses a broad range of social processes including discourse formation, media consumption, cultural participation, ideological struggle, identity construction, and other key concerns in previous media research (Couldry, 2004). In other words, instead of dividing them up into specific practices, media research should look into how these practices are coordinated with each other in an ongoing process. Likewise, the approach of critical discourse analysis also stresses the importance of going beyond the analysis of the discourse text, examining the dimensions of discourse practice and sociocultural practice and how text mediate between these different levels (Fairclough, 1992, 1995). Considering the inevitable limitations of discourse analysis in making sense of the other two dimensions, ethnographic perspectives are useful supplements to provide firm contextual grounds for the analysis of the text (Schröder, 2007).

Towards this end, the methods of digital ethnography and discourse analysis were weaved together in my research. Digital ethnography was not just about collecting online material for analysis and recruiting participants for interviews, but more importantly, included tracing netizens' activities of participating in digital humour and bringing together contextualised materials that revealed the dynamics of these cultural activities. Critical discourse analysis, in a similar way, was more than just content analysis on the textual level. It provided guidelines for me to navigate through the ethnographic field of messiness on the internet, sharpen my research questions about political humour, and analyse the three dimensions of text, discourse practice, and sociocultural practice on a case-by-case basis.

3.1.1 Ethnography

Ethnographic strategies are necessary for studying cultural practices of humour on digital media for two reasons. First, cultural analysis is essentially interpretive, unpacking meanings attributed to cultural products in signifying dynamics (Jensen, 1987, 1991b; Schröder, 1994). Ethnography is prized as a method for meaning making and interpretive analysis both in the round and in depth (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Hine, 2015). This is key to the analysis of humour with its polysemic nature and context-dependent

readings featuring great ambiguities and uncertainties. Second, with the increasing saturation of everyday life with digital media, analysis of cultural experiences on the internet requires immersion in the virtual field of research on an everyday basis (Hine, 2015). This is also crucial regarding the fluid and dispersed practices of everyday culture (Ang, 1991). This is particularly prominent in the political humour on the Chinese internet, as practices of political humour usually deploy numerous creative strategies to avoid being censored and even being searched by keyword, which makes them highly diffuse and decentralised on the internet. It is extremely difficult to find them systematically through any keyword search or data mining methods. The workable option is to do an everyday ethnography on Chinese social media.

My online ethnography of political humour started as part of the background research in December 2015 when I came across the ‘socialist jokes’ and their evolved version of ‘socialist memes’ that my friends shared on Weibo. As mentioned in the Introduction Chapter, I was immediately interested in these memes and instinctively felt their potential values for social research. Driven by my curiosity as a cultural participant and a potential social researcher, I started to pay close attention to jokes and memes of the like as I spent my leisure hours on social media including Weibo, WeChat, Zhihu, Lofter among other most-used online platforms in China. At this stage, I was making notes of the interesting political memes and jokes on social media that I found funny as a cultural participant instead of a social researcher. My notes included the humorous materials (with URL links and/or digital snapshots), content, theme, style, and why I found it funny. These ethnographic fieldnotes were only for background research before my formal research upon gaining consent from the Department of Sociology at the University of Cambridge regarding research ethics in July 2018. My background research in this period features a personal source of observation and a broad range of political jokes and memes. My virtual field notes were based on my private social networks and the online communities that I initially joined. On the other hand, I did not have any clear rules for observing political humour except for the rather instinctive criteria that they had to have something to do

with politics in any way while at the same time sounding funny. This was partly because I was still on my way to finding the right term or concept to summarise what I wanted to study, and partly because at a preparatory stage of research, I wanted to stay as open as possible to the interesting and creative discourses on the internet before sharpening my research focus. As I had not gained ethical approval from my department to officially launch my research project, the data I collected including my fieldnotes and saved notes in ethnography did not count as my research data and were not used for analysis in this thesis. Nevertheless, this flux of materials provided important inspirations for my formal research.

From July 2018 upon gaining departmental approval on research ethics, I officially started the main study of virtual ethnography on Chinese social media. Very much like snowball sampling, I quickly moved beyond my own social media network to observe more widely on the Chinese internet. My virtual ethnography differs from traditional ethnography in non-digital contexts regarding the moving 'field.' As cultural practices on digital media are always fluid and contingent, fieldwork is constructed in the process of research (Marcus, 1995). The sets of activities to start with are embedded in multiple contexts that need to be explored in research practice so that the field expands as research proceeds (Hine, 2015). Fieldwork, then, is an active process where work brings the field into being, and ethnography is inevitably multi-sited. The question then is how to find the right 'field.' Marcus (1995) introduces some guidelines in this process of moving: follow the people, the thing, the metaphor, the story, etc. In my research, I primarily followed humorous posts and their target audiences, i.e. different cultural communities on different social media. Every post about political humour on social media can be seen as a small event happening in a certain cultural setting (Dashper, 2016), as humour requires tacit understandings within a community about a general knowledge (Simpson, 2003). The size and range of this community can vary greatly depending on the specific case of humour. Some humorous posts are immediately funny to almost all the Chinese, while others only make sense to a small group of people. For this reason, I needed to zoom out of my cultural group(s) to study humour in other cultural groups as an outsider. In most cases it also meant moving

back and forth between different social media platforms including but not limited to Weibo, WeChat, Zhihu, Lofter, Bilibili, etc.

In my fluid-sited digital ethnography, I started from humorous posts I saw in my social media feeds and carefully observed audience's reactions in social media threads. Here, the 'audience' or what I meant by 'netizens' in paragraphs below referred to the social media users who interacted with these posts, i.e. left a comment or reposted it publicly on the social media platform. Although 'audience' or 'netizens' as a concept should account for the whole group of social media users, in my online ethnography I could only observe the active users who would leave observable digital footprints (comments and reposts). It was impossible in my ethnography to take into account the 'silent majority' or 'social media lurkers' who could also be potential users of political memes. I tried to deal with this limitation in ethnography through in-depth interviews with participants including those who might not be overtly active on social media but had their own cultural experiences and stories to tell (see Section 3.1.3 and 3.2.3 for more details). I first consulted how netizens reacted to this post (comments, reposts) to validate my own interpretation of its punchline. If I got it right, I would save this post including its discussion thread in my archive with fieldnotes recording the time, access, and humour reception in its context. If I got it wrong, or if I could not get the point, I would join their discussions and ask them about the meaning of the joke. If that knowledge was new to me, I would try to find a few users from the reposts or comments who seemed familiar with this knowledge and check their profile page to see if there were any other jokes of a similar kind. Sometimes I also asked them via direct comments or direct messages if they had ever seen other jokes that I could further look into, but very often they simply replied 'I don't remember' as most netizens just had a quick laugh at a certain post without any serious thinking and could not remember anything meaningful. But extensive research of their previous posts, replies, and other social threads would usually get me some useful information. If not directly leading me to useful materials of political humour that I could save into my data archive, most of the time their social media activities would lead me to Weibo influencers in their specific

cultural field so that I could follow them and widen my access to different groups. That was how I found gay fiction fans, Marvel fans, football fans, news journalists/columnists, as well as some influencers who just share general memes and jokes from every field. I followed 3-5 active influencers in each of these groups to keep track of any possible humorous posts they might share. I spent long hours on Weibo looking for potential jokes and—where necessary—swiftly moving back and forth between Weibo and other social media platforms that these jokes might lead to, and more importantly, observing how they interacted with each other: their jargon, their favourite emojis, their tone of ‘speaking,’ their favourite stories for ridicule, etc. This way, even if I did not always find anything useful for data collection, I got familiar with their cultural knowledge so that I could understand their jokes more smoothly when it came to that.

3.1.2 Critical discourse analysis

To capture not only texts of political humour but also its sociocultural contexts, my ethnographic observations were very broad and extensive, resulting in a messy field that constantly moved between different social media platforms and different online communities, and messy data containing numerous materials in different forms ranging from texts, audios, visual contents, social media threads, and my fieldnotes. To deal with this messiness, I used methods of critical discourse analysis (CDA) as guidelines to sharpen my focus in the multisite field of rich data resources and to sort out dispersed data from these observations.

CDA is a problem-oriented research tradition, consisting of a strand of approaches that work with text as discourse in diverse theoretical respects. Rather than a method or theory, CDA is a critical perspective of studying a specific social problem related to power relations (van Dijk, 2001). From a shared interest in the social workings of power represented by, processed through, and operated over discourse, CDA approaches diverge and develop their own theoretical and methodological frameworks to address specific problems (Wodak and Meyer, 2001). Among these approaches, I built upon Fairclough’s

framework to develop the CDA methods for studying political humour in this research.

Fairclough (1989, 1992) situates discourse in the locus of practice and unpacks discourse on three different levels: 1) text—a social product, 2) discourse practice—processes of production and interpretation where interactions take place, and 3) social practice—the wider sociocultural conditions that enable these processes. This framework draws on a number of theoretical traditions to form its methodology. In light of Bourdieu's practice theory, this framework understands discourse as both action and representation to incorporate a dialectic of agency and structure (Fairclough, 1992). Building upon Gramsci's concept of hegemony, he suggests a hegemonic model of discourse analysis that focuses on the process of shaping consent as an 'unstable equilibrium' (ibid.). He further builds on Laclau and Mouffe's argument about the incompleteness of the social and the temporary configurations of discourse, stressing that discourse formation is never fully achieved with ongoing struggles (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 2013). These theoretical traditions make his CDA approach versatile to explain the fluidity of digitally mediated discourse while also focusing on the nuances of power relations underlying discourse as practice.

For methodology, Fairclough especially points out a combination of language-oriented analysis in traditional discourse analysis with analyses of social formations and structures where discourse as practice arises. He lists out detailed instructions analysis on three levels: 1) for text analysis, examine vocabulary, grammar, coherence, text structure, etc., 2) for discourse practice analysis, investigate the production, dissemination, and consumption processes of text, and 3) for social practice analysis, situate discourse in ideological construction and hegemonic power struggles with a special focus on social change (Fairclough, 1992). These methodological guidelines fit well in the theoretical concerns of this research laid out in Chapter Two about the discursive nature of culture, politics of meaning signification, and the poststructuralist understanding of social practices.

Following this CDA framework, I developed the following three-level questions to guide

my ethnographic observations and organisation of the dispersed materials I collected in this process:

1. The textual formation of friendly political humour—what are the textual features of these discourse samples, e.g. rhetorical strategies, topics/themes, structures of humour, etc.?
2. The cultural formation of friendly political humour—how were these humorous texts produced and circulated as digital cultures on Chinese social media? On the one hand, how did they emerge and mutate in a memetic process of digital communication? On the other hand, how did netizens participate in a cultural process of creating and sharing these contents, communicating their feelings within their cultural groups, and interweaving their own stories into the shared digital culture(s)?
3. The social formation of friendly political humour—what is the shared cultural knowledge behind these practices of political humour? What does this knowledge as discourse formation imply about the established social structure of politics in this society? Would the acts of cultural participation in political humour make any difference to this shared knowledge and hence the structure?

My ethnography particularly focused on these three aspects. For the first, I paid attention to the creative language tricks and clever witticisms on the internet when looking for materials of friendly political humour. For the second, I traced the life cycle of these humorous expressions and observed how netizens interacted with them in a networked and iterative way through digital media. For the third, I looked deep into the context of cultural interpretation of humour and reflected on this contextual knowledge in relation to the cultural and political realities of the Chinese society that I am a member of. My data collection also prioritised these aspects. I saved textual materials of political humour deploying creative language (here ‘text’ is in its broad sense referring to not only textual

jokes but also audios and visual contents of humour). I also saved social media discussions as contextual material of the text itself in fieldnotes and snapshots to support my analysis on levels of discourse practice and social practice.

As I collected these materials during my ethnographic observations on the Chinese internet, I used thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to sort them in an organised way so that it could further help with my ethnography underway. My thematic analysis took two steps: 1) the coding and screening of broad-ranging materials of political humour in comparison with political satire, and 2) the coding of screened friendly political humour for categorisation and further analysis. First, I compared the broad-ranging materials of humour I collected with the empirical examples of political satire in previous studies, trying to identify the characteristics that distinguished the examples of political humour that I wanted to study from political satire. It was in this process that I gradually developed the definition of ‘friendly political humour’ to conceptualise these jokes and memes as my research subject. Inspired by the CDA framework, my thematic coding referred to the textual features of humour (strategies of euphemising and reworking political topics), the audience’s reactions from their social media discussion, and the different uses of humour in its context. In this process of refining the definition of ‘political humour,’ I would also evaluate whether the materials I collected were worth studying and screen out the less qualified from my collection. A part of my codes, in this regard, was about how well they fitted in as *friendly* instead of *satiric* and how they associated with political topics in China.

Second, with the dataset of friendly political humour after data cleaning in the first step, I did thematic coding of these materials regarding their similarities and differences in terms of language style, thematic topic, intentions of humour (based on netizens’ general reactions reflected in comments and reposts), popularity online and offline, etc. I also used codes to make connections between these materials when necessary regarding their iterative relations in a life cycle of the same cultural event. With these comparisons and connections, I was able to put these coded data into a multilevel structure of a catalogue.

The coding was mainly based on my ethnographic fieldnotes. These codes and their catalogue were constantly reviewed and adjusted as I moved further in the virtual field of observation, talked with participants in interviews (see Section 3.3.3 in this chapter), and consulted relevant theoretical literature and empirical studies. Through thematic coding, I finally categorised the entire collection of friendly political humour into three major areas of political communication—*censorship*, *propaganda*, and *hegemonic narratives*. In each of these areas, humour is associated with censorship regulations, official discourse of the socialist ideology, and official narratives of a political leader. As they differed significantly from each other in multiple aspects (see Section 3.3), they were taken as independent empirical cases for my critical discourse analysis.

For each of these three case studies, I followed the three-level questions laid out above as guidelines for data analysis. I should first examine the textual features of sampled materials, then break down the processes of digitally mediated cultural participation by which these materials came into their textual forms and continued to mutate, and finally relate these practices of friendly political humour to the unique social realities in China, reflecting on how they represent interactions between popular digital cultures and political discourse, and further, the interactions between the online public and the party-state.

It is important to note that CDA is a problem-oriented methodological approach that seeks answers in their concrete contexts (Fairclough, 2001; Meyer, 2001). On the one hand, CDA alone is not sufficient to address events of humorous practice regarding their life cycle of emergence and development and their social mechanisms of generating amusement among Chinese netizens. Depending on the three empirical cases in their own specific cultural and social contexts, my CDA-based analysis also draws from theoretical literature on cultural studies, affect, and representation, as well as empirical literature on Chinese censorship, political persuasion, and memetic digital media (see Section 3.2).

On the other hand, the problem-oriented method of CDA also needs to be further tailored for the specific research question. I look into these three cases of political humour that I

distilled from my rich and messy data collection with different research focuses. All three cases involve processes of cultural production, consumption (or reception), and circulation. Although these stages are often entwined in digital communication with blurring boundaries, they remain largely identifiable for my cases of political humour. Based on their themes of censorship, propaganda discourse, and official narratives, I have different research emphases for these cases, each featuring a different stage of cultural communication. ‘Socialist recoding’ features the production of humour using official slogans for political conformity. While it is more common to depoliticise sensitive political content to avoid censorship, ‘socialist recoding’ is the exact opposite, using official political discourse to justify problematic content. My interest in this case is primarily about this unconventional strategy for censorship circumvention. To better probe into this intertextual strategy of politicisation, my analysis puts more focus on how ‘socialist recoding’ is produced (while of course also paying attention to how it is received among the online audience).

The second of ‘socialist memes’ is slightly different from ‘socialist recoding’ despite their similar logic of incongruity humour—contrasting the official discourse with alternative genres. While ‘socialist recoding’ reappropriates the official discourse in order to bypass censorship, ‘socialist memes’ repurpose the official discourse for its own sake, i.e. seeking incongruity humour. For this reason, ‘socialist recoding’ is more case-based, applying to a specific occasion where censorship is involved or circumvention of censorship is needed. With this limitation, ‘socialist recoding’ can hardly go viral. ‘Socialist memes,’ on the other hand, are much more widely applied, and can easily go viral across social media. It features a highly contagious and memetic process of reproduction and circulation on the internet. My research focus in this case study, then, is the circulation and propagation process driven by humour’s affective quality of creating feelings of amusement.

The third case of the ‘toad worship’ culture, as a specific internet subculture in China, is more different from socialist humour—be it creative recoding for circumvention purposes

or internet memes for fun. While all three cases as practices of humour rely on shared cultural knowledge for humour to take effect, the background information they require is largely different. Socialist humour is based on a more general knowledge about the socialist discourse in China—one only needs to be familiar with this discourse (identifiable slogans and posters from the official propaganda) to find it funny. But the ‘toad worship’ humour requires much more specific background knowledge about Jiang including his speeches, career paths, language skills, and hobbies. Therefore, ‘socialist recoding’ and ‘socialist memes’ can actually appeal to everyone who has grown up in an environment of socialist propaganda, but the ‘toad worship’ humour applies only to a particular group of people who mostly use these memes consciously for their own different purposes. In this regard, my case study of the ‘toad worship’ culture puts more focus on the diverse ways that individual ‘toad worshippers’ reread the life story of the same person, and the diverse ways that they relate his life story to their own life.

The different focuses I have in these three case studies—the production of ‘socialist recoding,’ the circulation of ‘socialist memes,’ the interpretation of ‘toad worship’ humour—lead to different research methods in the same qualitative approach. The first two cases of ‘socialist recoding’ and ‘socialist memes’ are most based on ethnography and discourse analysis, and the third case of ‘toad worship’ relies more heavily on interviews with its cultural participants.

3.1.3 Interviews

As mentioned above, audience’s reactions to political humour are particularly important to understanding how humour is received and interpreted among netizens. My ethnography and CDA methods have already involved taking notes of online discussions in social media threads and asking relevant participants in these virtual discussions about the meanings and uses of jokes and memes. In addition to these fieldnotes, interviewing is a more direct way to gain more substantial knowledge about public understandings and usage of political humour. Section 3.2.3 below provides more detail into how informants were recruited, the

interview questions, and how interviews were supported with other data sources for analysis. This section mainly explains why interviews were necessary and, in particular, why interviews—unlike ethnography and CDA—were only used for analysis of ‘toad worship’ but not for the other two case studies.

‘Toad worship’ is a popular culture in China circulating memes and jokes in relation to the former Chinese President Jiang Zemin. Simply put, it is part of the *egao* internet culture that turns a former Chinese leader into internet memes (Fang, 2020). It is a widely recognised and influential on the Chinese internet with its own community of cultural members and its unique cultural jokes (Gracie, 2016; The Economist, 2016). This marks two major differences between ‘toad worship’ and the other two cases, which entail different research methods, with or without interviews. First, ‘socialist recoding’ and ‘socialist memes’ emerged on Chinese social media as a pattern of humour instead of a well-recognised cluster of cultural creation and cultural participation. They do not have any specific cultural group for practising this particular pattern of humour; nor do they revolve around a key theme like ‘toad worship.’ In other words, socialist recoding and socialist memes are even more decentralised, fragmented, and diffused on the internet and hardly categorised into any identifiable collectives. Therefore, unlike ‘toad worship’ with its own cultural community, there are hardly any fixed or discernible groups of cultural participants in practices of ‘socialist recoding’ or ‘socialist memes,’ because basically every internet savvy person could be a potential participant.

Second, as mentioned above, the ‘toad worship’ humour relies heavily on specific knowledge about Jiang, featuring a centrality of Jiang in this culture. ‘Toad worship’ first emerged as a deliberate ridicule and mockery of Jiang Zemin in a negative sense (Fang, 2020). Although this culture has gradually depoliticised and neutralised as it gets widely spread across the internet (see Chapter Six for more detailed analysis), participants are well aware of who they are making memes about. It matters how participants re-narrate his stories in humorous ways. This is also why I tend to focus more on their interpretations

of Jiang and their engagement with this culture in this case study. ‘Socialist recoding’ and ‘socialist memes’ that have no fixed or specific target of ridicule, on the other hand, are much more general, vague, and also broad and diversified in their range of repertoire. They are much closer to traditional jokes that are *affectively* funny—as we say, ‘Don’t explain a joke.’ In my online ethnography when I came across jokes that I hardly understood and asked random social media users: ‘how is it funny,’ ‘why do you find it funny,’ I usually got answers like ‘I don’t know, it’s just funny.’ For most social media users, they just immediately find these jokes to be funny without giving it any serious thought. In other words, these jokes affect people before any meaningful thinking or meaningful reflection about how or why—humour takes place before its conscious register.

Because of these two differences, I decided not to do interviews for ‘socialist recoding’ and ‘socialist memes.’ Analysis of a well-recognised and influential culture of ‘toad worship’—its origins and later development, its community, its repertoire and practice, etc.—by no doubt entailed in-depth interviews with its participants. However, interviewing is not the best way to study ‘socialist recoding’ and ‘socialist memes.’ First, interviews with a more general group of cultural participants would not be as effective in generating insightful knowledge about this culture as interviews with a much more specific cultural community, particularly with my different research focuses in these cases studies. My case studies of ‘socialist recoding’ and ‘socialist memes’ do not primarily focus on how they are received and understood among the individuals. My emphases, as mentioned in the section above, are the intertextuality of politicisation strategy for circumvention for ‘socialist recoding’ in its production process and affective amusement of ‘socialist memes’ that fuels their memetic spread on social media. Both these processes are more about the mechanisms of how humour emerges and circulates as a whole, which are beyond the level of individual participants. What can be gained from interviews with participants would be quite limited in generating understandings about these mechanisms. The study of the ‘toad worship’ humour, on the other hand, focuses on interpretations of Jiang’s life story and in-depth engagement with this culture—these are more reliable upon individuals’

experiences that can be much more effectively gained from interviews.

Second, particularly about ‘socialist memes,’ asking a general group of participants to explain their feelings and understandings of these socialist jokes in interviews is not very helpful to the analysis of how humour affects them instinctively and relationally in a networked public. Putting down their vague, unrealised, and uncatalogued feelings of a certain intensity into logical words, reasonable categories, and structured thoughts could actually dissolve the very intensity that my analysis of humour focuses on. For example, in early 2021, I did an interview-based side project with my colleague on user attitudes of ‘socialist memes’ in an attempt to further validate and support my analysis in this thesis.¹ In this study, we recruited 15 active meme users on the Chinese internet for qualitative interviews and presented them with a group of ‘socialist memes.’ We asked them how they felt about these memes, in what contexts of conversations they would use them, how they would understand them, and whether they would use them to imply political intentions. Nearly all of the participants said they had never carefully thought about these memes when using them so they had to rethink when answering our questions. From what they told us in these interviews, the feeling of amusement or laughter was simply an instinctive reaction. It was in these interviews that I realised that interviews with aims to get articulate answers would actually impose reflections and thinking about jokes on participants. That is not to say interviews cannot provide any useful information. I could have asked a group of random netizens to elaborate on the ephemeral moments of liking and sharing ‘socialist memes’—how they feel upon seeing ‘socialist memes’ and how these feelings affect their behaviours of liking and reposting them for these memes to further spread on social media.

¹ This article titled ‘From propaganda to memes: resignification of political discourse through memes on the Chinese internet’ co-authored with Bo Kang is currently under review by the *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction*.

For sure these participants could try to put these feelings into words, but it is not the data needed for my analysis of the affective intensity and potential of humour in bridging contrasting discourses and encouraging wider circulation among the online public. My research focus is not to dissecting the ephemeral moments of individuals' meme sharing, but how these numerous ephemeral moments of affective humour have come to form a collective picture of the popularisation of 'socialist memes' as alternative expressions of the official discourse. In other words, interviews can be helpful to learn about specific user behaviours, attitudes, and preferences in meme sharing activities in general (this is what the side project aims to do), but they could hardly generate any reliable understandings of the affective nature of humour and its important role in the collective or networked practices of digitally mediated cultural participation, which is the main research focus in this thesis.

For these considerations about the different features of these three cases and my different research focuses in these case studies accordingly, the interview method was only used for analysis of 'toad worship' while the other two case studies mainly relied on ethnographic and CDA methods for data collection, sampling, and analysis. These three case studies each have their own research focus and therefore require different theoretical approach and analytical tools. The following section explains how I tailored different data sampling and analysis methods for the three cases of friendly political humour, and how I supplemented the CDA framework with other relevant literature for discourse analysis in Chapters Four to Six.

3.2 Research designs for empirical cases

As the three categories of friendly political humour deal with three different systems of political power (censorship, propaganda, and hegemonic narratives), they differ significantly from one another not only in their textual features, cultural representations, mechanisms of humour but also in how they interact with political authority. For this reason, these three types of friendly political humour were taken as independent empirical

cases for which I needed to conduct data sampling and data analysis separately.

3.2.1 'Socialist recoding' for censorship circumvention

The first case study in this research focuses on humorous practices using the official political discourse to euphemise and justify transgressive and controversial content to avoid internet censorship. As these practices deploy slogans and terminology from China's official language of socialism, I call them 'socialist recoding' for censorship circumvention. These practices differ drastically from political satire that euphemises political dissent with non-political contents for the same purpose: while political satire depoliticises criticisms to stay below the radar, 'socialist recoding' uses the opposite strategy of politicisation to demonstrate political conformity for problematic non-political contents to bypass censorship. I label this political humour of 'socialist recoding' as 'friendly' because the core messages this recoding tries to convey are non-political contents such as obscenity and queer fandom that are also prone to censorship in China. The official discourse is only used here to reframe these controversial contents in a 'politically correct' (in the Chinese sense) way. Therefore, the humour of 'socialist recoding' is not about political dissent in the first place. Its general attitude is friendly rather than subversive.

Cultural recodings in attempts to circumvent censorship on the Chinese internet—whether satirical or friendly—are extremely difficult to sample precisely because they are created to avoid being found by censorship algorithms, internet police, or political authorities in any way. In fear of rigid keyword blocking, netizens hardly use keywords or hashtags, which makes it impossible to do random sampling. They are also extremely prudent not to form any collectives (like online communities) of cultural members or digital archives of relevant materials to make it more difficult for censors to hunt them down. As it is very hard to predict netizens' creative inventions of wordplay and visual representations on spreadable social media, it requires constant ethnographic observations on the internet to keep a record. What is worse, despite much discretion, some of these online contents are still ephemeral due to evolving censorship or self-censorship (see for example Liu and Zhao,

2021), which makes it even more difficult to collect online data. Most previous studies of circumvention practices on the Chinese internet are event-based, focusing on significant public crises or political events where euphemisms to avoid censorship are much needed. This event-based approach is often outcome-oriented, emphasising only the ‘major’ and often intense public/political discussion and downplaying the ‘minor’ informal activities because they do not typically or directly lead to events of political significance (Guan, 2019). This, as Guan argues, is likely to produce biased understandings towards conflicts and tensions, particularly when researching internet phenomena in China. My research, on the other hand, exactly focuses on the informal and indirect discussions in the everyday mundane. Event-based methods of data collection and sampling can hardly capture these small and trivial details.

Therefore, as mentioned in Section 3.2, I used ethnographic methods and CDA guidelines to collect ‘socialist euphemisms’ of transgressive materials on Chinese social media. I did in-depth ethnography on various Chinese social media platforms including WeChat, Weibo, Lofter, Bilibili among others from 2018-2021. Long-term observation moving between networks and platforms was useful to accumulate fluid knowledge to read between the lines and to compile fluid data of online expression (Han, 2018). Ethnography was inevitably influenced by my own interest, experience, and knowledge structure as the observer. Growing up in China in the 1990s and onwards, I witnessed how official discourse went outdated since the early 2000s and how it revived as a retro style with the rise of parodic ‘egao’ culture on the Chinese internet. As a cultural insider, I have a natural sense of the changes in public attitudes towards and uses of official discourse. As a social researcher, I also hold a critical and non-partisan perspective to review and make sense of these changes and their political relevance.

I started observations of recodings that contained socialist discourse (terminology, narratives, posters) in my own social media networks and then gradually expanded to other platforms and open-access online communities by following different accounts and

hashtags on various sites. Based on my ethnographic fieldnotes and the data of ‘socialist recoding’ materials after initial screening and categorisation mentioned in Section 3.2.2, I did a further thematic analysis, using different codes to summarise the topic, the overarching theme, degree of censorship, media format, commonality, popularity, etc. of each case, and categorise them based on topic. The themes of ‘socialist recoding’ include: horror/violent scenes, fictional gay romance, pornography, China’s zero-COVID policy. My case selection followed two criteria: 1) compared with other alternatives for euphemism to stay below the radar, official discourse is one of the most-used circumvention strategies for online discussion on this topic, 2) considerable visibility and popularity on the internet (based on the Chinese internet compared with other social media posts). Finally, I chose three interesting cases of cultural recoding of official discourse for legitimation purposes under censorship: 1) ‘socialist pornography,’ 2) ‘socialist brotherhood,’ and 3) ‘socialist Venom.’

Data analysis of these ‘socialist recoding’ practices draws on Stuart Hall’s (1980b) theory of cultural coding to elaborate on the CDA-based three-level research questions laid out in the section above accentuating meaning making and cultural (re)coding. On the textual level, I focus on semiotic aspects of meaning signification and rhetorical techniques. Then, these texts are situated in a context of spreadable media as a discursive practice of cultural recoding. At this level, my analysis focuses on the process of cultural participation and meaning struggles, addressing how they are (re)interpreted and (re)reconstructed. At the third level of social practice, I relate Fairclough’s hegemonic model understanding discursive practice as a process of shaping consent in power structures to cultural studies understanding cultural codes as politics of signification, investigating how these ‘socialist recodings’ interact with censorship and how this meaning interactivity represents power struggles among the online public over what is sayable in China.

3.2.2 *‘Socialist memes’*

The second empirical case is ‘socialist memes’—the ones that attracted me at the very

beginning as an ordinary Chinese netizen and a social researcher to look deep into this phenomenon. As mentioned multiple times above, ‘socialist memes’ are a group of internet memes that remake political slogans and old-fashioned propaganda posters into funny memes for online communication. These memes emerged on Weibo in December 2015 first as texts, then as image-macros, and finally evolved to be versatile for everyday conversations. To this day they have already become one of the meme templates or genres popularising on Chinese social media like any other specific themed memes.

The data sampling of ‘socialist memes’ was less complicated than ‘socialist recordings,’ as these memes themselves constituted an independent type of data that was directly identifiable. These memes have two prominent features: 1) they have propaganda posters as visual background and/or socialist terminology and slogans embedded in the textual caption; 2) despite their mentioning of political discourse, they are used for non-political topics for everyday conversations like Figure 1 and Figure 2 of self-deprecation in the Introduction Chapter. What made it even easier to do sampling was that these memes could be searched on the internet by the keyword ‘socialist’ or other related political terminology like ‘communist’ and ‘Marxist.’

My sampling of ‘socialist memes’ was done in two ways. First, based on the background research before officially starting my main study in 2018, I retrieved the posts I saved on the digital archive and my computer and consulted the then media reports on these trending memes. In this way, I sorted out a data sample consisting of ‘socialist memes’ in their early versions to reconstruct how these memes emerged and mutated in their early stages of textual formation. Second, I searched for memes that had the two core features on Baidu (the largest search engine in China), Google, and WeChat, using keywords including ‘socialist memes’ and other closely related political terms such as ‘communist,’ ‘imperialist,’ ‘Marxist,’ ‘core values’ (short for ‘core socialist value,’ a set of official interpretations of socialism promoted in 2012 written in 12 words as propaganda slogans including ‘democracy,’ ‘freedom,’ ‘equality’ among other concepts), etc. Among the search

results, I selected the memes that were most relevant and had relatively wider popularity among Chinese netizens based on my ethnographic observation on Chinese social media. The earlier and rather unmaturing versions together with the current forms of ‘socialist memes’ constituted the data sample for analysis.

Analysis of ‘socialist memes’ draws on a different theory—*affect*—in addition to the main methodological structure of CDA. The focus of data analysis in this case study is also directed towards how humour engages netizens as ordinary meme users with the affect of laughter. I first review the textual formation of ‘socialist memes’ based on the data sample, analysing how these memes gradually developed into their current forms. Then on the second level of analysing its cultural formation, I particularly examine how the process of cultural participation is driven by the affect of humour, i.e. how netizens were attracted to these funny memes and how they interweaved their own personal experiences into these memes while creating and sharing these memes. Finally, I compare this memetic reiteration of funny political memes driven by affect on digital media with the propagandistic repetition of state-produced discourse, asking how the memetic spread of these ‘socialist memes’ reworking this political discourse originally promoted by the party-state for propaganda purposes may influence the effects of ideological persuasion.

The analysis of affect is primarily text-based. I chose not to do any interviews with users of ‘socialist memes’ because affect is by its nature unspecified and unconscious—as explained in Chapter Two. In my virtual ethnography on social media, I had some informal conversations with both my friends who were active meme users and random netizens that I came across on Weibo sharing related posts. From what they said, most of the time they were sharing or posting ‘socialist memes’ without giving it any serious thought. Most of the time memes are funny because of an ephemeral and instinctive flash of feeling. When asked to properly categorise their feelings about these memes at the moment when they clicked ‘like’ or ‘repost,’ or shared on their social media, netizens would have to engage in a rational thinking process of trying to define their feelings and qualify their affect-driven

behaviours, which would reshape and even alter their original unconscious experience of affect. What I wanted to analyse was not the clearly labelled emotions and motivations behind cultural practices of ‘socialist memes,’ but rather the process of meaning and affect mobilisation before these emotions and motivations are consciously catalogued and articulated. It is in this process that unconfined ambiguities and possibilities gain their potentials in nudging human emotions, behaviours, and interpretations towards undecided ends. This is where affective analysis differs from emotional analysis. For this reason, I relied on CDA methods to conduct my analysis. In addition to these memes as text, I drew on the comments in their social media threads to see how these memes were received among the online public at their time. Further to these rather separate moments of media reception among audience, I also put these memes into the life cycle of ‘socialist memes,’ tracing the routes of their reproduction and circulation. In tracing the directions in which memes mutated in the digital context of cultural participation and reappropriation, I could reconstruct the kinds of feelings that drove the individuals to actively share these memes, and more importantly, perceive the kinds of feelings that inspired them to create their own versions of ‘socialist memes.’

3.2.3 ‘Toad worship’ culture

Unlike ‘socialist recordings’ and ‘socialist memes’ that have not been properly categorised or named as any particular digital culture among the public, the third case—‘toad worship’ about former Chinese President Jiang Zemin—is a widely recognised culture of significant popularity in contemporary Chinese society. It has its own community of cultural members and its own characteristic cultural jokes. ‘Toad worship,’ or ‘Moha’ in Chinese, is a culture of creating and sharing various forms of memes and jokes related to the former President Jiang Zemin, who is referred to as ‘toad’ due to his toad-like appearance in a mocking way. The social influence of this culture in China has already received attention in both media and academia (see for example Fang, 2020; Gracie, 2016; The Economist, 2016), as it is not very common to see a culture that turns a Communist Party Leader into internet

memes to popularise in an authoritarian country. ‘Toad worship’ fans, also known as ‘mogicians’ or ‘toad worshippers,’ take great enthusiasm in producing and sharing memes related to Jiang in variously creative ways for multiple different motivations and diverse expressions including implicit criticisms, satire, unharmed playfulness, and social networking (Fang, 2020). Moving forward from existing media reports and social research of this digital culture, what I take particular interest in is not the various motivations for cultural participation, but rather, how this culture reframes the stories of a Chinese President in a humorous way and the possible impact it may have on how netizens interpret and remember this former leader.

As mentioned above, analysis of ‘toad worship’ is primarily based on interview data. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 40 self-identified ‘toad worshippers’ from July to November 2018 (see Appendix Three for interviewee information). In the first stage from July to mid-October, 15 interviewees were recruited via snowball sampling based on my personal connections. In mid-October, I introduced myself to one of the ‘toad worship’ influencers on Weibo who not only participated in my interview but also kindly helped me spread the word to his followers. I recruited another 24 interviewees who showed enthusiasm about this culture and great interest in my study. The interviews were about 50-90 minutes long and were conducted in Chinese mandarin. Eight were in-person interviews and the rest of them were telephonic interviews via WeChat and Skype, as most of the interviewees felt insecure or under pressure in traditional face-to-face interview settings to talk about a politically sensitive culture. As active social media users, these ‘toad worship’ participants were more comfortable with only digital connections with me, coordinating interview details via WeChat messages and having conversations about ‘toad worship’ with their camera off. For research on sensitive topics, it is important to adjust the research tools and choose the ones that participants (particularly from vulnerable groups) have already familiarised in their everyday life so that they can communicate with researchers more naturally (Kaufmann, 2019).

As shown in Appendix Three, there were only 9 female participants among the 40 interviewees. This comes from the general gender imbalance among ‘toad worshippers’ in this culture. According to what my participants explained in interviews, the ‘toad worship’ phenomenon emerged as a markedly masculine culture, which results in its gendered cultural practice. On the one hand, ‘toad worship’ was markedly political in its early stages, revolving around news, events and rumours of the former Chinese President. The realm of politics itself is gendered as men are found to be more politically interested, informed, and efficacious than women (Bennett and Bennett, 1989; Verba et al., 1997). On the other hand, ‘toad worship’ in its early phase of development used to make fun of Jiang primarily in a satiric and critical way. Before its wide popularisation on the Chinese internet and its development towards light-hearted amusement, ‘toad worship’ was much closer to critical digital engagement for expressions of political dissent. As women are often socialised into conflict avoidance, they are much less likely to engage in political dissidence than men (Coffé and Bolzendahl, 2017; Wagner et al., 2021). Therefore, the special kinship of ‘toad worship’ to the field of politics and its transgressive nature in China made culture stereotypically more appealing to men than women.

Many of my participants including those who started their ‘toad worship’ at a very early stage around 2011 agreed that the early ‘toad worshippers’ were predominantly men. Their active participation in ‘toad worship’ practices further enhanced its masculinity (bolder and more radical claims, men’s conversational styles, etc.), which would drive away women who might be interested. For example, one female participant told me that she once joined a ‘toad worship’ WeChat group in excitement but quickly withdrew from it with great disappointment because she felt uncomfortable about the overtly ‘boyish’ conversations. Now the ‘toad worship’ has been widely popularised on the Chinese internet, losing a great deal of its ‘politicalness’ and risks of transgressing the political ‘red line,’ appealing to both men and women for cultural amusement. With more generalised humour in creative forms not limited to political discussion and radical criticism, more women are now participating in this culture. Nevertheless, the gender imbalance remains prominent.

While this gendered aspect of ‘toad worship’ is very interesting, it is rather irrelevant in my research of the reconstruction of political discourse through humour. I raise this issue here mainly to explain that the sample of my interviewees is not biased—it is consistent with the general gender imbalance of the population. This imbalance will not affect my analysis of how humour reconstructs hegemonic narratives. These cultures of political humour all have their own community of different demographic features, (for example, fans of ‘socialist brotherhood’ in Chapter Four are predominantly female, users of ‘socialist memes’ in Chapter Five are mostly people under the age of 40). My research of political humour is not a user study of any specific internet culture. It is a study of friendly political humour in general that encompasses a range of digital cultures, and the research emphasis is on its implications for understanding processes of political communication in China instead of demographic features of different user groups.

The interview questions focused on their cultural practices (general activities, personal experiences, most impressive memes and jokes), their cultural participation and identification (motivations for participation, interpretations of ‘toad worship’ memes, social networking experiences with other ‘toad worshippers,’ cultural identity), their attitudes and opinions about Jiang (first impression, later development, general comments, important memories). The full interview guide for semi-structured interview questions can be found in Appendix One. In the interviews, informants shared with me their cultural feelings and experiences, their political attitudes and opinions, and their understanding of this culture and more generally the internet culture and politics in China. They also provided many interesting humorous memes, videos, articles (links to webpages, and/or digital artefacts they saved from the internet), and offered useful advice on where I could find more. My conversations with them were also extremely helpful for collecting textual materials of political humour.

In addition to these in-depth interviews, I did participant observation in two ‘toad worship’ groups on WeChat from mid-October 2018 to the end of 2019 as a researcher upon

consent from the group organisers. I observed their general activities and discussion topics. I also did daily observation more generally on different Chinese social media platforms (WeChat, Weibo, Zhihu, Bilibili, etc.) as part of my ethnography. Based on these observations as well as my conversations with interviewees, I collected a small corpus of toad worship memes in different media forms including fan-made textual stories/jokes, visual images, audios and videos. I also saved Weibo discussion threads on interesting ‘toad worship’ topics by taking snapshots.

Data analysis of ‘toad worship’ applies data triangulation strategies (Bryman, 2004; Denzin, 2017) to compare between different data and validate my findings. Analysis of ‘toad worship’ consists of not only discourse analysis of ‘toad worship’ memes, but also interviews and participant observation as the primary data source to validate findings from discourse analysis and to develop a robust understanding of this culture. In addition, I also use the meticulous study of ‘toad worship’ by Fang (2020) as an important source of data to validate my data and analysis. His study collected rich data of interviews and meme samples and provides a comprehensive understanding of ‘toad worship,’ which is a valuable reference for my study.

In developing CDA-based data analysis, I first draw on the memetic logics of digital media from Milner’s (2016) theorisation of internet memes to unpack the processes of the textual and cultural formation of ‘toad worship,’ and deploy Burke’s (1969) concept of representative anecdote from his theory of dramatism to analyse the representations of Jiang showcased in ‘toad worship’ that differ from the official narratives about this former President of China. Like the previous two case studies, the key focus of data analysis here is still the question of how this popular culture of a former Chinese leader, in its memetic cultural spread, interacts with official narratives and (potentially) affects the ways in which a political leader is remembered among the online public.

3.3 Research ethics

Ethical considerations in this research mainly emerge from two aspects. The first is related to the privacy of digital data obtained through virtual ethnography and respondent confidentiality in interviews. Second, as political humour—albeit in friendly and moderate forms—is in close association with sensitive topics in politics, it is important to reduce the potential political risks resulting from my research activities and protect both informants and myself as the researcher from any possible harm.

3.3.1 Privacy and confidentiality

While the internet provides rich and live information that is easily accessible to the public, it also poses new challenges to the existing ethical guidelines about how researchers should use digital data. Central to the ethical and methodological complexities in internet research is the issue of whether data retrieved from the online public space should be considered public or private (Ackland, 2013; Sugiura et al., 2017). Ethical guidelines for privacy protection in internet research, despite constant reflection and updates from researchers, remain rather ambiguous and unstable, which requires case-by-case considerations based on specific research contexts and methodologies (Eynon et al., 2008; Franzke et al., 2020; Markham, 2012; McKee and Porter, 2009; Snee, 2013). For example, some scholars are worried that anonymisation practices removing all references to identification may reduce research quality, especially for ethnographic studies that rely heavily on authentic details to provide accurate accounts of social phenomena (Buchanan, 2011). Other scholars have further noted that identification is not the only problem of privacy issues in a digitally networked society, as moral risks could occur by identifying the essential personality of the individuals at stake and their network status without identifying the individuals themselves (Matzner, 2014; Hutchinson et al., 2017).

To deal with these challenges and retain ethical considerations, I tailored different strategies for privacy protection in this research based on the Internet Research Ethics 3.0 guidelines

(franzke et al., 2020). Rather than taking a prior stance, I applied the ethical principles in a case-based and process-focused way, reflecting on ethical concerns on a contextual and iterative basis (Hine, 2015; Markham, 2006; Markham and Buchanan, 2017). I took necessary adjustments as I moved along the way to conduct digital ethnography on the Chinese internet, engage with different materials of political humour and different cultural participants, and analyse data obtained in this process.

For virtual ethnography as an unobtrusive method, to avoid potential pitfalls when data may come from intrusion without consent, data collection should be strictly confined to the public settings or upon the consent of relevant participants (Hine, 2015). During my ethnographic observation on different social media platforms, I specifically distinguished two different sources of materials—the ones that were publicly accessible (e.g. public posts on Weibo that were accessible to all users), and the ones with limited access (e.g. feeds on WeChat within private social circles, Weibo posts that were set to be visible to the followers or ‘close friends’ only). For the former, I removed all the reference information (usernames, hashtags, keywords of the original media posts that are searchable on the internet) that could lead to possible identification and data trace as I collected the humorous materials for analysis. I also removed the watermarks of usernames on visual images. Indeed, this anonymisation practice would cause another problem of not properly acknowledging the user’s authorship in formal citations (Bassett and O’Riordan, 2002). However, as the images I quoted from these opensource social media posts had already been popularised across social media, this problem was much less significant compared with privacy issues. Specifically, regarding the memes shared by Weibo influencers (Figures 11-16 in Chapter Five) their authors (whose names I removed in this thesis) explicitly stated in their Weibo post that ‘feel free to use and spread these memes.’ Therefore, I decided to compromise proper citation to ensure privacy protection. For the ones that were accessible within private groups, I asked their authors for consent before saving the posts (including any visual attachments) in my data archive. In addition, I also used password protection for the data archive saved on my computer and its backup on an external hard drive.

For online ethnography related to the ‘toad worship’ culture specifically, I obtained explicit permission from the organisers of the two ‘toad worship’ WeChat groups before joining their group chats. They introduced me to their members as a social researcher studying the political humour of ‘toad worship’ as a PhD project. Nevertheless, it was very likely that there were group members who missed my introduction and were unaware of my presence as they engaged in conversations. For this reason, I removed their WeChat usernames when making fieldnotes of their discussions and asked for consent when I wanted to save some of the memes or visual materials they shared in these private groups. As I later gained extensive and in-depth data from interviews that went way beyond my fairly fragmented observations in these WeChat groups, I did not use any data from these observations for analysis in this thesis. Instead of providing explicit data for my case study, they supported my case study of ‘toad worship’ culture as background research for me as a ‘cultural outsider’ to immerse in their conversations and develop a cultural sensitivity about ‘toad worship’ that helped with my conversations with ‘toad worshippers.’ Another important aspect that these observations helped with my research was that I recruited a number of informants from these WeChat groups for interviews. In short, I minimised the ethical risks of my participant observations in these closed groups by using them merely as a preliminary step for me to be in a better position to conduct interviews.

Regarding the interviews with ‘toad worship’ participants, I strictly followed the ethical guidelines set by the Sociology Department at the University of Cambridge to protect my interviewees, ensuring full confidentiality and anonymity. I presented an interview consent form (see Appendix Two) to all my interviewees, explaining the content of my research and asking for explicit consent before starting the interviews. I applied complete anonymity to all the interviewees involved in my research, using pseudonyms to replace their real names or identifiable social media IDs. In presenting interview data in this thesis, I removed all the identifiable information including the pseudonyms they used to sign the consent form, leaving only their basic information of age and gender plus the time and location of the interviews for necessary reference in this research (see Appendix Three).

3.3.2 Political risks

The second ethical concern of this research is associated with its political sensitivity. Although I have made it clear throughout this thesis and the research process that what I wanted to study was the friendlier and more moderate cases of political humour instead of the more radical and critical ones, their distinction was usually very vague and problematic in practice, depending on how users interpret them in a specific context. According to how Lee (1993) in his guidelines for sensitive research defines ‘political’ in its broadest sense as related to ‘the vested interests of powerful persons or institutions, or the exercise of coercion or domination’ (p.4), my study of netizens’ reworking practices of the dominant political discourse in China by no doubt falls into the category despite my efforts in narrowing my research focus to the relatively less satirical and subversive types of humour. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the potential consequences on both my participants and myself. Unlike research on explicitly problematic political issues like protests and other forms of mass incidents, my research is at a safe distance from the ‘hard red lines’ regarding regime stability. Nevertheless, it is closely related to the ‘fluid red lines’ about the political discourse as the regime’s core legitimising narrative. There is not only great variation to which this narrative and political authorities can be discussed and criticised (Glasius et al., 2018) but also great ambiguity about whether the ways in which they are discussed are considered criticism. This fluidity of governance is deeply rooted in the Chinese political system featuring adaptability and flexibility (Heilmann and Perry, 2011). For my research, this feature of Chinese politics made it more difficult for me to navigate the fluid lines for ethical concerns about political risks. To minimise the risks and protect my participants and myself from possible harm, I took the following procedures to depoliticise my research.

My depoliticisation started with forming my research topic in background research, and then went on to online ethnography and interviews, and finally to writing up the thesis. It was not just about using strategic wording to frame and present my work in politically

neutral terms, but also about choosing materials of political humour carefully to avoid certain political taboos. This reflexive process of depoliticisation was primarily based on my own cultural and political sensitivity as a native Chinese researcher, which was further supported by what I witnessed on social media and advice from my Chinese friends.

At the preparatory stage of background research, I specifically distinguished friendly political humour from more radical satirical types of humour. As mentioned in Chapter One, this distinction was for analytical purpose in this research. By no means did I intend to create a binary of ‘friendly vs. radical’ or ‘humour vs. satire.’ Nor did I intend to arbitrarily define humour as statically friendly or statically subversive. The reason for doing this was simply to narrow down my research focus from a broader spectrum of humour to a specific range of it, particularly considering that the more satirical types of humour have already been extensively studied in previous research. With this research focus, I framed my general research question as looking into how the online public reconstructs the dominant political discourse through cultural practices of digital humour. Rather than looking for bursts of opposition under spectacular repression that one would usually expect in authoritarian societies, my research wanted to explore the possibilities of promoting conversations and reconciling opposition. This starting point stated myself clear as a non-partisan researcher whose primary interest is in the dynamics of digital culture instead of the politics of the empirical cases. Again, with this research question, I was not denying in any way that opposition under repression existed and were practiced through the use of humour. Nor did I try to advance the idea that humour was *all* about reconciling opposition instead of signifying conflicts. By the same logic, this vantage point was about a different perspective to examine political humour in addition to existing theorisation of humour, rather than a different argument that aimed to throw the whole humour theory into question.

During my online ethnography, I was trying to clarify the nebulous concept of ‘friendly political humour’ by looking for a variety of political humour (including the more radical

and satirical cases) on the Chinese internet as well as relevant empirical studies. As I observed the conversation flows in social media threads, WeChat groups, and whether the social media posts I saved would quickly be censored, I honed my sense of the appropriate and inappropriate political topics to joke about, and the appropriate and inappropriate ways of joking about them. This was important not only for my data collection to screen out potentially ‘dangerous’ material of political humour—however friendly it might appear—but also for my analysis of interpreting these samples of political humour as accurately as possible.

When approaching ‘toad worship’ participants for interviews, I carefully phrased my research at a distance from politics, emphasising the cultural aspects of digital humour. For a culture about a former Chinese president, explicitly relating it to ‘politics’ in front of its cultural participants when inviting them for interviews would make it sound more sensitive than it actually was. It would not only scare off some potential participants but could also result in a bias of interview recruitment as those who were willing to take part in this research would be more likely to have stronger political opinions than average ordinary ‘toad worship’ lovers. When asking for their consent and explaining my research, I also clearly stressed that it was not my aim to study their political opinions or attitudes. What I wanted to know from them was their *cultural* practice rather than *political* practice. Meanwhile, I also made it clear that my interviewees were at their liberty to talk about topics they were interested in or political opinions they were entitled to if they wanted to or felt like doing when our conversation naturally flew to these topics, without worrying about any confidentiality issues. Under no circumstances would I judge them by any sensitive topics they mentioned or any political opinion they held. Nor would I disclose our conversations to anyone else.

While doing these interviews, I tried to harness our conversations within a ‘safety zone,’ carefully steering away from sensitive topics about the regime, the Communist Party, the current leadership, etc. when necessary. This was because these topics were hardly

pertinent to my research focus and we wanted to avoid being censored if using WeChat for interviews. That said, I was not preventing them from talking about these topics because I had already explained to them that they were free to talk about anything in our interview. What I asked from them was to not to go too deep into these topics which would digress from our conversations about ‘toad worship’ or not to discuss some sensitive topics too overtly without any euphemisms. We also tacitly avoided mentioning the full name of political leaders, the Communist Party and any other sensitive words in fear of possible surveillance over messages and phone calls on WeChat (interviews via Skype were more flexible about the use of euphemisms). In fact, several interviews did digress a little to talk about China’s economy, science fictions, and gender issues. This was also a sign of good conversations between us so that they felt comfortable with me and got talkative in sharing with me their different ideas. But these topics were hardly relevant to my research question so I did not include them in my analysis in Chapter Six. With our mutual carefulness, all the interviews (in person and via WeChat or Skype) went on well without any unexpected interruption or interference. Nor did any of us experience any unwanted attention from the security services because of these interviews.

To protect the privacy of my informants as well as to gain their consent for interviews, I explained to them that I did not need to know their real names for interviews. I also suggested they sign their nicknames on the interview consent form for safety. In the interview transcripts, I removed all their personal information, only stating the date and time of the interview, referring to the interlocuters as Q (short for ‘question’) and A (short for ‘answer’). Their basic information (nickname, age group, gender, reference number, location and time of the interview) was kept in a paper copy without any information about my research topic or content of the interviews. In presenting my analysis of their interview data in this thesis, I referred to them using their participant number (e.g. P8, short for Participant 8).

In writing up this thesis with textual and interview data, I carefully chose the materials I

used as examples to present the empirical cases and form my analysis, avoiding any political humour that might be too sensitive to fit in as politically neutral. Although some of my interviewees shared their political opinions on a few sensitive topics out of their trust in me, I did not include these contents in my analysis (this was primarily because they were irrelevant). Worried that what I thought to be acceptable and neutral might appear problematic to others, I also asked a number of my Chinese friends to vet my wording and writing and took their advice in making small adjustments.

Finally, it is very important to point out that these efforts I made to depoliticise my research have nothing to do with research bias or deliberate omission of important empirical data. While indeed it was necessary to screen out overly sensitive materials and avoid discussions on politically sensitive topics for ethical concerns, most of these contents that I left out were also irrelevant to my research. I decided to study friendly political humour instead of radical political satire not just because the latter was too sensitive and could bring harm to me as a Chinese researcher. The primary reason that I wanted to study it was that these friendly cases of humour as well as the informal everyday reappropriations of political topics were seriously under-researched. In other words, I did not need to compromise my data and research quality for ethics—my research topic was inherently consistent with ethical requirements.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explained why I adopted a qualitative approach to studying humour as digitally mediated cultural practice and described how I applied ethnography and CDA methods to develop my research from my initial interest in a group of funny ‘socialist memes’ in 2015 finally to a fully-fledged PhD research project presented in this thesis. Before gaining ethical approval from the department in July 2018, I had been doing background research looking for potential data of friendly political humour through ethnographic observations on Chinese social media. In the summer of 2018, I formally started my virtual ethnography on multiple Chinese social media platforms, expanding

from my own social network to other cultural groups that I was not a member of. In this process, I collected a large amount of data that were messy, unorganised, but also diverse. To navigate through the messy multi-sited field and to sort dispersed data, I used CDA methods to sharpen my research focus, guide my thematic coding of the dataset and lay out the structure of data analysis in empirical case studies. In this process, I refined the object under study as ‘friendly political humour’ and distilled three categories regarding their specific area of politics: ‘socialist recoding’ of transgressive contents to circumvent censorship, ‘socialist memes’ repurposing propaganda discourse for everyday conversation, and the ‘toad worship’ culture that reworks a former Chinese President into memes. These three categories of humour differed so significantly from each other that they needed to be researched as independent case studies.

Following the three-dimensional research questions regarding the textual, cultural, and social formations of friendly political humour that I developed following a CDA framework of methodology, I tailored different research methods for each of these three cases. For ‘socialist recoding,’ I primarily consulted my ethnographic fieldnotes and used thematic analysis for data sampling. Data analysis draws on the theory of cultural recoding to focus on the meaning making aspect of these humorous euphemisms to avoid being censored. For ‘socialist memes,’ in addition to ethnography, I also used keyword search on the internet to sample meme data. My analysis focuses on how the cultural participation process of these memes was driven by the affect of humour. For ‘toad worship,’ I relied on semi-structured interviews with active cultural participants as well as data samples from their recommendations for analysis. I draw on the theorisation of memetic media to account for the cultural formation of ‘toad worship’ and the notion of representative anecdote to probe into the social formation underlying these humorous cultural practices of ridiculing the former Chinese leader. Throughout the process of researching these three cases and presenting my analysis in this thesis, I have taken careful and reflexive procedures of privacy protection and depoliticisation to avoid ethical pitfalls. The detailed process of these data analyses and my findings are presented in the following chapters, starting from

Chapter Four on 'socialist recoding'

CHAPTER FOUR

NEGOTIATING CENSORSHIP THROUGH CULTURAL RECODING

Introduction

In 2018, a web series called *Guardian* (镇魂) gained phenomenal popularity on the Chinese internet. It was cleverly adapted from a famous ‘boys’ love’ (BL or *danmei*, China’s version of slash fiction) web novel, with its story relocated from a fictional universe to contemporary China, and the homoromantic relationship between the two protagonists changed into a brotherly friendship. Despite unclear regulations about representations of homosexuality in film and television productions in China (Zhou, 2017), LGBTQ contents to a large extent remain a grey area with censorship risks. Worried that the success of *Guardian* would draw unnecessary attention from the censors, fans coined the term ‘socialist brotherhood’ (社会主义兄弟情) to describe the rather covertly romantic relationship in this drama to show explicit conformity to the mainstream values of heterosexuality and socialist ideology (Ng and Li, 2020). Since then, ‘socialist brotherhood’ has been widely applied among BL fans on Chinese social media to characterise homosexual relationships that have to go underground and disguised as brotherhood under the pressure of censorship. This circumvention strategy of politicisation is also found in BL literature featuring male-male homosexuality mostly by and for women on the Chinese internet. Among the numerous creative metaphors used in BL works to write erotic content below the radar ranging from mathematics to agronomy, political slogans and social events of political significance are also used in sexual scenes either in a satirical tone or a light-hearted way (Wang, 2020).

This strategy of legitimating transgressive topics through the use of political language is one of the numerous creative ways to deal with information control in China. However, it

is largely understudied in China-focused internet research of contestations over censorship. Existing literature has put more focus on censorship of political topics (narrowly defined as related to formal governance) and censorship-evading practices that euphemise these topics using various linguistic and media strategies. Chinese netizens have developed recoding strategies of wordplay, imagery, and remixing to avoid keyword blocking of politically sensitive words (Mina, 2014; Zuckerman, 2015). For example, the ideological term ‘harmony’ (*hexie* 和谐) was transformed into its homonym ‘river crab’ (*hexie* 河蟹) to subvert the official language (Nordin and Richaud, 2014); ‘grass mud horse’ (an internet neologism which literally means alpaca, commonly used as its homonymic swear word in Chinese) was invented as an expansion to ‘river crab’ again to ridicule strict internet governance ‘harmonising’ the undesired contents (Mina, 2014; Tang and Yang, 2011); and more generally, online spoof emerged as a popular parodic culture of ‘egao’ that subverts authoritative discourses in a disguise of internet humour (Esarey and Xiao, 2008; Gong and Yang, 2010; Meng, 2011; Yang and Jiang, 2015). While political censorship is indeed a significant aspect particularly in authoritarian China, it is important to note that internet censorship also widely applies to more general and less government-centred topics such as obscenity, foul language, and transgressive cultures. In addition to tactics of *depoliticised* euphemisms, deliberate politicisation that draws on official discourse to construct political conformity and legitimate problematic content is also a creative strategy when it comes to non-political censorship. Different from censorship-evading practices like ‘river crab’ with their ‘hidden transcripts’ being political topics carefully and creatively disguised as satirical entertainment, in practices of politicisation, the ‘hidden transcripts’ are transgressive but non-political views, values, and entertainment, carefully and creatively disguised in ‘socialist’ terms for political conformity.

Interested in the strategy of politicisation to bypass censorship on Chinese social media, this chapter looks into this process of discursive construction, examining how these politicisation practices reframe controversial materials in ‘socialist’ narratives to avoid censorship, and investigating the political significance of these cultural recoding practices.

Moving beyond the dominant analytical framework in existing research that focuses on the political logic and prioritises rivalry between state and society, this chapter follows a cultural logic suggested by Yang (2016) that examines censorship-evading practices as cultural workings on the symbolic level of meaning making. Based on ethnographic observations on Chinese social media, this study selects three representative cases of politicised circumvention for analysis and seeks to develop a systematic examination of nuanced censorship-evading practices and potentialities of these nuances in China's contested politics. These three cases recode literary pornography, a BL-adapted drama, and a Marvel film in attempts to deal with censorship on obscenity, homosexuality, and foreign shows respectively. Discourse analysis of these recodings discerns different patterns of recoding strategies and power relations manifested in these recodings, depicting a discourse matrix of heterogeneous responses to censorship including but not limited to resistance, negotiation, and problematisation. In this chapter, I argue that these recoding practices negotiate terms of censorship through meaning making and mediate dynamic power struggles, indicating a permanent instability of authority in internet governance in China. The co-composition of popular culture and politics promotes the exchange, mixture, and negotiation of diverse cultures and tendencies in contested cyberspace. By showing the potentialities of pluralised meaning-(re)making practices in contesting and negotiating internet governance and established norms and values, this chapter advances existing understandings about nuances in China's contested internet and contributes to broader debates about the decentring and destabilising of authority in contested cyberspace worldwide.

4.1 Censorship-evading practices as cultural recoding

The Chinese internet features a combination of high levels of strict internet governance and online activism (Yang, 2006). Despite ongoing debates about the effects of internet governance, it has been widely agreed that Chinese internet censorship is multi-layered, fragmented, contentious, rather than centralised, monolithic, and swift (Knockel et al.,

2015; MacKinnon, 2009; Miller, 2019; Roberts, 2018; Sun and Zhao, 2021; Tai, 2014). In this porous and delegated system of information control, censorship rules are often intangible due to the ambiguous state regulations, and the boundaries for what is sayable on media frequently fluctuate, leaving a grey zone of strategic bargaining and negotiation between journalists and the state featuring interactivity of improvisation (Repnikova, 2017). With the rise of the internet and new media in China which remains to a certain degree uncharted compared with traditional media, there are more discursive opportunities for journalists to take advantage of new forms of digital media to negotiate censorship (Deng, 2018). Repnikova (2017: 83) describes this dynamic as ‘a game of cat and mouse, with the two actors constantly trying outrun each other.’

In this context of porous and contentious censorship, this cat-and-mouse game not only takes place between journalists and the state, but also more generally among the online public where internet-savvy individuals interact with top-down censorship—which could be operated by media conglomerates, government agencies, or internalised as self-censorship within individuals themselves. Like the aforementioned ‘river crab,’ ‘grass mud horse,’ and the parodic culture of ‘egao,’ Chinese netizens have learnt to deal with censorship in various ways. These practices applying satirical tactics of great creativity, playfulness, and ambiguity not only communicate the ‘hidden transcripts’ that would otherwise be filtered. They also invite participation and amplification through humour on spreadable media, which often leads to networked practices beyond the individual level (Lee, 2016; Mina, 2014; Yang, 2009; Yang and Jiang, 2015; Zuckerman, 2015). These playful practices combining both contention and entertainment showcase strong resilience to censorship (Roberts, 2020; Zuckerman, 2015).

Research on contestations over censorship in China has experienced a paradigm shift from control/resistance analysis towards more nuances beyond the binary. Earlier studies mostly tend to endorse these censorship-evading practices as a form of grassroots resistance to the state on the Chinese internet (see for example Esarey and Xiao, 2008; Gong and Yang,

2010; Lee, 2016; Meng, 2011; Mina, 2014; Tang and Yang, 2011). This argument of recoding practices to bypass censorship being indicative of political dissent against the state, along with the dominant perspective in researching online expression as digital contention, has been criticised for reducing the complicated dynamic to dichotomies of state vs. society, control vs. resistance (Yang, 2015; Yang, 2016; Guan, 2019). These dichotomies not only contradict the delegated, fragmented, contentious nature of Chinese censorship, but also gloss over pluralised, ambiguous, heterogenous response from the online public, and therefore, multiple possibilities of power relations at stake (Han, 2018; Chen, 2015). Censorship-evading practices often involve adaptive strategies of cultural remixing and polyphonic reframing for disguise and distraction (Gleiss, 2015; Mina, 2014; Thornton, 2002), and are therefore notably fluid and ambiguous. Many studies have stressed the complexity and ambiguity of creative practices under censorship on the Chinese internet. For example, Nordin and Richaud (2014) find that while ‘river crab’ was initially created to ridicule censorship and satirically criticise the official discourse, the use of this mocking wordplay among Chinese netizens is mostly apolitical. Yang and Jiang (2015) also notice that political critiques in disguise to stay below the radar are often shared among netizens as a form of socialisation instead of political resistance. Han (2015) furthers the diversity of online expression by looking into how these censorship-evading strategies are also used by voluntary patriots on the internet to support rather than resist the state. These studies reveal a contested cyberspace in China constituted by divergent forces competing for their own interests (Han, 2018). This is also part of the global landscape of cyber contestation where internet governance coincides with popular participation (Deibert and Rohozinski, 2011). In this contested cyberspace, existing norms and principles are open to intense debates and struggles from not only the states but also pluralised constituencies of netizens worldwide. In the Chinese context, contestation is manifest in the fluidity and fuzziness of cyberpolitics with rich dimensions of struggle and negotiation (Han, 2018). The undecidability of meanings and motivations behind these cultural practices indicates a complex dynamic that requires more nuanced examination.

Scholars have made important attempts to account for the contested and fragmented internet in China from different perspectives. Yang (2016) suggests a prism of ‘visibility’ that views censorship-evading practices as cultural recodings of meaning making in complex relations of power negotiations. Chen (2015) terms ‘alter-production’ to capture the heterogeneity of responses to censorship including but not limited to opposition and resistance. His conceptualisation shifts from the power to delete and deny to the power to produce and create, pointing out a mode of state-society coproduction in a public-making process. Further beyond censorship-centred discussion, Han (2018) uses ‘pop activism’ to encapsulate online expression in China, highlighting its playfulness and artfulness in deploying diverse linguistic and media tools to consume politics, its creativity and spontaneity in a changing dynamic of popular participation, as well as its pluralisation in content and fluidity in format. He particularly points out that entertainment can be both a means of political expression and an end in itself, calling attention to the fusion of popular culture and politics and their co-construction.

These studies have been helpful in conceptualising the contestation and struggle in China’s cyberspace and advancing the understanding of Chinese internet politics as a discourse matrix where multiple actors articulate, interpret, and negotiate socio-political experiences. However, these studies of contested cyberpolitics lack two important dimensions that need further specification. First, online expression is nuanced—what nuances exactly? It is fluid—how, and in what directions exactly? Previous studies mostly present nuances through individual cases in a manner of itemisation, but they hardly put them together in a coherent framework for more systematic analysis of these nuances in terms of how they differ from each other while also relating to each other in a cultural process. Consider censorship-evading contestation for example, what are the possible shades of power relations? How can we make sense of these diverse possibilities in a coherent logic in the digital age? Second, to step beyond the level of these possibilities, is there any potentiality lying in the fuzziness of nuances as a whole? One major theme in China-focused internet research is the political impact of China’s digital activism, particularly its potential in

consolidating the authoritarian system or promoting any liberal and democratic transition (Han, 2018; Lagerkvist, 2010; Yang, 2009). If we shift away from the political logic to focus on the cultural workings in cyberspace, what can be learnt from these meaning-(re)making practices in terms of negotiating internet governance and mediating power relations? To bridge this gap, this study draws on three cases of censorship-evading practices on the Chinese internet, each representing a different type of power relations, and seeks a systematic analysis of these nuances in terms of their recoding feature, discourse strategy, focus of contestation. This chapter investigates the comprehensive co-composition of culture and politics in Chinese fluid cyberpolitics, and further reflects on the potentialities of its fluidity in forging new forms of power relations in contested cyberspace.

My discourse analysis adopts the cultural logic that focuses on processes of meaning making as power contestation (Yang, 2016). The social reality of power and interest is written into cultural codes of texts and these texts as representations of culture are ideological constructs through which social positions in a power structure are negotiated (Fiske, 1987). These negotiations take place through meaning struggle in forms of resignification and reinterpretation in different positions of decoding (Hall, 1997c, 2013; Clarke et al., 1990; Hebdige, 1979). In addition to the ‘dominant-hegemonic’ way of conformity and the ‘oppositional’ way of resistance, there is also the negotiated decoding that acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic encodings while setting specific rules that deviate from the dominant ones (Hall, 1980b). More importantly, Hall points out that these positions are not static. Decoding practices move among different positions with frequent conflicts, opening the hegemonic code to uncertainties and changes. In this sense, the practice of cultural decoding and recoding is fundamentally a politics of signification (Hall, 1980b). As audiences ascribe a variety of interpretations to particular media content, they are mobilising its polyvocality in favour of their own interests in varying relationships with the dominant discourse. For example, Dahlgren (2009) argues that humour of inconsistencies challenges official discourse by inserting multiple entries to political topics. In a digital context where memetic communication affords variations in meanings,

polyvocal public discourse can facilitate conversation between diverse positions, constituting an online space where multiple voices and identities can be negotiated (Milner, 2016). Therefore, the lens of cultural recoding not only provides a useful tool to delve into the ambiguities of censorship-evading practices as meaning negotiation but more importantly relates the cultural workings back to the political dynamic to discern the nuances and examine their potentialities in Chinese cyberpolitics. The following section takes a closer look at the specific case of ‘socialist recoding’ in this chapter.

4.2 Case study: ‘socialist recoding’

Previous studies of censorship-evading practices in China mostly focus on internet governance in the narrowly-defined realm of politics, i.e. related to formal governance by nation-states (Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008). The censored topics are either related to the government, political system and leaders (Luqiu, 2017), or about significant public crises, e.g. the Tianjin explosion, the Wenzhou train accident (Wu & Fitzgerald, 2021; Xu, 2015). This narrow approach of politics prioritising the ‘major’ and often intense discussion targeted at the state and downplaying the ‘minor’ and informal activities is likely to produce biased understandings towards conflicts and tensions (Guan, 2019). With the rise of everyday politics blending in popular culture in the digital age, censorship-evading practices span a broad range to include government-centred politics and more general topics like pornography and violence that do not target the state. These practices are also essentially political as they challenge the authority—however fragmented and contested—in internet governance and showcase workings of power on the level of meaning making (Armstrong and Bernstein, 2008). Yet inadequate attention has been paid to these practices and their political significance.

To bridge this gap, this study turns to recodings of sensitive but ‘non-political’ i.e. less government-centred topics to avoid censors (e.g. obscenity and violence). One major recoding strategy is intertextuality, i.e. replacing sensitive/controversial keywords and sentences with textual or visual alternatives of similar meanings, e.g. homonyms, geometric

graphs, Chinese poems, and in many cases, official discourse (Wang, 2020). Different from government-centred discussion that needs to be depoliticised under censorship, recordings of these topics sometimes use official slogans and narratives to politicise the content for legitimisation. Growing up and living with this discourse, Chinese people are more familiar with these replacements than other alternatives that may require knowledge in areas like mathematics and poetry. Official discourse therefore is among the most-used strategy for recoding. I call these censorship-evading practices deploying official slogans and terminology ‘socialist recoding.’

This strategy is nothing new in Chinese politics. The grassroots have long been using official discourse to legitimate their claims of petitioning (Scott, 1990). Innovative use of the officially promoted laws, policies, narratives, etc. has been a significant strategy of popular contention in China and elsewhere (O’Brien, 1996). With the increasingly blurring boundaries between the cultural, the political, and the popular in the digital age (Hamilton, 2016), this strategy has extended from ‘rightful resistance’ in the political realm to cultural entertainment in a broader sense of ‘pop activism’ (Han, 2018). ‘Socialist recoding’ emerged in this context as part of the cyberculture in China that repackages propaganda discourse in jokes and memes for everyday expression. It features sharp contrasts between the formulaic official language and other public (mostly non-political) discourses to create incongruity humour. The motivations and messages behind ‘socialist recoding’ vary widely, as its playfulness can be used to deliver political messages and/or for pursuit of fun (Han, 2018). This chapter dives into the variation and fluidity for a systematic examination of different possibilities therein. The following sections in this chapter look into three examples of ‘socialist recoding’ practices on the Chinese internet, analysing how they respond to censorship through meaning making in different ways and how ‘socialist recoding’ as a whole negotiates, adjusts, and redirects censorship rules.

4.3 ‘Socialist pornography’

Pornography is one of the few topics that get a continuously high level of censorship on

the Chinese internet because of its negative impact on public morality in general (King et al., 2013). With the rise of internet literature in China, the relatively less monitored online space (compared with the print-based publishing system) has created considerable room for a variety of transgressive writing including erotic fiction (Feng, 2013; Hockx, 2015). Despite strict regulation or even legal elimination of online pornographic material, the limits of legality are constantly shifting as online fiction sites increasingly challenge the ‘red line’ in different ways (Hockx, 2015). At the current stage of self-castration of not writing ‘anything below the neck’ in waves of anti-pornography campaigns (Bai, 2021; Zheng, 2019), authors have also developed numerous creative ways including reworking political slogans like ‘core socialist values’ and ‘harmony’ to mask their erotic writing (Wang, 2020).

For visual pornography like drawings and videos of fan art faced with no fewer censorship risks, creators often use ‘core socialist values’ to justify their artwork in conformity to the mainstream values. A simple strategy for both erotic writings and drawings is to put the official political slogans at the very beginning of their fiction or artwork as a disclaimer. For example, on a Chinese social media platform called ‘Lofter,’ one of the most popular microblogging websites in China for interest-based communities and fandom, many erotic writings and drawings of fan art are tagged with the twelve words of ‘core socialist values’ proposed by the Chinese Communist Party in 2012 as the official interpretations of Chinese socialism. If we search ‘prosperity, democracy, civilisation, harmony’—the top four core socialist values—on Lofter, it is easy to find numerous posts of erotic fan art across different communities like Harry Potter, Japanese manga, and Chinese BL fictions. Creators share their drawings of sex scenes with their fan art hashtags and say nothing in the caption but a string of these socialist values. Very often the caption looks like this: ‘Prosperity, democracy, civilisation, harmony, please Lofter don’t filter my post.’ In many cases, to hide the erotic visual content, creators would put a propaganda poster on the top of the image so that the preview only shows the poster; readers need to open the image and scroll it down to see the drawing. These are only a few simple strategies of using political slogans to protect pornographic materials from being censored. As we shall see

below, there are also more complicated reworkings of erotic content that interweave the ideological language into the representations of sex scenes. The political reframing of pornographic materials for conformity to the official rhetoric on socialist values is what I call ‘socialist pornography’ as a unique cultural recoding on the Chinese internet.

A most prominent example is the sex scene in a heterosexual fiction called *Reinvigorating Male Ethics in a World of Masculinity* (‘在男权世界复兴男德’), which is written entirely based on the official terminology and slogans:

The erotic atmosphere in the bedroom immediately became high school politics. Li Ruochuan picked her up by the waist, walked a few steps in the socialist road, and fell onto the bed, fully devoted to the development of productive forces...In the lights of the city twinkling outside the window, he explored her body to find the right way to economic boost... “Can’t you be more tender with me? Don’t make mistakes of left opportunism.” Warm and advanced values slowly gushed out of Tang Hu’s soul...His heart beat faster. Something he couldn’t see disrupted his market economy. He put all of his focus on Tang Hu’s one centre and two basic points...Li Ruochuan rested his chin on her shoulder, deepening his revolution...On this silent night, she finally reached that moderately prosperous society (xiaokang).

The political terminology in official discourse is used here in a metaphorical way to describe the sex scene: ‘the development of productive forces’ originating from Marxism and frequently used in Chinese government documents implies the act of sexual reproduction; ‘left opportunism’ as a term of political tendency or position here is used literally to indicate the physical position; ‘one centre and two basic points’ which refers to the erogenous zones of the body comes from the socialism theory officially put forward by the Chinese Communist Party in 1978 as the basic guideline for the party in the primary stage of socialism; and ‘moderately prosperous society’ (xiaokang), the goal of social and political development for the Chinese Communist Party in the first centenary, is used here to hint on the state of contentment after sex. In addition to the creative wordplay of pun

connecting sex and politics, political terminology is also used to mitigate the erotic mood, navigating the atmosphere towards the Chinese-style political correctness which sounds formal and 'healthy.' For example, by describing 'the erotic atmosphere' as 'high school politics' right at the beginning, it covertly implies that what follows (the sex scene) is transgressive and therefore 'indescribable' (an internet buzzword frequently used to describe obscene content) by using the words and expressions that are the exact opposite, i.e. legally approved and documented in Chinese high school politics textbooks.

This unconventional remixing of sex and politics features a strong sense of ridicule and absurdity as a form of incongruity humour. Compared with the web fiction itself, this unexpected contrast of 'socialist' recoding is more widely consumed and welcomed among the online public as a joke. On 23 November 2020, a Weibo influencer shared this excerpt of erotic content expressing astonishment at the way it rephrased pornography. It immediately received nearly 1,000 comments, 4,000 likes, and more than 1,300 reposts within a few minutes. Although this post unfortunately was later changed from public to protected (based on the snapshots of this Weibo thread I saved), netizens who saw this post primarily understood this socialist recoding as playful laughter that ridiculed censorship on obscenity. The vast majority of comments and reposts were 'hahahahaha' and '???' or similar memes, as this socialist recoding was immediately found to be ridiculous and laughable. The remaining comments are more specific about incongruity, for example, 'That is a red and expert car' ('red and expert' comes from Mao Zedong's quote to describe the combination of communist values and expertise), 'Wow socialist car literature,' 'Awesome,' 'Marx says well done.' Some commented on the recoded porn, 'Good, my erotic thoughts are gone,' 'OK that's positive energy pumping up my body,' 'I'm turned off,' 'I can't look at one centre two basic points in a normal way anymore.' Only one comment specifically mentioned censorship: 'Guess it would make those anti-porn censors blood boil.'

From what netizens reacted to this excerpt, meaning struggles in this recoding practice

were primarily felt among netizens as incongruity humour that caused intuitive amusement of spoof and ridicule. This was likely one of the main reasons that this post gained attention and popularity in a very short time on social media. Further to this on a connotative level, political concepts successfully take over the dominant place, with the original meaning of pornography to a large extent removed despite the erotic setting. From netizens' reactions, this sex scene was perceived to be highly political, positive, and healthy. It was no longer sexually exciting, but ridiculously exciting in terms of ruining the sexual excitement by creatively spoofing the official political discourse.

Although it was not directly reflected in netizens' reactions, this socialist recoding of erotic writing is essentially a satirical ridicule of censorship. In 2007, an official statement titled 'An Urgent Announcement about Strict Action against Online Obscene and Pornographic Fiction' was issued by the National Office for 'Eliminating Pornography and Suppressing Illegality.' The first sentence reads:

Taking strict action against online obscene, pornographic, and other harmful material is a necessary requirement for the construction of a socialist harmonious society and for the purification of a healthy environment for youngsters and teenagers to grow up in. (Hockx, 2015: 116)

The aim of anti-pornography campaigns to construct 'a socialist harmonious society' is deployed as a clever strategy to circumvent censorship. In fact, this goal is to a large extent reversed in the practice of 'socialist pornography.' It puts together pornography—considered to be unhealthy and damaging from the official standpoint—and the rigidly defined political concepts—deliberately constructed by the party-state to be markedly healthy and positive, thus creating an ironic contrast between the fading sexual excitement and the rising political values and 'positive energy.' This is exactly what anti-pornography campaigns aim to achieve. Masking obscene content with political concepts changes the transgressive writing into something with absolute legitimacy, something that ought not to be censored on the internet because it signifies 'a socialist harmonious society' in itself.

While demonstrating conformity to the dominant political discourse and socialist values, it also reduces these values into the 'low culture' of obscenity. For example, as mentioned above, 'core socialist values' of 'prosperity, democracy, civilisation, harmony' are frequently used to mask erotic writings and drawings on Lofter. Keyword research of these so-called 'healthy' and 'positive' political terms can only find 'problematic' content of pornography, which is the very target for elimination in the anti-pornography campaigns for a society of 'prosperity, democracy, civilisation, harmony.' This ironic reversal poses an interesting challenge to anti-pornography campaigns. While attempting to bypass censors by conforming to the values stated in these campaigns, practices of 'socialist pornography' are essentially destabilising and even subverting the rationale behind these campaigns that label pornography as harmful to socialist harmony.

However, it is important to note that this socialist recoding as parodic ridicule differs from other overt political satire with explicit motivations of subversion as it foregrounds intuitive laughter instead of radical critique. As the Weibo thread illustrates, the atmosphere of online discussion was predominantly playful, amusing, interesting, rather than critical, sarcastic, rebellious. Netizens' comments and reposts hardly mention any political views about these ideological concepts. Likewise, for the erotic posts on Lofter, it can be seen from the comments that both authors and readers are much more concerned with the visibility of these posts than the ridicule of 'core socialist values.' For example, some images were unfortunately censored by Lofter despite all these efforts. From the discussions below these posts, both authors and readers were trying to solve the problem by suggesting other means of sharing such as sending direct messages and using websites with less complicated censorship rules. They were, in some cases, expressing their dissatisfaction about the platform's overly strict censorship of pornographic materials, but these comments were nothing radical or rebellious in terms of critiquing the suppression of speech in China on a whole or subverting the ideological language of socialism.

Of course, this could also be a result of censorship—perhaps the other transgressive

comments had already been filtered, or a result of self-censorship—maybe netizens wanted to avoid talking about this despite their tacit understanding of this ridiculous recoding as circumvention. Regardless, what we see from the discussions around these posts of ‘socialist pornography’ is far from contentious or subversive. This friendly and amusing ambience, especially the overwhelming repetition of laughter, would also navigate subsequent comments and reposts towards a light-hearted laugh instead of critical resistance. And this is of great significance in the digital context of spreadable media where emotions, attitudes, and opinions are constructed in a networked public of affect (Papacharissi, 2015). As a cultural practice that welcomes public participation, ‘socialist pornography’ is more than just a circumvention strategy adopted by fiction writers or fan art creators, but more importantly a cultural response to censorship from the online public. This ‘socialist’ recoding was initiated in the act of producing transgressive content and further constructed in the process of online circulation where netizens’ feelings and interpretations joined in and shaped its form towards friendliness. Indeed, as analysed above, practices of ‘socialist pornography’ are covertly challenging the anti-pornography campaigns by associating pornography with socialist values. However, it would be misleading to further interpret the resistance to these campaigns at a higher level as resistance to the whole system of censorship beyond the scope of anti-pornography or disapproval of official discourse in China.

This brief analysis of how ‘socialist pornography’ is received among its audience on the internet reveals an important aspect of cultural recoding: the signification of politics is more than just semiotic recoding; it is essentially an ongoing process of cultural participation and public discussion instead of one-sided production of ‘socialist pornography.’ The cultural recoding itself is constantly decoded and recoded in various ways as it circulates among the online public. These decodings are recodings are to a great extent unpredictable and undecidable but subject to nudges like the strings of ‘hahaha’ in the Weibo thread. Imagine a scenario when comments on this Weibo post, for example, are predominantly criticising the censorship system that forces this ‘ridiculous’ style of

pornography instead of having a light-hearted laugh over the creativity. The atmosphere of discussion about this creative erotic writing would have ended in a different direction, and then, of course, perhaps more likely to get censored. What is tricky here is that this ‘atmosphere’ is formed this way as a result of enduring interactivity between the political authority and the public. On the one hand, the production and reception of socialist recoding is institutionalised within an established social structure of long-term censorship. Chinese netizens have already accommodated to this environment and have learned to respond in a covert and friendly way without causing unnecessary contention that could hinder their cultural consumption of fictional writing and fan art. On the other hand, socialist recoding is also in flux that can be steered towards different ends as netizens continue to explore their way of reframing cultural contents to bypass censorship and interpret these different practices of reframing through spreadable media. This enduring dynamic is more explicitly reflected in the cultural recoding of ‘socialist brotherhood.’

4.4 ‘Socialist brotherhood’

Queerbaiting has been a major and popular marketing strategy in the entertainment industry in China, especially since the success of *Guardian* in 2018 followed by a number of other equally well-received BL-adapted drama and a foreseeable BL drama boom in the next few years (Baecker and Hao, 2021; Zhao, 2020). The cultural production of BL dramas itself is a process of negotiation, navigating commercial interests based on the rising subculture of romanticising male-male relationships in China and the regulations of the NRTA (Baecker and Hao, 2021). Although media representations of homosexuality were officially classified as ‘unhealthy’ sexual content in 2007, the regulations remain unclear and fluid in how they are applied (Zhou, 2017). In this context, commercialisation of the BL genre and practices of the BL culture have to carefully cope with the mainstream norms and values to survive. While trying to visualise the male same-sex fantasies in the literary genre to appeal to the Chinese BL market, the production side needs to modify explicit sexual or romantic elements to comply with the political demands of the National

Radio and Television Administration (NRTA), transforming homosexuality into homosociality (Baecker and Hao, 2021; Hu and Wang, 2020). Aside from the production of these queerbaiting dramas, BL fans have also learnt to poach from the mainstream cultures and negotiate with the government rhetoric and moral policing. In this process, this problematic culture of gay romance has developed to be a porous and inclusive pop culture instead of a counter-culture of public demonstration and subversion (Tian, 2020a). This cultural negotiation with the official rhetoric and the dominant cultures takes various forms, one of which is the cultural recoding of ‘socialist brotherhood’ among BL fans.

In its entry on Baidu Baike, the Chinese equivalent to Wikipedia, ‘socialist brotherhood’ is defined as ‘a moniker developed by fans for male-male romance in dramas under the pressure of censorship’ (Ng and Li, 2020). This entry also mentions another similar internet neologism ‘feared love’ (碍情, homonym of 爱情 love) meaning a type of love relationship that cannot go public for the fear of NRTA. The cultural recoding of ‘socialist brotherhood’ started with the web series of *Guardian* as fans attempted to mask gay romance in a politically correct discourse frame. Following the phenomenal popularity of this web series on the Chinese internet, the term ‘socialist brotherhood’ has also gone viral and is now frequently used across different online communities to describe gay romance in general. For example, keyword research of ‘socialist brotherhood’ on Lofter can find numerous posts fantasising about bromance in Japanese manga, Chinese TV dramas, reality shows, mobile games, American movies, etc. This fan-made genre of ‘socialist brotherhood’ emerged on the Chinese internet as a strategy of negotiating homosexuality with official regulations. In the following, I will reconstruct the process of this cultural recoding of gay romance starting from the *Guardian*, unveiling how BL fans in China tactfully interacted with official authority to protect their culture of BL fandom from censorship.

In tacit interaction with the producers of *Guardian*, fans were also deeply aware that they had to constrain their enthusiasm for what they saw as genuine homoeroticism to avoid

the consequence of this show being removed for censorship reasons. Following a surprisingly wide use of *Guardian* memes by official accounts like People's Daily Online and the National Meteorological Centre on Weibo and continuous heated online discussion of homoerotic romance (Tian, 2020b), fans quickly realised the rising risk and strategically reframed the homosexual relationship as 'socialist brotherhood.' They tried to foreground the mainstream cultural and political values manifested in this story while engaging in online discussions. For example, in a Weibo post by the official account of *Guardian* on 4 July 2018, the vast majority of comments were deliberately describing this relationship in line with the official discourse in a half-joking way:

Guardian taught me to 'memorise the misery and glory from the past, fulfil our responsibility and duty in the present, live up to the dreams and pursuits in the future,' isn't that the Chinese dream that we should all pursue! (8842 likes)

We Guardian fans are all socialist successors. We dedicate ourselves to serving our country. The two actors with their great performance taught us the real meaning of friendship and brotherly love. We promise to fight for the core values manifest in this drama. We believe China will be much stronger! (4503 likes)

The drama *Guardian* adheres to Chinese traditional values centred upon patriotism, promoting positive energy from contemporary youth and their willingness to take on the responsibility of safeguarding our country with its comprehensive scripts and vivid stories. Bravo! (3001 likes)

Like 'socialist pornography,' socialist recoding of the BL drama also deliberately deploys the most politically correct narrative to cover up for homosexuality. In accordance with the queerbaiting strategy of drama production, this socialist recoding also cleverly navigates through this grey area of homoerotic representations towards explicit conformity to the official values in an attempt to stay within the safety zone from being censored. However, while creating laughter of incongruity humour (many of the reposts

in this thread for example also mentioned how amusing these socialist comments were), this recoding of ‘socialist brotherhood’ apparently exaggerates the extent to which *Guardian* is reminiscent of the grand political values of ‘the Chinese dream’ or ‘safeguarding our country,’ resulting in a somewhat parodic effect about official discourse. These comments of socialist rephrasing of the gay story, while eagerly demonstrating political conformity, also implied implicit irony of the need for such rephrasing, hinting at the rigid intolerance and suppression of gay romance in China. Other scholars have also noticed how BL fandom in China—in its adaptation of homosexuality or queer-related content to fit in the mainstream media—embodies soft and passive subcultural resistance to heterosexist norms and the conservative political ideology (Hu and Wang, 2020; Wang, 2019). In this regard, the socialist reframing of homosexuality showcases ambiguous attitudes of conformity and resistance towards censorship, the mainstream values, and the official rhetoric of socialist ideology in China.

However, this ambiguity was later to a large extent specified in a subsequent move by the *Guardian* fans. For a short period, the hashtag ‘socialist brotherhood’ was trending on Weibo for the *Guardian* fans to mask their explicit enthusiasm in shipping this ‘brotherly’ couple. This phrase itself had also been widely circulated on the Chinese internet as one of the most heated buzzwords in that year. With the unexpected phenomenal popularity of ‘socialist brotherhood,’ fans soon realised that this too would seem inappropriate and risky, so they voluntarily abandoned this increasingly trending hashtag to avoid any real political implications or accusations and stopped making fun of anything ‘socialist’ (Tian, 2020b). This change is crucial in two ways. First, although this socialist recoding of homosexuality implies an ironic spoof of the mainstream values, it is clear that netizens would not want to challenge censorship or get into conflicts with the state in any way. Their primary goal was to protect this drama from being censored and create an online space where they could enjoy homosexual fantasies among themselves without being disturbed. This is a very common mentality among Chinese BL communities to voluntarily keep a low profile and use various tactics to sweep away from government policy (Yang

and Xu, 2016). This cautious nature of BL practice in China is most notably reflected in a self-protective strategy called ‘quandi zimeng’ (圈地自萌) among BL participants, which literally means ‘claim your own land and enjoy yourself on your own territory’ (Tian, 2020b). This term of ‘quandi zimeng’ has already become a general principle of self-regulation in all Chinese BL communities. Just like authors and readers of ‘socialist pornography’ whose primary concern is the visibility of erotic content, BL fans care much more about practising their own culture without being disturbed than openly confronting either the state regulation on BL productions or political authority in general. Therefore, it would be misleading to understand the ambiguity of socialist recoding as resistance or subversion because it fails to capture the core interests of BL participants.

Second and more importantly, netizens’ cultural response to anti-homosexuality censorship is tactful and fluid, revealing a changing dynamic of negotiation and manoeuvre instead of any determinate moment of resistance, contention, or conformity. In the process of recoding and further (re)constructing this recoding, netizens were carefully adjusting their strategy at a proper distance with the political authority for their relationship of interactivity to remain friendly rather than contentious. Both their socialist reframing and later proactive moves to ‘cool down the heat’ were attempts to balance between their enthusiasm in homoeroticism and the political standards of not only the NRTA but also more generally the dominant social norms in China. Therefore, it is not accurate to understand ‘socialist brotherhood’ either on its surface as conformity to the mainstream sexual and political values in China or its implications as resistance to either censorship or the official political ideology; it is essentially an ongoing process of negotiating the transgressive values and desires from these BL fans and the requirements from the party-state. The interactivity between BL participants and the ‘official lines’ are not one-sided passivity under authoritarian suppression. BL fans are actively ‘poaching’ official values and the mainstream cultures in a friendly manner for this transgressive culture to be extended beyond ‘its own territory’ and integrated into the dominant culture (see for example Tian, 2020a, 2020b). This is not contradictory with their ‘quandi zimeng’ principle.

BL fans are trying to keep a low profile because they do not want to be seen as in any way rebellious or threatening to the political authorities. It does not mean that they want to completely cut themselves from the mainstream for self-protection. In reframing homosexuality in a socialist framework—whether it is for political conformity, political irony, or simply for pursuit of fun—they are making moderate efforts to reconcile between their values and the mainstream cultures.

As a result of this tactful and flexible practice of cultural recoding, the discourse of ‘socialist brotherhood’ has later become normalised as a politically neutral term to describe homosexual relationships and values in general. With a large number of BL dramas acquiring unprecedented visibility and even attracting mainstream audiences (Baecker and Hao, 2021) and even more to come, this narrative reframing homosexuality as homosociality has been widely applied as one of the cultural representations of BL fandom in China. It is still popular but no longer trending in a phenomenal way that may draw unwanted attention from censors. In a way, this socialist recoding through its continuous circulation on Chinese social media has developed from resistance to negotiation, reworking the likely ‘transgressive’ values (in the Chinese context) from slash fandom into the mainstream culture and reconciling the conflicts of visibility regarding homosexual fantasies in close cooperation with the entertainment industry of BL drama productions.

4.5 ‘Socialist Venom’

Different from ‘socialist pornography’ and ‘socialist brotherhood’ as circumvention strategies that deal with actual risks of censorship, the socialist recoding of the Marvel film *Venom* looks more like an attempt to play and mess with ‘imaginative’ censorship—unlike pornography or homosexuality, this American superhero film was hardly at any risk of being censored in China. In this case, as we shall see below, socialist recoding was in fact unnecessary, which provides an interesting angle for us to further probe into this practice of cultural recoding in relation to the interactivity about censorship.

On 26 October 2018, the official account of Sina Film posted a fan-made video depicting *Venom* as a socialist hero, which immediately went viral on Chinese social media. To date it has been reposted more than 22,000 times and has received more than 4,700 comments. As a fan-made trailer, this video gained phenomenal popularity that even critics had attributed *Venom*'s success in China's box office partly to this video (Cousins, 2018; Shen, 2018). The video chose three clips from the film and turned them into short public service announcements (PSAs) from local residential committees with a slogan and a credit at the end. The first clip of the protagonist Eddie's motorbike crashing into a car is followed by a slogan 'You live one life only, let safety be with you throughout the journey,' changing the poster 'Venom: Lethal Protector' into 'Venom: Safety Protector'; the second clip of *Venom* giving the noisy neighbour a lesson followed by 'Less noise, more peace,' with 'Venom: Manner Protector'; and the third clip of *Venom* delivering justice to a burglar is followed by 'Bear laws in mind, live a life of the happiest kind,' and the slogan 'Venom: Public Safety Protector.' All above were credited to a made-up 'Venom Community Residential Committee,' one of the elementary administrative units in urban China.

As a successful pastiche of the Chinese-style propaganda slogans and PSA videos prevalent in local communities, on billboards, TVs, and the internet, like 'socialist pornography' and 'socialist brotherhood,' this video created great amusement of ridicule among Chinese netizens for the unexpected remixing of an American superhero and the mainstream social values in China. Its humour not only comes from the clear-cut opposition in the twisting style of narration progressing along adrenaline pumping scenes in a US blockbuster film, and, rather anti-climatically, concluding with a tedious yet familiar 'preaching' tone. It also reflects the cultural clash between American individualist heroism and Chinese heroism valuing contributions to social order and harmony. Naturally, this Weibo thread was again filled with expressions of laughter. For example, many of the most-liked comments praised the clever marketing strategy of 'localising' *Venom* in the Chinese context ('The marketing team's gonna rock, this is totally Made in China!', 'Amazing idea, well suited to harmonious society') and joked about the official political

discourse ('Did our *Venom* just join the Party?', 'Well in accordance with harmonious social values').

Although this socialist recoding of *Venom* apparently was not aimed at detouring around censorship but rather for pure playfulness of cultural remixing because by that time *Venom* had already got the release license from the China Film Administration (CFA), netizens took this fan-made video as the official trailer (with good reason as this 68-second video was posted by a credible Weibo account specialising in movies using hashtags of the name and the release date) and mocked film censorship in China. Given the general impression among the public about the strict film censorship, netizens joked that a foreign film needed adaptation like this to land in China. For example, some of the comments said:

- (i) Wait, is it official? I think I know how it got passed...
- (ii) The marketing team really know how to play the game
- (iii) What an endeavour to enter the Chinese market!
- (iv) Is that what they sent to the CFA for approval? Bravo!
- (v) The film quickly got approved with its release date for good reason

This logic of socialist recoding was understood among netizens as conformity to the socialist ideology to please the CFA, which implied a negative attitude towards film censorship. Instead of passively avoiding censorship on problematic contents when pressured, the recoding of an already approved film actively engages with the censors by 'problematizing' normal materials, creating an imaginary scenario of censorship where circumvention is necessary. Compared with 'socialist pornography' and 'socialist brotherhood' that struggle with the existing boundary of censorship, this recoding practice is 'redefining' the censorship rules that media and cultural contents need to be reworked into an ideological frame of socialism to get approved. This 'redefinition' of censorship

more explicitly moves beyond a dynamic of control/resistance towards an interactivity in which netizens not only ridicule but also dissolve censorship regulations by playing and messing with them, essentially throwing them into question in a light-heartedly playful way.

It was unclear whether this video was fan-made or guerrilla marketing. Regardless, it typically represents the trending cyberculture of remixing official discourse and entertainment for cultural consumption. As Chapter Five will explain, repurposing propaganda slogans and posters in jokes and memes for everyday expression has been a popular trend on the Chinese internet. The success of this video powerfully evidenced the popularity of cultural working. It transcends censorship-centred debate into the broader cultural realm of meaning making and popular participation. This is manifest not only in how this recoding was created, but also in how it was received among netizens. Apart from sarcastic ridicule of film censorship and the official political discourse, in this Weibo thread netizens also expressed their appreciation of this marketing strategy, excitement about the new movie adapted to the Chinese context, amusement at Venom's 'socialist identity,' etc. Moving beyond resilience to censorship, this recoding signifies comprehensive boundary-spanning cultural practice on spreadable media that expands and mutates in multiple directions, which creates fluid space to accommodate individual netizens' pluralised attitudes and feelings. In other words, the recoding practice moves beyond the single dimension of interactivity regarding censorship towards a more complicated and multifarious dynamic of cultural participation in the digital context of social media.

Venom is not the only fictional character that has been made 'socialist.' For example, we also have a socialist version of the phenomenal TV drama *Game of Thrones*. When its final season was released in 2019, Chinese fans tried using the state media narrative to tell the main story of every episode in their online discussions. Episode 1 in Season 8, for example, was reframed in this way:

President Cersei met cordially with General Euron Greyjoy at the State Guesthouse in Kingslanding. The talk proceeded in a friendly atmosphere. President Cersei

offered high praise to General Euron Greyjoy and thanked him for firmly adhering to the One-Queen Policy.

This style of narration typically imitates the style of reporting presidential visits in the Chinese state media. Even the ‘One-Queen Policy’ was inspired by the ‘One-China Policy,’ one of the high-frequency words in diplomatic news reporting in China. This reframed story constructs a ‘socialist Cersei’ with her ‘One-Queen Policy.’ However, from how this *Game of Thrones* joke was received among the fans in their discussion of this series, netizens did not relate it to censorship of foreign films and TV dramas, making fun of how these episodes needed to be reframed this way to be accessible on Chinese video platforms. The reason was simple: before this joke of ‘socialist Cersei’ was posted online, *Game of Thrones* had already been released on Tencent Video who owns the streaming rights to this series in China. The Chinese audience had already watched the episode. They of course would not take this ‘socialist Cersei’ joke as ridicule of censorship. Most comments on this post were just expressions of laughter. This joke, then, was primarily understood as incongruity humour of remixing foreign fictions with the Chinese authoritative language. This also exemplifies how socialist recoding has expanded from resilience to censorship to general cultural practice that can be interpreted in different ways depending on specific contexts.

Like ‘socialist Venom’ and ‘socialist Cersei,’ a specific genre of jokes on Chinese social media is to reframe stories in popular movies or TV dramas in a socialist style of narration. This narration is part of the Chinese authoritative language of ideology with fixed and formulaic structures usually seen in official documents, mainstream media reporting, local public service announcements, etc. As mentioned in Chapter One, the construction and regulation of this state-sponsored authoritative language is a major way of practising the hegemonic ideology in late-socialist societies. By putting stories that have nothing to do with politics or ideology into the socialist style of narration, these socialist recodings can easily create laughter of incongruity humour. These recodings do not necessarily have to be related to the ironic ridicule of any specific government policy or political institution.

In many cases, they are simply received by the online public as light-hearted amusement for their unexpected ‘wrong’ use of the authoritative language. Nevertheless, these practices of socialist recoding are still highly relevant in terms of the reconstruction of the ideological language. Their political relevance in authoritarian societies will be closely examined in the following chapter.

Conclusion

Politicised recoding reframing transgressive content in socialist narratives for legitimation has been a popular censorship-evading strategy on the Chinese internet. However, compared with depoliticised recoding to avoid political censorship, this equally important issue and its relevance in Chinese cyberpolitics are largely understudied. Following a cultural logic of discourse analysis based on ethnographic observations, this chapter reviews how ‘socialist recodings’ of pornography, gay romance, and foreign shows emerged and circulated on the internet, and investigates how meaning negotiation relates to workings of power. While repackaging official discourse for legitimation and using meaning ambiguity for recoding, these cases vary in their recoding tone, level of meaning ambiguity, focus of struggle, and showcase different power relations.

‘Socialist pornography’ masking erotic content with ideological terminology under the pressure of anti-porn campaigns in China features parodic recoding of official discourse and reversal of porn-free ‘socialist harmonious’ values. Intertextuality between erotic descriptions and official discourse takes place via ambiguity of vocabulary. Considering how it was received among netizens, this type of recoding primarily struggles for the visibility of pornography, implying a critical attitude towards overly rigid anti-porn campaigns and censorship system in general. ‘Socialist brotherhood’ transforming homosexuality into homosociality to comply with Chinese mainstream values more explicitly illustrates political prudence as BL fans tried to tone down the parodic effect of ‘socialist recoding’ Ambiguity used for meaning remaking expands from socialist terminology to socialist narrative, situating gay stories in political mainstream storytelling.

While carefully interacting with political authority to protect BL drama and the BL culture of homosexual fantasies from being censored, this recoding struggles not only for visibility of this drama alone but more importantly queer cultural values and practices. Fans’ attempt to neutralise and incorporate their culture into the mainstream demonstrates not opposition but negotiation between slash fandom and political standards of censorship. Rather differently, ‘socialist Venom’ reframed stories of an American superhero in a socialist narrative when circumvention was unnecessary. Subsequent participation in interpreting and circulating socialist recoding of fictional characters opens it to various possibilities towards more prominently playfulness than parody, which goes beyond censorship-evading into a wider realm of popular culture of pluralised expression on an everyday basis. Here ambiguity used for intertextuality points at the censorship system, problematising its rules by ‘redefining’ them in a playful way and thereby struggling for discursive power in cultural governance. This recoding practice represents a more complicated dynamic where authority is destabilised in a fluid matrix of discourse remaking.

Table 1. Variation in censorship-evading recoding

	Socialist porn	Socialist brotherhood	Socialist Venom
Recoding tone	Parody	Political prudence	Pluralised playfulness
Meaning ambiguity	Vocabulary	Narrative	Discourse system
Focus of struggle	Visibility	Cultural values	Discursive power
Response to censorship	Resistance	Negotiation	Problematisation

Analysis of these cases reveals variation from a ridicule of censorship, to careful negotiation of cultural values, then comprehensive disruption and problematisation of cultural governance. This diversity unveils censorship-evading as boundary-spanning practice that flows beyond censorship towards popular culture blending politics with entertainment. Presentation of these three modes of recoding draws a clearer spectrum of nuanced power relations in China's contested cyberspace. With different recoding tones on different levels of meaning making for different aims of struggle, cultural recoding registers pluralised responses to censorship afforded by rich resources of cultural workings for social reconstruction in the digital age. This power dynamic consists of resistance, negotiation, problematisation and other shades of relations in flux. Cultural recoding in reality is usually a mixture of these shades, just like how parody exists in all three cases above but accounting for a varying proportion. Terms of censorship are not rejected, but rather, blurred and unsettled towards uncertainties and possibilities. Authority of internet governance and existing norms and values is therefore decentred and destabilised in a comprehensive manner of popular struggle.

This variation in censorship-evading practices and more generally online expression echoes the 'crisis of authority' and an inside-out re-examination of the entire internet governance in the age of contested cyberspace (Deibert and Rohozinsky, 2011). Further to the unsettling power dynamic, the fluidity and fuzziness of Chinese culture-saturated cyberpolitics per se has significant potentiality in mediating and (re)forming power relations. As shown above, ambiguity and undecidability of cultural recoding prove useful in contesting visibility and the power of governing and negotiating visibility in cyberspace. The very fuzziness also creates buffer zones for contesting and negotiating cultural values regarding pornography consumption, queer culture, individual heroism vs. Chinese collectivism, etc. The co-composition of popular culture and politics fuelled by momentum of creativity (Han, 2018) and affect of playfulness (see Chapter Five) as a whole promotes the exchange, mixture, and negotiation of diverse and sometimes contradictory cultures and tendencies in contested cyberspace. Therefore, the nuanced and

pluralised meaning-(re)making practices have important potentialities in contesting and negotiating not only internet governance but also established norms, values, principles more widely in a multi-institutional understanding of society (Armstrong and Bernstein, 2008).

Previous scholarship has argued for more nuanced analysis to account for pluralised online expression and power relations in China's contested and fragmented cyberspace (Han, 2018; Yang, 2015). This chapter dives into these nuances and advances this line of argument by detailing the possibilities in the heterogeneity of responses to censorship. Systematic analysis of three recoding practices delineates a dynamic discourse matrix of meaning making, specifying the diverging tendencies and how they manoeuvre in this matrix for different aims of contestation. By showing the potentialities of these nuances as cultural workings of power beyond the narrowly-defined politics regarding liberalisation/democratisation of formal governance, this study also contributes to the debate on the internet's potential for social change in China (Han, 2018; Lagerkvist, 2010). Analysis in this chapter enhances our understanding of the crisis of authority and establishments and extends it from the realm of internet governance (Deibert and Rohozinski, 2011) to a comprehensive multi-institutional field of social structure and social change. Cyber contestation is much more challenging or consolidating authority—it is a permanent instability in processes of becoming where the fusion of popular culture and politics affords problematisation, re-examination, and reconstruction of established norms and powers.

CHAPTER FIVE

NEGOTIATING POLITICAL PERSUASION THROUGH AFFECT²

Introduction

In the previous chapter, we have seen how BL drama fans coined the term ‘socialist brotherhood’ to describe homosexual relationships in queer-baiting TV dramas. This was not the first time that socialist terminology had been reworked for humorous effect. In fact, creative remakings of propaganda language had already been a feature of popular internet culture in China for several years, most notably ‘socialist memes.’ Back in December 2015, a group of jokes adapting socialist propaganda went viral on Weibo. Netizens combined familiar propaganda phrases with popular conversational buzzwords, rendering the formulaic political language ridiculous. For example: ‘You can diss me, but you cannot diss my Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of our nation’, ‘I can’t take my eyes off the way you work hard to build socialism’. They went on to create a variety of memes by putting these words on Maoist propaganda posters, as shown in Figures 7 and 8 below. These memes that entertain through sharp contrast in both visual and textual styles have also been a big hit across online communities.

² A preliminary version of this chapter has been published as a peer-reviewed journal article, see Zhang R (2020) Re-directing socialist persuasion through affective reiteration: a discourse analysis of ‘Socialist Memes’ on the Chinese internet. *AI & Society*. Epub ahead of print 20 November. DOI: [10.1007/s00146-020-01107-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-020-01107-7). This chapter differs from the journal article version in the arrangement of data and analysis as I made necessary revisions to polish the argument.



你可以瞧不起我，但是不能瞧不起我
实现中华民族伟大复兴的中国梦



很好，你努力建设社会主义的样子
成功引起了我的注意

Figure 7. ‘You can diss me, but you cannot diss my Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of our nation.’

Figure 8. ‘I can’t take my eyes off the way you work hard to build socialism.’

In the process of their continuous propagation and circulation on the Chinese social media, these memes have developed to move beyond the semantic confinement of the ideological language for more mundane and versatile everyday conversation. For example, the memes below are some of the most recent ‘socialist memes’ on the Chinese internet about being single. Figure 9 captions a cartoon figure with ‘Everyone has their date, except for me, building socialism by myself.’ This ‘image macro’ (user-annotated image) about anxiety around being single, is particularly popular among young people, especially on holidays like Christmas or Valentine’s Day. Likewise, Figure 10 captions a figure of a socialist revolutionary soldier with ‘I am a socialist successor, I can’t be bothered with romantic issues.’ The highly valued sacrifice of soldiers putting off romantic relationships or even marriage during wartime to serve their country is reworked to justify being single in the present. Here, ‘socialism’ no longer refers to the ideological concept for political justification purposes; it simply means the factual state of living in a socialist country. On the simplest level, the memes say ‘Everyone has their date, except for me being single,’ and ‘I’m devoted to my career, I can’t be bothered with romantic issues.’ But the addition of

the political commitment of ‘building socialism’ used here amplifies both the bitterness and amusement of this self-deprecation. ‘Socialist memes’ nowadays are memes of the like remixing official language of socialism and other irrelevant contents from mundane utterances for everyday expression and communication on the Chinese internet.



Figure 9. ‘Everyone has their date, except for me building socialism by myself.’



Figure 10. ‘I’m a socialist successor, I can’t be bothered with romantic issues.’

The emergence and increasing popularity of these reworkings or adaptations of political terminology in China indicate that socialist ideology has necessarily moved beyond official spheres of control, and pervades public discussion in a far more diversified context of utterances than ever before. Practices of ideological language are no longer subject solely to the strict regulations of the party-state for political purposes, but open to diversified reworkings by ordinary netizens as a means of self-expression. This move is made possible by the development of digital new media that encourage public participation in the rewriting of discourse. In an authoritarian country that relies on the manipulation of representations to exert political control, this change in patterns of reiteration of official language has important implications for political persuasion and the power dynamic between state and society. Previous research has noted the ambiguity of reiteration as simultaneously reversal and reaffirmation, and variously assesses the persuasive effects of repetition. Studies on public reiteration of official language on the Chinese internet

primarily focus on the control/resistance binary, analysing how the parodic ridicule of official rhetoric attempts to subvert this language and critique the system of political persuasion as a whole (see for example Li, 2011; Meng, 2011; Want et al., 2016; Zhao, 2009). But as Nordin and Richaud (2014) point out, there are ambiguous and multiple meanings in these reiterative practices that cannot be pinned down to a determinate interpretation of political subversion. Instead of debating about whether these practices should be labelled as resistance under repression, they argue for the need to analyse the complicated mutual configuration of political discourse and its alternatives in a tacit hegemony.

Regarding the undecidability of this meaning making process, the case study of ‘socialist memes’ in this chapter looks into how the ambiguity of this humorous reiteration from the online public serves political negotiation in the formation of socialist hegemony in China. I draw on affect theory to address the ambiguity and fluidity of humorous meaning making, focusing on the potentials of the ambiguity per se in interrupting signification structures, forging affective engagement, and reifying the socialist ideology. Using a critical discourse analysis method, I first break down the process of how ‘socialist memes’ emerged and developed on the Chinese internet. Then, I examine how the affect of their humour produces interpretive ambiguities of the official language and engages the public affectively for this reworked language to be further incorporated in the everyday life of netizens’ cultural experience. Discourse analysis in this chapter demonstrates how ‘socialist memes’: 1) instead of subverting official language, enrich its ideological meanings with personalised reworkings; 2) instead of subverting the imposed infiltration of ideology in everyday life, incorporate this formulaic language in cultural experiences. This chapter argues that practices of memetic humour redirect the ineffective propagandistic repetition towards wider cultural participation in reiterating and reasserting the ideological language, and in so doing negotiating and reconfiguring the socialist hegemony in China.

5.1 Political persuasion in China

Persuasion pervades politics, perhaps in a more overtly observable way in non-democratic countries. To convince its people of the legitimacy of authoritarian rule, a regime needs to frame its performance to be in line with the common interest and common beliefs in equality, justice, and development (Holbig, 2013). The framing project in China largely works through ideology and propaganda (Brady, 2008; Holbig, 2009). As Chapter Two has already explained in the theoretical review of ideology, the crafting of language is of vital importance in establishing and sustaining relations of domination. Strategic language techniques are required to construct a 'secondary reality' consistent with the interest of the ruling power for individuals to accept as natural and spontaneous (Wodak, 1988). This reality is first manifested in its own language before it is made to circulate across society through institutional practices and public surveillance (Brady, 2008). These disciplinary practices of propaganda are essentially the manipulation of representations to exert ideological influence on human actors (Lasswell, 1995). Ideology as 'a wide-ranging structural arrangement that attributes *decontested* meanings to a range of mutually defining political concepts' (Freedon, 2003: 54, italics in the original) serves power domination in coping with the indeterminacy of meaning. This is why ideology is necessarily rhetorical for persuasion purposes (Eagleton, 1991).

China's socialist ideology is constructed first on the signification level. To eliminate interpretive ambiguity of political concepts, the party-state has crafted a rich repertoire of representations that include terminology, rhetoric, slogans, and their various symbolic forms such as posters, adverts, news programmes, all in a designated formation. Together they form a political language featuring semantic certainty and interpretive finality. To a limited extent, this language resembles what George Orwell in *1984* called 'Newspeak', a controlled language of simplified grammar and restricted vocabulary that helps to maintain political order by eliminating alternative thinking. This political language in China is created in discourse formation and regulation via linking key vocabularies with political forces. By

legitimizing one meaning of the vocabulary and delegitimizing the others, and more importantly, dominating the rights to use this language in the larger social world, the party-state denies alternative interpretations and uses of this language in alternative contexts (Brown, 2012; Holbig, 2013).

Then, to impose this language, the party-state pays considerable disciplinary efforts to enforce a top-down iteration of this formalised language in society, so that it becomes accepted as the sole legitimate medium of political expression (Schoenhals, 1992). More importantly, these disciplinary practices aim to get people habituated to its omnipresence and *live* with this language not just in their political life but more comprehensively in their everyday cultural experience. Official slogans ranging from ‘harmony’ (和谐)³ to ‘Chinese dream’ (中国梦)⁴, for example, are not only repeated in official documents and speeches (Karmazin, 2020), but also in public space on propaganda posters on the streets, billboards in shopping malls, local announcements in residential communities, etc. The verbatim repetition of slogans consolidating socialist language in material practice serves political purposes of cultivating loyalty to the party-state, organising certain cultural attitudes, delivering political goals promised by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and ultimately, mass persuasion of socialist legitimation in a changing domestic and international environment (Brown and Bērziņa-Čerenkova, 2018; Holbig, 2013; Song and Gee, 2020).

Moreover, this orchestrated system of language requires an equally elaborate system of maintenance to ensure its interpretive determinacy and material omnipresence, that is, censorship. As part of public surveillance, censorship is a mechanism of information

³ This term is short for ‘harmonious society’, an ideal of social development promoted by former Chinese President Hu Jintao as one of the keywords of the CCP’s ideology under his leadership.

⁴ This term was promoted by President Xi Jinping to describe both ideals for Chinese people’s personal development and the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

manipulation by imposing costs for accessing and spreading information (Roberts, 2020). According to Roberts (2018), there are three types of censorship: threatening with punitive consequences, increasing the difficulty of access and distribution of information against authorities, and promoting distraction information to outweigh the undesired information. With these techniques to monitor information permeating the public and how people react to it, the party-state can crowd out alternative interpretations of socialist language and maintain its exclusive right of final explanation, which constitutes an important aspect of its authoritarian rule in China.

Powerful and well-rounded as it is, this whole system of persuasion through language is not necessarily effective in the way it might appear or is intended. The monotonous socialist language appears obsolete and insipid, and less likely to engage the masses in a meaningful way. In this case, the omnipresence of mechanical repetition may even undermine the effects of socialist persuasion. Chen and Shi (2001) find that respondents with more exposure to state media have less trust in the Chinese government, suggesting the failure of propaganda in nurturing political support among Chinese people. Likewise, Huang (2018) uses a survey experiment to show that crude and heavy-handed propaganda in China can backfire and worsen citizens' opinion of the state, which may have a negative impact on regime legitimacy in the long run. On the other hand, other scholars insist that propagandistic repetition works to enforce obedience and achieves persuasion in a different, coercive way. It is on a basic level an expression of power: perhaps all the more so, if publicly acknowledged as critically and collectively resisted. Wedeen (1999) analyses how the Syrian government produces compliance by enforcing participation in rituals and habituating citizens to utter formulaic slogans and perform empty gestures. Roberts (2018) additionally shows that the Chinese government can exert significant influence over the tenor of online discussion by using coordinated information comprising mostly of cheerleading messages to divert netizens from negative information. These studies underscore the complexity of the persuasive effects of ideological repetition.

The other side of the problematic effects of ideological persuasion in China is various attempts from the public to challenge the determinacy of the ‘socialist Newspeak.’ Like all other ideologies, socialist ideology in China is also in a hegemonic process of constant meaning contestation. While the authoritarian state can create a language of monosemy and make it pervasive, even inescapable in everyday lives, it can never eliminate all alternative interpretations by the public. According to Arendt’s account of human action, ‘acts performed in public are immediately submitted to the interpretation of others who will elaborate their meaning in ways impossible for the actor to anticipate or control’ (Dolan 1995: 337). As theories of ideology and discourse have already argued, the attempt to fix a dominant meaning and remove alternative interpretations is always partial and incomplete however coercive and thorough it may be. Various evidence suggests there is widespread scepticism about official discourse in China, as people have managed to circumvent censorship and reiterate socialist language in different ways (see Lynch, 1999; Scott, 1990). For example, Link (1993) noticed the use of ‘authentic’ official language in so-called ‘wrong’ contexts, describing it as ‘playing the official language game in reverse.’

In the digital age, meaning contestation over official language often takes place in the forms of ‘incongruity humour’ on the Chinese internet. Incongruity humour normally comprises two elements that are sharply contrasted in conflicts yet at the same time cleverly fused to create the effects of disappointment and tension relief (Monro, 1951). As ideological boundaries in language utterances remain identifiable in contemporary China in contrast with other language genres (Brown and Bērziņa-Čerenkova, 2018), it is easy to create incongruity humour out of this ‘socialist Newspeak.’ Chinese netizens often move it from its original political language setting to alternative contexts, or attribute alternative meanings to it by reifying the ideological slogans in personalised expression. This ‘socialist humour’ of incongruity draws on a variety of ideological representations ranging from slogan texts and poster images to news videos of state media, e.g. ‘river crab’ as the ridicule of ‘harmony’ and the parody videos of the ‘Red Classics’ as mentioned in Chapter One. In addition to these satirical reiterations, there are also a wider range of less subversive and

rebellious types of humorous remaking for sheer amusement, self-derogation, and even nonsensical pleasure—that nonetheless have a political effect. For example, ‘socialist memes’—as briefly mentioned above—is a particular popular genre of ‘socialist humour’ on the Chinese internet that reworks propaganda for everyday conversations.

All of these humorous reiterations of official language—whether friendly and unharmed or subversive and critical—are repeating this language despite their attempts to move beyond its official definitions, which in fact confirms the symbolic hegemony of socialist China in the ideological sphere. This ambiguity problem with public reiterations of the official language is inherently about the formation of socialist hegemony. This dynamic is not about a binary relationship between state and society as ideological imposition meets resistance through humorous reconstruction. It involves an iterative process of interaction as the dominant ideology and its alternatives mutually incorporate and constitute one another in meaning contestation and negotiation. To address the paradoxical nature of public reiterations as simultaneously a reversal and reaffirmation of the dominant language, this chapter draws on *affect* to tackle this problem. Essentially concerned with the in-betweenness in a process of becoming and concentrating on unfolding events instead of static things, the concept of affect provides a useful lens to probe into how the micropolitical domain of ambiguities and multiplicity of interpretations articulates.

5.2 Humour as affect: ambiguities for alteration

Papacharissi (2015: 125) observes that publics in the digital age are formed in ways that discursively render *affective publics*, i.e. ‘networked public formations that are mobilized and connected or disconnected through expressions of sentiment.’ These expressions are discursively constructed through media texts and carefully staged in the digital public, reflecting and reshaping power relations in a larger social structure (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). As mentioned in the theoretical framework in Chapter Two, I distinguish affect from emotion as affect refers to the unconscious experience of intensity in motion and foregrounds the fluidity and ambiguity of sensational feeling. This chapter views ‘socialist

memes' on the Chinese internet through the lens of affect rather than emotion for two reasons. First, their amusing effects to a large extent can and do remain inexplicable and ambiguous compared with political satire or parody whose articulate 'point' is immediately recognisable. Humour gives aesthetic pleasure by appealing in a generalised manner to feeling and emotion (Bigelow, 1953, cited in Gruner, 1965), where satire persuades in a reasoned, therefore more specified process. Second, expressions of 'socialist memes' permeate online discussion, creating an always-on ambience wherever everyday conversations take place. Different from satire that is transient because of censorship, 'socialist memes' are prudent enough to survive censorship so that their affective punches become a kind of sediment. It is created by a continuous flow of tendencies and potentials, rather than disconnected and fragmented instances of registered emotion.

From the perspective of affect, the ambiguity of reiteration is no longer a problem of a paradox that swings between a conservative reproduction of the status quo and a progressive subversion of established hierarchies. Instead, ambiguity *per se* has the potential of altering power dynamics. This potential can be consolidated through affective engagement in repetition. The theoretical analysis below dissects how ambiguities of humour can mobilise affect to promote change by interweaving the insignificant individual with the dominant rhetoric and accumulating intensity through repetition.

According to Papacharissi (2015), affect is about the intensity with which something is experienced specifically in an unconscious way. Drawing on the Spinozist definition of affect as 'the capacity to affect or be affected,' Massumi (2015) explains that this 'something' comes from the point of *encounter* with a differential of force, which triggers the movement of affecting or being affected. The affective hit is thus inevitably interrupting whatever continuities are in progress. Likewise, humour takes effects by disrupting expectations. Humour creates intellectual pleasure by building up an expectation that is destined to be frustrated (Eastman, 1937). The expectation is essentially a feeling of taken-for-grantedness based on a set of internalised norms, which is why humour often embeds a

reversal of values (Monro, 1951). Freud (2002:102), too, understands humour as a means of outwitting our internal inhibitions: ‘the joke then represents a rebellion against such authority, a liberation from the opposition it opposes.’ The affective moment of humour, then, is essentially interrupting the dominant order of thought that individuals have come to accept as natural without consciously realising its presence.

Moreover, Spinoza’s definition also reveals that affect is directly relational. Massumi (2015) explains that affective techniques are fundamentally participatory, as they apply more directly to situations that involve co-occurrences of individuals encountering this event in their own personal way. This process of collective participation is called ‘differential attunement.’ While punctuating the beats of the dominant narrative, the streaming affective gestures of these ‘socialist memes’ are also weaving personal experience and storytelling into it. This interweaving via affect allows individuals to feel their own place in the narrative, and the ambiguity with its potential for contagion further invites others to tune in and develop the stories (Papacharissi, 2015). This process facilitated by spreadable media is naturally widening the spectrum of contestations and negotiations over political meanings and practices (Lim and Mark, 2008; Rentschler and Thrift, 2015). In other words, relational affect on the internet forms a ripple of intensity that is continuously spreading onwards and outwards. This way, momentary interruptions actually can have an enduring effect of engaging a wider population via affect and amplifying the visibility of repressed or underrepresented interpretations.

For example, Rentschler and Thrift (2015) argue that feminist memes have a collective effect on feminist movement building. Their study of how memes can make a difference through a network of laughter reveals the potential of ‘minoritarian tendencies’ that underlie and energise major changes (Pedwell, 2017). As Manning (2016: 1) argues, these minor movements are often missed out in our ‘belief in the major as the site where events occur.’ Pedwell (2017), then, highlights the contribution of Rentschler and Thrift’s work to the onto-epistemological shift from ‘the major’ to ‘the minor’ in understanding social

change. She further points out in her analysis of image networks how affect nudges transformation through accumulation of minor movements instead of directly triggering major revolutions:

‘Rather, in a context in which images are always connected to other images (as well as bodies, infrastructures and environments) more enduring forms of socio-political transformation may emerge less through “affective revolutions” than they do via the *accumulation, reverberation and reshaping* of seemingly minor affective responses, interactions, gestures and habits.’ (p.165, italics in the original)

This accumulation that consolidates these minor potentials and tendencies in constant motion as a determinate drive for change in reality is primarily effected through habitual practices of repetition. According to Butler (2006), repetition is crucial in sustaining and naturalising norms. Identities are always fluid. It is through the performance of acts that a certain identity registers, and through repetitive acts that this identity gets affirmed and consolidated. Wedeen (1999) in her study of political rhetoric in Syria finds that the regime facilitates obedience by enforcing a rhetorical excess, so that familiarity with this symbolic language and behaviours consistent with its formulas have become part of the experience of being Syrian. However, she points out that this imposed excess does not require identification with the rhetoric to be felt (partly because the rhetoric deprived of ambiguities cannot engage the public affectively), but only simulated. Participation without affective experience can be problematic and lead to mundane transgressions. Affective repetition, on the other hand, encourages active instead of passive reiterations. It connects and pluralises individual expressions (Papacharissi, 2015), instead of isolating and regulating them. In short, monotonous repetition aims at contracting the public into a homogeneous entity, while sentiment-driven repetition mobilises the public to be more open and receptive to the new and to change. As Papacharissi (2015: 54) draws on Deleuze, ‘the force of repetition augments the disruption introduced by a tweet into “an affective intensity capable of overthrowing the entire order of discourse in favour of

transformation.”” In the always-on ambience created by affective refrains, individuals do not just *live* with the norms that abound their everyday lives; more importantly, they *feel* their way into the connective narrative and *structure* the ways in which affect as an event further unfolds. That is how repetition works through affect to make a difference.

5.3 Emergence and development of ‘socialist memes’

‘Socialist memes’ came into existence on Weibo in December 2015 and have gone through a process of mutation, reproduction, and ultimately normalisation. They have raised heated discussions on social media platforms, have been widely disseminated over the years, and remain pervasive on the internet. Some of the original posts initiating the once-famous ‘sentence-making competitions’ (remixing rephrased socialist terms with romantic buzzwords) are now nowhere to be found after five years of internet change, but we can still uncover how they began by looking at some snapshots of the original Weibo threads that were taken and posted online by other Weibo users. Some Weibo users, especially influencers, would share humorous materials to gain more attention and traffic. Snapshots of previously deleted social media posts are one of their common resources. From these posts, I found some snapshots of the first Weibo post of ‘socialist memes.’ According to these snapshots, it all started from a Weibo user who wrote this one sentence of ‘I’m just so into the way that you don’t like me but have to build socialism with Chinese characteristics with me nevertheless’ on 1 December 2015. This prompted similar comments as a collection of clever, witty sentences. Most of them followed the lead, remixing ideological terms of ‘socialism,’ ‘*xiaokang*’ (a moderately prosperous society), ‘the great rejuvenation,’ ‘the great banner’ etc., with famous lines from a particular type of romantic TV drama that typically features an innocent sweet girl and a pokerfaced boy pretending that he is not in love with her. The top five most liked comments are:

- (i) Don't bow your head, or your GDP will fall; don't cry, or (our enemy) capitalism will laugh⁵ (4,598 likes)
- (ii) Come get me, if you catch me, I'll take you to go for xiaokang (3,169 likes)
- (iii) Crush my heart all you want, but I'll never allow you to give up holding high the banner of socialism (3,090 likes)
- (iv) Forget me all you want, but don't forget core socialist values (2,838 likes)
- (v) Don't shed tears over my grave, you'll spoil my way of comprehensively building xiaokang (2,518 likes)

From these textual remixes, netizens went on to put these rephrased texts onto images to create memes. Four days later on 5 December 2015, another Weibo influencer posted nine image-macros (to date it has received more than 16,000 likes, 5,000 comments, 20,000 shares), thus began the vibrant humorous creations of remaking socialist slogans and propaganda posters into memes. For example, Figure 11 and Figure 12 are two of the 'socialist memes' that put the original sentence and the most liked comment in the thread above on 1950-style propaganda posters to further emphasise the contrast and ridicule.

⁵ This sentence was rephrased from a romantic cliché 'Don't bow your head, or your tiara will fall; don't cry, or your enemy will laugh,' which is meant to encourage girls to fight for their rights and dignity when offended. The phrase 'bow your head' in Chinese means a physical gesture commonly seen in East Asian societies as a polite greeting, and also means 'to surrender.' The rephrased sentence of parody literally means as a socialist country we must stand firm for development (GDP) and show our strength to capitalist countries (enemy).



Figure 11. ‘I’m just so into the way that you don’t like me but have to build socialism with Chinese characteristics with me nevertheless.’



Figure 12. ‘Don’t bow, or your GDP will fall; don’t cry, or capitalism will laugh.’

Once these memes were well-known, netizens began to tone them down by replacing propaganda posters with other non-political images or changing captions from the awkwardly rephrased romantic lines to more pragmatic ones. For example, this humorous style of remixing was applied to football players and Marvel heroes, as shown in the figures below. Figure 13 captions the Italian footballer Mario Balotelli in his shirt ‘Why always me?’ with ‘Why always CCP?’ Figure 14 adapts former Liverpool Football Club manager Bill Shankly’s famous ‘Football is more important than life and death’ quote into: ‘Core socialist values are not a matter of life and death, they are much, much more important than that.’ These memes were widely spread among football fans on Weibo. Similarly, another Weibo user made 9 Marvel memes and shared them on 6 December. Among them, Figure 15 says ‘Be the kind of woman that men can never get hold of’ remaking a poster of a Chinese female peasant with her face photoshopped as Black Widow. Figure 16 is a revolutionary soldier photoshopped as Thor with his hammer saying ‘Mess with me again and it’s hammer time.’ With more than 9,000 likes, 4,000 comments, nearly 23,000 reposts, this post was a great hit among Marvel fans.

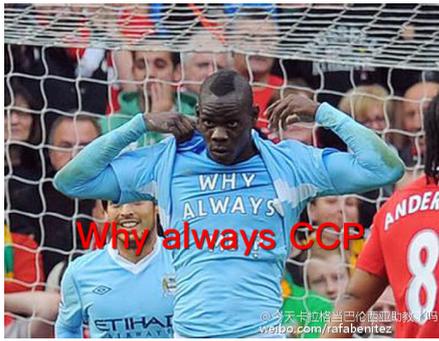


Figure 13. 'Why always CCP'



Figure 14. 'Core socialist values above life and death.'



Figure 15. Black Widow meme



Figure 16. Thor meme

These memes are rather confined in their contexts of use as they cannot appeal to those who are not familiar with Marvel stories or football. But the principle of meme-making caught on across different knowledge communities. As this style of socialist remixing spread to a wider public, more versatile memes appeared. For example, the memes below joke about insomnia, being a 'homebody', and diet. Figure 17 captions an image of a sleepless cartoon figure 'Too worried about building socialism to fall asleep.' Figure 18 says 'Everyone is going away on trips, except for me building socialism by myself.' Figure 19 responds wittily in self-soothing humour around overeating, being on a diet, or being overweight: 'Only when you feel full are you able to build socialism with Chinese characteristics.' Like aforementioned Figures 9 and 10, here 'socialism' simply means chores of life. This embedding of ideological language in what appears to be ordinary memes is distinct from the satirical re-use of well-known propaganda phrases and images.

为了社会主义的建设
而操心的睡不着觉



Figure 17. Insomnia meme



全世界都粗去玩了
只有我在独自建设社会主义

Figure 18. Homebody meme



吃饱了才有力气
建设中国特色社会主义

Figure 19. Diet meme

From above we can see that the development of ‘socialist memes’ has gone through three steps: sentence-making competitions, image-macros based on these sentences and their mutations, and finally memes as self-expression in daily communication. In this process, we can see how the humour of ‘socialist memes’ became increasingly useful in everyday conversations, with decreasing political irony and diluted political meaning of the socialist term embedded. With its popularisation on the internet and pluralised interpretations of the repeated political terms, it can reach and *engage* a wide public with affect.

Before moving on to the analysis of how affective engagement has important potential in re-directing the persuasive effects of political language, it is now necessary to briefly explain why I particularly look at socialist memes of friendly humour—rather than political satire—for affective analysis. As mentioned in previous chapters, compared with better-researched political satire, ‘socialist memes’ have different communication potentialities and a broader social impact in their ability to reach a wider audience and encourage more vibrant participation in circulating humorous reiterations. Political satire of overtly critical and rebellious intentions is considered more threatening to the regime, and therefore is more, and more likely to be, censored. The aforementioned videos mocking ‘Red Classics,’ for example, were widely criticised by the state media following their success in public communication in 2006 (Li, 2011). More recently, the official Xinhua news agency made clear that websites must ban video spoofs that violate socialist core values (Li and Jourdan, 2018). These moves signal the party-state’s consistently powerful and extensive control

over public expression. ‘Socialist memes,’ on the other hand, are more prudent in their choice of prioritising personal expression to ridicule socialist terminology and values. They keep a low profile in online discussions and avoid attention from the state. In sharp contrast to online jokes and satire on Twitter, these socialist memes on the Chinese internet are also highly decentralised to circumvent censorship. Users of these memes typically avoid actively publicising themselves using politics-related tags or increasing their visibility on the internet using identifiable keywords. As I found in my virtual ethnography, few online communities, groups, influencers or opinion leaders would share these memes regularly on the internet, as they too want to avoid overflows of political ridicule (however friendly it may be) in their social media feeds which could lead to unwanted attention from the authorities. It is correspondingly difficult to search and sample these memes: they are simultaneously nowhere and everywhere, permeating online conversations in various contexts as everyday humour—for example, discussions of movies and TV dramas, comments on sports games, etc. It naturally merges with all other online content, looking like just another funny internet quote, another bit of sparkling wit and creativity—but in its own, different, way, i.e. in a ‘socialist’ way.

5.4 Affect of memes: interruption, attunement, engagement

At the very beginning of ‘socialist memes,’ rephrased texts containing ideological terms in ‘sentence-making competitions’ above were immediately interrupting the formation of the official narrative that Chinese people had been habituated to accept as ‘normal’: when readers come across the joke, they would instinctively expect the sentence flowing towards the same old political cliché, and then surprisingly find it end in a romantic one. This interruption embeds a reversal of values. The texts of ‘socialist romance’ listed above and the memes based on these sentences (e.g. Figure 11 and 12, only with its contrast enhanced by visual presentation) all imply an ironic value orientation of prioritising romantic relationships over socialist construction. This socialist morality that all personal feelings and actions be steered around political doctrines used to be highly valued in China before

the reforms in the late 1970s, but is no longer popular in China today, or at least more likely to appear in neutral terms like ‘devotion to society’ rather than the more overtly political ‘building socialism.’ For these texts and memes, at first, the reversal was overt and crude, interrupting the socialist rhetoric in an abrupt yet non-offensive way. After all, in reiterating ‘socialist construction above anything’ in a creative way, they in fact ‘reinvigorate’ the obsolete socialist morality making an old-fashioned style from the Maoist era and slogans associated with it contemporary again.

As ‘socialist memes’ further unfold with diversifying types of mimesis, the interruption becomes less abrupt and more cleverly muted. Instead of collapsing political language onto romantic clichés, football memes, or Marvel stories, interruption in subsequent memes reveal a friendlier interaction between self-expression and political terminology. In other words, netizens used the earliest forms of political reiteration to play and mess with official rhetoric, whereas subsequent memes became part of normal and mundane utterances in online communication. For example, while Figure 13 and Figure 14 are still directly ironic, Figure 15 and Figure 16 are nothing to do with politics except for reworking Maoist propaganda posters; for Figures 9, 10, 17, 18 and 19, the commitment to socialism in these memes is arguably not for greater ironic reversal, but simply to sound wittier.

The mutation of ‘socialist memes’ illustrates how the interruption of political language utterances has gradually become a comprehensive disturbance of the whole language structure, as reiterated socialist terms get increasingly recontextualised and resignified. In the first, socialist terms and posters are simply removed from their ‘correct’ language formations and implanted in ‘wrong’ contexts, yet their ideological meanings remain unchanged. In the second, netizens are exploring creative ways of using the dominant messages of socialist values completely outside their typical repertoire. In doing so, they are weaving their own storytelling into the narrative about ‘socialism,’ continuously expanding a shared cultural language to account for their own concrete experience of living in a socialist country. And this is exactly what Papacharissi (2015: 136) call ‘attunement’

when individuals ‘seek (semantic) agency by trying to determine how their personal narrative connects to normative and evolving narratives for understanding the world.’ ‘Socialism,’ then, is no longer a symbolic field strictly guarded by the authoritarian regime where only ‘socialist Newspeak’ is allowed, but instead, is evolving towards a public space where ordinary people find their way in and make their own connotations.

In this regard, individuals’ attunement to the dominant narrative has great potential for reconstructing political discourse and disrupting hegemonic power structures. As Wedeen (1999: 45) observes in Syria, the authoritarian regime imposes a dominant rhetoric to ‘destroy the possibilities for public expressions of contingency, frailty, and interpretive ambiguity, thereby fixing meanings and censoring facts in ways that silence or render irrelevant people’s understandings of themselves as publicly political persons.’ Likewise, in China, the system of political persuasion is orchestrated via this symbolic manoeuvre of denying individuals’ entries into this field. However, with ‘socialist memes,’ Chinese netizens are claiming their semantic agency within political discourse, thus also claiming their subjective position in politics. Their access to this fluid form of power, seeking to break into the ideological mainstream, is enabled by affect (Papacharissi, 2015). It is in this sense that we argue the affective humour of ‘socialist memes’ has the potential to liberalise political discourse in a socialist hegemony.

How socialist humour contributes to the liberalisation of political discourse remains a possible tendency, a temporary potential waiting to be activated. As previous research suggests, it is inherently ambiguous whether this potential can be realised or not. But tendencies *cumulatively* can produce great energies to undo symbolic structures of political persuasion, which, I argue, is achieved via affective engagement. This is what makes the humour of ‘socialist memes’ fundamentally different from other imposed disciplinary repetitions of propaganda. It is able to pull through propagandistic repetition and re-direct it towards interpretive pluralism.

Rather than simulating official narratives, reproducing forms and content devoid of any

meaningful interaction with their receivers, the practice of ‘socialist memes’ reproduces *feelings* that connect individuals thus creating a sensation of being in a public. Previous research has proved that Chinese people have been generally tired of the repetition of state-produced narratives (Chen and Shi, 2001; Huang, 2018). Studies of repetition also suggest that the sensory intensity of affect wears off through repetition, and its power to ignite active responses declines (Sontag, 2003). Mechanical repetition of the same old political discourse, therefore, is unlikely to increase positive affective input. This sheds light on why socialist memes evolve and change. Living in an environment overflowing with socialist language, people can easily identify with these kinds of jokes and memes with great enthusiasm and want to see more: perhaps a backlash effect of precisely monotonous and monosemic socialist persuasion. The affect of memes encourages popular participation and facilitates *ongoing* iteration of ‘socialist memes’ across online communities, a process likely to be fed by further iterations of official propaganda.

5.5 Humour as hegemonic negotiation

Up to this point, the interpretive pluralism and ongoing iteration of these alternative understandings of official discourse may well be seen as ‘counter-culture’ or ‘counter-discourse’ that can potentially decentre the dominant meaning and challenge the dominant political power. However, towards the end of my analysis in this chapter, this section draws on the hegemonic aspect of ideology to map out how affective humour of ‘socialist memes’ are in fact enriching the official language, reifying abstract language in cultural experience, and in so doing redirects and reconfigures the hegemony instead of subverting it as an opposing force.

First, as mentioned above, with ‘socialist memes’ ordinary Chinese netizens are able to weave in their own connotations into the ideological terminology. For example, in Figures 17-19, ‘build socialism’ is recontextualised from its abstract ideological field of signification to refer to concrete—and also trivial—things. ‘Building socialism’ in Figure 17 can be understood as ‘work,’ ‘mental pressure,’ ‘too much coffee,’ or basically any factors that

make it hard to fall asleep. In Figure 18, it usually means ‘staying at home,’ ‘working over the holidays,’ or anything that is not ‘going away on trips.’ In Figure 19, ‘build socialism’ is more usually taken as a witty way to express self-deprecation without any concrete meanings. However, it applies to a specific situation in everyday life when someone uses ‘socialism’ to justify the unwillingness to keep a diet.

These memes bearing personal connotations and applied to specific moments of personal life are not only changing the ideological meanings of the official discourse about ‘socialism,’ but also enriching this discourse with vivid experiences. Political jargon-word in ideological language usually becomes a meaningless, empty ‘vogue-word’ with its increased use (Wodak, 1988; Yurchak, 2005). This is the same case with ideological slogans and terminology in China. Despite state-promoted and implemented practices of this language throughout society, they either appear in official documents and news reports without referring to any specific empirical experiences that ordinary people can easily relate to. Even if these slogans and propaganda posters are frequently seen in local residential communities and billboards in shopping malls, they are simply presented there without any vivid elaboration that can engage people passing by. Now with ‘socialist memes,’ this abstract and meaningless language has been enriched by the creative online public to have more specific meanings about everyday life as a result of diversified interpretations. These practices render this boring, formulaic, distant ideological language much more relatable.

Second, and more importantly, these enriched meanings are not just on the signification level; they are practised in everyday life as lived cultural experience. The ideological language is reified as concrete descriptions and behaviours when reappropriated in memes. This is how affective engagement differs from the mechanical repetition of official language: it forges meaningful affective connections between the lived experience and the ideological signs. Unlike walking past a local billboard showing a ‘build socialism’ slogan without giving it any meaningful thought, people use ‘building socialism’ in memes like Figures 17-19 at the moments when they *feel* at loss wide awake in the middle of the night,

feel bitter and envious of others who are going out travelling on holidays, *feel* distressed about a diet break. When people think of these memes and use them for self-expression at these moments in life, they are tuning themselves into affective connection with the ideological terminology. At the same time, the terminology is also weaved into their everyday life as they actively share these memes on social media to express their state of feeling at these moments. Indeed, it might be difficult to evaluate with evidence whether imposed mechanic repetition is more effective in generating persuasion than affective engagement through the use of memes. However, at least these cultural experiences that individuals actually live with the terminology—albeit in a reworked version—contribute to the reification and infiltration of socialist ideology.

Furthermore, these feelings are not isolated within one individual's lifeworld; they are widely transmissible and spreadable as 'socialist memes' are circulated across the internet. The relationality of affect is enhanced by memetic media, which further amplifies the ideological reification and infiltration. This works in a similar logic with the politics of 'fun' protest as culture jammers deploy humour and playfulness to gain attention, widen bystander participation, and promote counter-hegemonic messages (Wettergren, 2009). The only difference is that in the case of socialist humour, the messages facilitated in this process of humorous contagion are not necessarily counter-hegemonic. For one thing, these memes are much friendlier with little political critique and they are used for non-political everyday expression rather than for any political purposes. It is more accurate to view these memes as alternatives to the official meaning. Second, while indeed the flux of alternatives, as argued in theoretical review, embeds the possibilities for alterations in the meaning structure and hence the power relations of domination it sustains, these alterations are not necessarily subversive. As 'socialist memes' elaborate on the boring and abstract ideological language for it to be more relatable to everyday life and weave it into individuals' cultural experiences upon usage, the alternatives they incorporate in fact transform and negotiate the persuasive effects of socialist ideology, configuring it to be more firmly based on active engagement instead of coercive imposition.

Conclusion

Previous studies of political rhetoric have noted the paradoxical nature of language iteration and the ambiguous effects of repetition in achieving persuasion. Discourse analysis dissects how ‘socialist memes’ as an event emerged and developed on the Chinese internet, and reveals how this genre of socialist humour interrupts the structures of official language, encourages interweaving between personal experience and dominant narrative and engages the public affectively in its continuous repetition. In this chapter, I argue that by claiming semantic agency in political discourse via practices of reiteration, netizens are entering into the state-monopolised political domain for cultural participation. While affectively engaged in repeated exposure to diversified interpretations of political discourse, they are reframing this diversity of interpretation as natural, which cumulatively can lead to habitual acceptance of these public-produced alternatives as important supplements to state-produced rhetoric. Thus, what public reiteration in friendly socialist humour does is much more than just disrupting ideological language structures. It enriches its meanings to be more relatable and reifies the abstract language of socialist ideology to be incorporated in everyday cultural experiences. Therefore, I argue that practices of memetic humour can potentially redirect the ineffective propagandistic repetition towards wider cultural participation in reiterating and reasserting the ideological language, and in so doing reconfiguring the socialist hegemony in China.

This case study contributes to theoretical literature in two ways. First, instead of looking into the detailed specificities of ambiguity and fluidity (i.e. the case-by-case diversified meanings), this study makes an evidence-based general argument about the potential of ambiguity and fluidity comprising of all the interpretive possibilities as a whole in bringing about meaningful social change. The flux of interpretive uncertainties—if consolidated through affective engagement in repetition—have great potential in making minor adjustments and refinements of the established signification structure and therefore power relations. These minor moves are particularly important because what they potentially

achieve is not any radical act but rather negotiation as undercurrents that step by step lead to peaceful and natural development. To further the onto-epistemological shift from the major to the minor that Pedwell (2017) argues, this case study points out that this shift also implies an important change in research focus from overly radical oppositions to the informal, indirect, and also relatively more moderate variations and amendments.

Second, drawing on the cultural, political, and hegemonic aspects of ideology, my analysis provides valuable empirical support for the theoretical understanding of hegemony as an ongoing process of meaning negotiation. In this chapter, I have shown how hegemony works through a mutually constitutive and configurative dynamic between the dominant ideology and its alternatives. Hegemony is not a once-and-for-all imposition from the dominant power; nor can it be effectively achieved through one-sided imposition, even in an authoritarian country. It relies on constant interactions between the dominant power and alternative—not counter—forces from social actors of active agency in diverse positions. Particularly, as my study as well as my whole thesis aims to stress, these interactions are not necessarily about repression and resistance. Analysis of ‘socialist memes’ reveals how these alternatives of interpretive pluralism—rather than countering the dominant ideology—in fact, contribute to its reification in everyday experiences, which do more to enhance and improve the consensual ground of the hegemony than challenge and subvert it.

In addition to the theoretical contributions, this study also makes an important empirical contribution to China-focused internet research. It enriches the understanding of political persuasion in China by looking at a largely neglected area of political humour, showing how the accumulated intensity of humorous tendencies can be activated to promote change. Previous research mostly focuses on subversive satire as grassroots resistance. However, these forms of overtly rebellious irony and criticism are much less likely to survive censorship than friendly jokes and memes like ‘socialist memes.’ With more and longer exposure on the internet, more muted, indeterminate, and anonymous political

humour has important political potentials not yet fully explored in relevant research. Analysis of 'socialist memes' in this chapter reveals how modest and mundane political humour is enriching official language and redirecting political persuasion from regulated monosemy to open-ended polysemy in a hegemonic process. This contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the transformation of political discourse in a digital era, towards the perception of contested culture as a dynamic interaction, rather than a dualism of obedience or subversion.

CHAPTER SIX

NEGOTIATING HEGEMONIC NARRATIVES THROUGH MEMETICS

Introduction

Upon the death of Prince Philip on 9 April 2021, while most people from all over the world were expressing their shock at this news, a group of Chinese netizens seemed more interested in comparing his longevity with former Chinese president Jiang Zemin. Many netizens ‘joked’ on Weibo that ‘Now we come to the final competition between the Queen and *him*.’ This joke of comparing Jiang with other influential oldest living state leaders especially Queen Elizabeth (she was born in the same year as Jiang) comes from a popular cultural phenomenon in China called ‘toad worship’, or ‘*moha*’ (膜蛤) in Chinese, an unconventional cult of Jiang Zemin as a toad for his toad-like appearance. Proposed by the Falun Gong (FLG) movement (persecuted under Jiang’s leadership in 1999) as political ridicule of Jiang for retaliation, the mockery of Jiang as a toad has gradually developed into a popular internet culture of multi-faceted and fluid motivations including but not limited to admiration for him, dissatisfaction about the current leadership, and sheer playfulness (Fang, 2020). ‘Toad worshippers,’ also known as ‘toad fans’ (蛤丝) or ‘mogicians’(膜法师), enjoy creating and sharing various internet memes by reappropriating Jiang’s photos, videos, famous quotes from his speech, personal experience, etc. In the context of egao internet culture (creative and participatory online parody) in China (Gong and Yang, 2010; Li, 2011; Meng, 2011; Zou, 2020), the former president of China has also become a rich resource for meme makers.

Previous research has analysed China’s internet culture of parody and ridicule as grassroots resistance to express discontent and criticism about sociopolitical realities in China based on different empirical cases ranging from political satire like ‘grass mud horse’ and ‘river

crab’ to popular buzzwords like ‘diaosi’ (Meng, 2011; Mina, 2014; Szablewicz, 2014; Yang et al., 2015; Yang and Jiang, 2015). Going beyond this analytical framework of politicisation, Nordin and Richaud (2014) argue that these online practices of egao also involve a depoliticisation, suggesting the ambiguity and nuances of China’s internet culture that do not necessarily lead to political potential. With regards to ‘toad worship’ memes specifically, Fang (2020) also finds the fluid and ambiguous nature of this memetic culture that can be both political as expressions of resistance and apolitical as digital cultures of entertainment depending on its context. In this vein, this case study particularly looks into this politicisation/depoliticisation ambiguity, examining how internet culture *repoliticises* through a process of *depoliticisation*. Rather than conceptualising this ambiguity in a binary of resistance to and reproduction of domination, I analyse this iterative loop of cultural reappropriation in a hegemonic model as meaning negotiation. In this model, politics and non-politics are not oppositional in a static structure. Nor are hegemony and its alternatives that consciously dissociate themselves from the hegemony necessarily in rivalry against each other, one seeking repression or even replacement of the other.

My analysis in this chapter is based on textual materials of ‘toad worship’ culture and interview data with its cultural participants. I argue that practices of depoliticisation in this popular culture of a Chinese political leader reconstruct and enrich one-sided official narratives in a memetic process of online cultural participation driven by vernacular creativity and humour. In decentring the official presidential image, these depoliticisation practices reshape the ideological discourse formations, which indicates a repoliticisation effect in a hegemonic sense. Instead of being confined to the authoritative language, discussions about a Chinese leader are open to the mass public for creative interpretations in friendly humour. These interpretations, as shall be seen in the following sections, promote a more amiable and relatable presidential image and nudge more positive attitudes about this former President. This way, these cultural practices in ‘toad worship,’ while attempting to dissociate from politics for cultural playfulness, contributes to a socialist hegemony that not only appeals to the political authority but also meets the needs and

preferences from the public.

This chapter begins with a brief review of the concept of representative anecdote as a theoretical lens for analysis and the memetic logics underpinning the creation and circulation processes of internet memes. The main discussion first introduces the ‘toad worship’ phenomenon as a memetic culture, reviewing its emergence and development on the Chinese internet and unpacking its memetic nature following the five fundamental logics of memetic media. Then, the discussion zooms into two contrasting representations of Jiang in ‘toad worship’ as representative anecdotes reflecting two different media and sociocultural realities, examining how ‘toad worship’ memes reconstruct the official narratives of Jiang through memetic logics. The chapter concludes with implications of this memetic culture on hegemonic power dynamics in China.

6.1 Memes as representative anecdote

In brief, Burke’s theory of dramatism talks about how a set of language or symbols represents and construct social realities. With an emphasis on the reduction of reality through symbols, dramatism is a useful lens for us to inquire into the full range of activities from which social worlds are reduced by analysing the use of symbols, and thereby uncover how a symbolic reality—‘anecdote’ in Burke’s term—is constructed in accordance with its subject matter, speaking, acting beings in its specific context (Crabbe, 2000). Central to his theory of dramatism is the concept of representative anecdote. According to Burke (1969:60), representative anecdote is ‘a summation, containing implicitly what the system that is developed from it contains explicitly.’ It is both representative and reductive. An inquiry guided by a representative anecdote does not simplify the underlying complexity of its subject matter (Crabbe, 2000). It provides consistent themes that are sufficiently broad enough to cover the general qualities of a given discourse (Harter and Japp, 2001). Representative anecdote as a critical tool is particularly suitable for analysis of mediated discourse because ‘it resonates with the anecdotal, representative, dramatic form of the media’ and that ‘the content carried by that form is used by millions as equipment for

living' (Brummett, 1984:166), which still holds for memetic media today. Therefore, representative anecdote provides a critical lens to discern how a given discourse reveals the complex cultural realities through rhetorical strategies and its power in shaping the ways in which cultural members perceive and respond to cultural concerns in their living (Japp, 1991). Memes, in this regard, can be seen as a contemporary discourse formation that represents a sociocultural reality of memetic media in a novel structure of popular communication and cultural participation.

The term 'meme' was coined by the geneticist Richard Dawkins in 1976 when he applied this biological term to theorise the process of the cultural evolution of infectious replication (Dawkins, 2016). It has become particularly relevant in the digital age of participatory culture with relatively low barriers to expression and engagement and strong support for personal creations and their sharing (Jenkins, 2009). In this context, Shifman (2014: 41) defines an internet meme as 'a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, transformed via the internet by many users.' Likewise, Wiggins and Bowers (2015: 1903) see internet memes as artefacts of participatory digital culture: 'memes are remixed and iterated messages which are rapidly spread by members of participatory digital culture.' Milner (2016) particularly brings out the *memetic* process of meme creation, circulation, and transformation as incorporating individual texts into collective ones, individual netizens into broader public conversation and discourse construction. He points out five fundamental logics underpinning this memetic process: multimodality, reappropriation, resonance, collectivism, and spread.

Multimodality refers to the remixing of different communicative modes such as language text, image, audio, video, and hypertext (Milner, 2016). As digital artefacts, internet memes are usually multimodal, blurring multiple modes of communication and therefore more versatile in mediated conversations. In addition to remixed format, memetic media also features hybridity of contents, i.e. *reappropriation*, which is key to memetic creation and sharing as individuals reuse popular texts for different interpretations. Similar to 'bricolage'

as a form of cultural poaching in cultural studies (Clarke, 1990; de Certeau, 1984; Hebdige, 1987) and ‘intertextuality’ or ‘interdiscursivity’ as relational texts and discourses in discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1993), Milner (2016) points out that reappropriation is rendered much easier and more creative on digital platforms. The multiplicity in multimodality and reappropriation leads to *resonance* as further imitations are inspired through the cultural appeal of memes and a varying degree of *collectivism* as memes are shared in communities and spread through collectives. And finally, there is participatory *spread*. Different from virality, i.e. accelerated information circulation that usually follows a power-law distribution, memes spread in processes of transformative reappropriation where new iterations are constantly created and keep resonating through collectives.

With these logics, memetic media is particularly powerful in encouraging and widening participation in digital cultures, which is often followed by wider and more significant social impact. This case study of the ‘toad worship’ culture applies Milner’s theorisation of five memetic logics to cultural participation in the ‘toad worship’ phenomenon, analysing how memes of Jiang are created and shared within and beyond this cultural community, and how these user-generated memes interact with his image as Chinese president in official narratives. Moreover, examining memes as representative anecdote, this study sees through the structural changes in media and its power in forming narratives about political leaders in China. We shall see how ‘toad worship’ memes represent Jiang in ways that differ from traditional narratives of Chinese presidents. The anecdotal analysis will unravel how this difference is enabled by memetic media and reveal the power of memetics in presidential image reconstruction in China.

6.2 ‘Toad worship’ as a memetic culture

To put it in simply, the ‘toad worship’ is mainly about cultural practices of creating and sharing memes about Jiang Zemin among Chinese netizens. According to Fang (2020), it started from the Falun Gong (FLG) movement who spread different negative news and rumours about Jiang on the internet to vilify him as a toad, which is also confirmed in my

interviews. The most famous materials FLG promoted include the toad metaphor and two video clips (Jiang's interview with anchor Mike Wallace in August 2000, and Jiang's angry remarks at a Hong Kong journalist in October 2000). These negative materials about Jiang had caused great shock and curiosity among a small group of Chinese netizens in the early 2010s. They went on to dig out more about Jiang outside what was said on China's mainstream media, including a large number of his photos, videos and personal stories. Among these materials, they found another interesting video of his visit in 2009 to the China Union Engineering Corporation where he used to work as an engineer in the 1950s. This video together with the two video clips of his interview with Wallace and his remarks at the Hong Kong journalist has become the 'Three Masterpieces' (蛤三篇) in 'toad worship.' They are so named among 'toad worshippers' because these are the primary source of meme making.

Jiang's interview with Wallace ('Wallace Interview') was famous because to many young 'toad worshippers,' this was the first time that a Chinese president sat down with a western journalist to openly and directly talk about many of the sensitive political topics about China including human rights and dictatorship. Many participants said they were much impressed that Jiang answered all the very challenging and even aggressive questions in a very clever but also honest way. Jiang's angry remarks at a Hong Kong journalist ('Angry Remarks') was even more well-known in China. Most of my interviewees were attracted to 'toad worship' because of this video clip. When asked whether his supporting Hong Kong's then chief executive would imply it was already an internal decision instead of a democratic election, Jiang was enraged and lectured the journalist switching between Chinese Mandarin, Cantonese and English (Landler, 2000). All the words he said, like 'I feel that you journalists need to learn,' 'all the questions you asked are too simple, sometimes naive,' 'you know Wallace from the US, he is far better than you all, we talked and laughed comfortably,' 'don't try to make a big news,' 'I'm angry,' etc. were received with great shock and surprise among Chinese netizens because it was rare to see a Chinese politician expressing anger on such an occasion. The third video is slightly different; it

comes from state media ('CUEC Visit'). In his visit to the corporation in 2009, the then retired Jiang looked back on his career, recalling how he ended up as the President and reviewing his political achievements with humility. It did not get viral until the rise of 'toad worship' culture in the early 2010s. Like the second video, many of his lines went viral on the internet, most famously including a Chinese poem he cited 'One should uphold his country's interest with his life, and should not evade responsibilities for fear of personal loss' (苟利国家生死以, 岂因祸福避趋之), his remarks on how he as an engineer later became the President 'Our fate, of course, relies on our personal achievement, but it also depends on historical processes,' and most of all, the English word 'excited' he spoke upon receiving a gift as a guest.

The 'Three Masterpieces,' together with other materials of Jiang including photos, audios, videos, quotes, gestures, etc., have become rich source materials for 'toad worshippers' to create diversified and creative memes about Jiang. According to my interviewees, since the early 2010s, these memes have been widely spread on different social media platforms in China, which constitute what we call the 'toad worship' culture today. 'Toad worship' is first and foremost a memetic culture on the internet. The following will unravel this culture in more detail using Milner's five logics of memetic media.

6.2.1 Multimodality

The first and most straightforward feature about 'toad worship' is its multimodality. For most ordinary netizens including those who do not actively participate in this culture, 'toad worship' is known as popular textual catchphrases like 'excited,' 'naïve,' emojis readapted from his photos, and image macros (user-connotated images). For example, Figure 20 below is one of the 'old-fashioned' (according to my interviewees) and most commonly used image macros. It connotes Jiang's photograph with his famous quote 'excited.' Likewise, Figure 21 captions a more simplified cartoon figure of Jiang with 'naïve.' These are commonly used as emojis in online conversations.



Figure 20. 'Excited' (from 'Visit to CUEC')



Figure 21. 'Naive' (from 'Angry Remarks')

In addition to these most common forms of memes, 'toad worship' memes also include a variety of audio and video remixing. According to P9 who became a 'toad worshipper' at quite an early stage of this culture, 'toad worship' started to spread across the internet through audio remix in 2012:

At that time, we were using singing synthesizer applications like UTAU to turn human voices into songs. Do you remember the song Gangnam Style? Someone made Jiang's version of Gangnam Style using his voice from the "Angry Remarks". That was in July 2012. There were quite a few music creations before that, but that was the most popular one. It immediately went viral on the internet. And lots of people were attracted and began to join us. That was when this culture grew up from a game within a small group of people to entertainment among larger crowds.

As P9 remembered, this 'Toad Style' song first appeared on Chinese social media but it was later censored. It was then uploaded to YouTube four months later in November 2012. With 137k views and about 300 comments, it seems still one of the most popular memes among 'toad worshippers.'

Another popular audio meme was a ‘toad worshipper’ impersonating Jiang by singing a Chinese song called ‘Take you to travel,’ only adding one quote at the end of the original lyrics: ‘I want to take to you the romantic country of Turkey, and then Tokyo and Paris. I also like Miami and Los Angeles where black people live. Dear sweetie don’t be astonished. Let’s go to bustling Shanghai and Beijing (original lyrics), and be the General Secretary of CCP.’ This 25-second audio, according to P15, came from a ‘toad worship’ group on WeChat in 2018 where one of the members sang this song to the group. As P15 recalled, ‘This song has been a real hit among “toad worshippers” in the last two months. I have also saved it on my phone. It’s so special because the voice is a true likeness.’

The multimodal potential of ‘toad worship’ memes increases their versatility in online communication and creates wider resonance across online communities, like P9 said how the ‘Toad Style’ song synthesized from the most famous ‘Angry Remarks’ promoted this culture to a broader group of people. From multimodality, we can also see that it has become much easier in the age of digital media to create multimodal information (Milner, 2016). With a similar voice, one can easily impersonate Jiang and sing a song to a group chat. And it is even easier to create an image macro meme using Jiang’s photo. This is extremely helpful for the creation of memetic content on the internet as more individuals are attracted to this culture and are inspired to make their own memes. These creations not only learn from the previous memes using multimodality strategies, but also even frequently reappropriate Jiang’s materials to create new hybrids.

6.2.2 Reappropriation

Reappropriation is the primary logic underpinning ‘toad worship’ meme creation. Most ‘toad worship’ memes feature a combination of Jiang’s materials and another contrasting genre. For example, both Figure 22 and 23 are GIF memes with Jiang photoshopped into clips of Tom and Jerry. In Figure 22, Tom is reading Jiang’s biography *The Man Who Changed China*. In Figure 23, shocked to find Jiang behind the door, Tom immediately shuts the door and holds it for fear to stay away from a ‘big leader’ and powerful politician like him.

Figure 24 is an imitation of the well-known ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’ poster. It changes this slogan into Jiang’s famous quotes ‘too young too simple, sometimes naïve’ from the ‘Angry Remarks,’ and the crown into a frog.

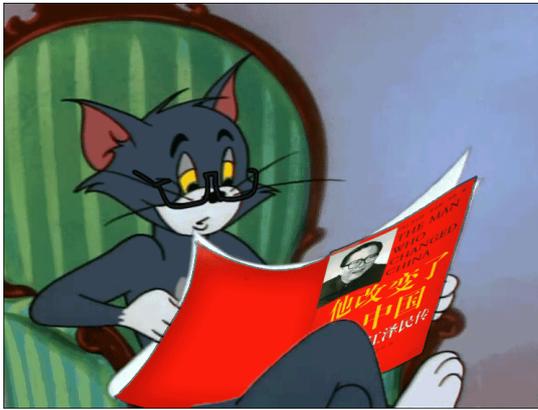


Figure 22. Tom reading Jiang’s biography (GIF)



Figure 23. Tom shuts the door at Jiang (GIF)



Figure 24. Too young, naïve, too simple

In addition to these meme examples juxtaposing Jiang with other cultural contents, ‘toad worshippers’ also create unexpected connections between Jiang and other topics on the internet by sharing stories, leaving comments, answering questions, etc. Different from the memes above, these connections are much subtler. Many interviewees said they used to

spend hours on Zhihu (a Chinese question-and-answer social media), looking for answers that ‘worship’ Jiang in a covertly clever way. They shared with me quite a few impressive examples of these unexpected ‘toad worship’ answers.

I remember a question going like, how to quarrel in a decent and elegant way, and then there is an answer saying, “let me give you a model”, followed by a string of snapshots of “Angry Remarks” at the journalist. That was really funny.’ (P26)

Another example is an answer to the question ‘Why is Wallace (a Chinese fast food chain) so much cheaper than KFC.’ It imitates Jiang’s lines exactly as they were in ‘Angry Remarks,’ only changing some of the words to fit in the context of fast food. (This answer has later disappeared for censorship or self-censorship reasons. The text below is translated from a snapshot of the original webpage shared by an interviewee.)

I feel anxious for you all, really. None of these answers gets the point. Wallace from the US is way better than KFC. It’s suitable for elders like me, sitting there talking and laughing comfortably. So KFC really needs to raise its level of cooking. Don’t just try to make a big combo. Everywhere in the world you go, KFC makes fast food faster than Wallace, but the chicken thighs are always too crispy, sometimes salty. That’s not the right way. So KFC, I’m sorry but I’m saying this to you as an elder, to share with you my life experience. You understand that? I’m angry.

In addition to Zhihu, ‘toad worshippers’ also like to leave comments implying Jiang below the official Weibo account of Shanghai Jiao Tong University (SJTU) where Jiang graduated. As P27 said, ‘I don’t even need to see the comments, because I know they are all about him. You have a look yourself, every post of SJTU, no matter what it’s about, you can find comments worshipping him.’ It is true. In a recent SJTU Weibo post on 29 April 2021 encouraging people to read books for example, the most liked comment said, ‘For books, I only read *The Man Who Changed China*.’

These practices of reappropriation are crucial to ‘toad worship’ culture. By blending Jiang’s materials with numerous other contents which are in most cases non-political, reappropriation depoliticises the context about a former president of China and at the same time politicises the non-political contents. For example, Figures 22 and 23 politicise Tom and Jerry, but Figure 24 and the Wallace-KFC answer, on the other hand, depoliticise the ‘Angry Remarks.’ This depoliticisation/politicisation effects of reappropriation blur the boundary between the political and the non-political, and opening the restricted genre of political ‘toad worship’—especially in its early phases in around 2010—to everyday reappropriation like what we can see today in SJTU’s Weibo posts. It is in this way that reappropriation increases cultural participation and transmission (Milner, 2016).

6.2.3 Resonance

Among the elusive, different, and sometimes very personal ways that memes resonate with individual participants, playful humour is an obvious and prevalent factor (Milner, 2016). We share what is humorous, surprising, or emotionally arousing (Shifman, 2014). That is also how ‘toad worship’ memes connect with existing and potential cultural participants. When asked about their initial reaction when they first saw any ‘toad worship’ memes, nearly all of my interviewees said they were surprised, amused, and ‘excited’ (P10: ‘I laughed for a whole day, just laughing’). They found these memes interesting and funny for different reasons, which can be categorised based on the three theories of humour: incongruity, relief, and superiority (Monro, 1951).

Humour of incongruity occurs when two elements are sharply contrasted and at the same time cleverly fused (Monro, 1951). It comes from a textual formation that combines conflicting or incompatible scripts (Attardo and Raskin, 1991). In fact, ‘toad worship’ culture was initially built on the incongruity between Jiang’s rich emotions and his identity as Chinese president which is usually narrated in official rhetoric to be dignified with authority. Most of my interviewees described how they became interested in ‘toad worship’ because they found him ‘different.’

The reason why I was attracted was that it broke some kind of myth about political leaders. I used to think that they were always perfect, they were always correct, like textbook correct. And then suddenly there is this guy, with this video, which basically tells you that they are still human. They also get angry and go off ranting on people. And that's really appealing to me. (P21)

His behaviours are not very funny if he were my roommate for example. But he's the President, and that's really rare. I was interested (in 'toad worship') not because of his political views or anything, but because of this special combination, what he did, and who he is. (P7)

Following these first-hand materials, later memes further use the political nature of Jiang to make contrasts and create incongruity humour. People find these memes funny simply because Jiang and his stories are not expected in the context. For example, P19 described a joke that she found most amusing:

It's a clip from some Japanese anime or advert poster. There's a Shinkansen train running. And below the train where there should be something like an advertising slogan, it writes, 'We run even faster than Hong Kong journalists.' Wow! You know, just amazing!

The joke 'run faster than Hong Kong journalists' is one of the most popular ones in 'toad worship.' It comes from the 'Angry Remarks' when Jiang said to the Hong Kong journalists: 'There is only one good thing about you. Whenever something happens in the world, you'll run over there faster than the western journalists.' In this meme she described, people would never relate 'toad worship' with a high-speed train. But the connection is so cleverly made that Jiang's angry irony about Hong Kong journalists is well suited in the context.

In addition to incongruity, the humour of 'toad worship' memes also comes from relief from restraint. According to Freud (2002: 102), humour is a means of outwitting our

internal inhibitions: ‘the joke then represents a rebellion against such authority, a liberation from the oppression it opposes.’ For ‘toad worship,’ part of its humour comes from the excitement of outwitting political authority and internet censorship. P10 said, ‘It’s more enjoyable to play with this if it’s not allowed, but in places where we can talk about it more openly, people are actually not very interested.’ P33 felt that this was the main reason that ‘toad worship’ went popularised: ‘it feels like the forbidden fruit.’ P18 described this feeling more vividly:

To be honest, it’s like the most exciting sex happens not at home but in places where you shouldn’t be having sex. ‘Toad worshipping’ on the Chinese internet feels like doing it in a cubicle in a shopping mall. (laughter)

For a very small group of people, they find ‘toad worship’ memes funny and appealing because they feel proud to know something unusual. It can also be explained by the theory of superiority that views laughter as ‘a sudden glory arising from some conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly’ (Hobbes, 1968: 5). For ‘toad worshippers,’ this glory does not come from Jiang’s memes and jokes per se, but from their knowing these jokes while others cannot, their being able to ‘get’ how funny these jokes are while others are not. For example, P38 said, ‘I used to feel really superior among my peers because I knew about this and I was really excited to share these jokes with them, just to show off.’ P40 also admitted that a small part of his interest in ‘toad worship’ came from a sense of self-satisfaction in knowing something cool. But this sense of superiority would usually fade away as they get older and ‘toad worship’ culture get more widely known.

For these different reasons of humour, ‘toad worship’ memes easily resonate with Chinese netizens. It can not only connect with netizens who are not used to a ‘different’ Chinese President, who particularly enjoy challenging the authority, and perhaps younger groups of people who feel superior for knowing the ‘hidden’ side of Jiang, but also potentially appeal to ordinary netizens more generally simply because incongruity humour is funny in

itself (like the Shinkansen joke). Resonance attracts new participants and encourages existing participants to share existing memes and create more.

6.2.4 Collectivism

Like all the jokes, ‘toad worship’ requires a cultural understanding to decipher its humour and create resonance. Not everyone can easily get the point and find it funny. Its resonance naturally forms a cultural collective. Digital media has a great advantage in weaving individual activities into networked collectives (boyd, 2011; Papacharissi, 2014). Milner (2016) refines the collectivist criterion in a memetic logic by bringing out the role of internet memes in promoting further creation, circulation and transformation on the internet. In other words, collectivism does not apply to static memes in themselves but describes the process of memes connecting individuals and the orientation of their memetic development towards collectives through extensive intertextuality. It is in this sense that ‘toad worship’ is a cultural collective. According to my interviewees, there is no markedly discernible repertoire of ‘toad worship’ memes. For censorship reasons, ‘toad worshippers’ hardly use any hashtags or keywords to connect with others, and they try to keep a low profile by mixing ‘toad worship’ memes with other contents to avoid attention from the internet police. ‘Toad worship’ memes are therefore multifarious in their forms and contents on a number of different social networking sites. Like aforementioned ‘toad worship’ answers to unrelated questions on Zhihu and ‘toad worship’ comments on SJTU’s Weibo posts of daily greetings, ‘toad worship’ takes such a variety of different forms that can hardly form a unified, searchable collective of memes. It is nevertheless collectivist in the sense that it resonates with individuals in the cultural sense of humour, which relies on not only a common cultural knowledge but also a set of cultural codes that creates this common knowledge into a lingua franca (Milner, 2013b, 2016).

As mentioned above, ‘toad worship’ was built based on the ‘Three Masterpieces.’ However, the ‘Wallace Interview’ and ‘Angry Remarks’ are censored on Chinese social media. Although as my interviewees explained, a lot of people, ‘toad worshippers’ or not, have

seen these videos in their own way (using VPN, being abroad, shared by friends who downloaded the videos onto their devices, etc.), for a long time these videos have remained unknown to a large number of Chinese netizens. As the culture of ‘toad worship’ develops, its memetic multimodal reappropriation continues to inspire new reappropriations, gradually moving away from the ‘Three Masterpieces’ and the other materials in their original form. Milner (2016) points out that a particular ‘grammar’ of cultural discourse is developed premised on multimodality and reappropriation; memes applying this grammar bridge multimodal dialogues between individual expression and popular imaginations by continuously blending the familiar with novel iterations. This way, memetic media has created a lingua franca for this cultural collective. It is more open than jargon because of its tendency of spreading out through cultural poaching, but it also involves gatekeeping, particularly in the case of ‘toad worship’ as discussions however playful and light-hearted about Chinese politicians are still very much restricted on the internet. Partly to avoid directly mentioning Jiang’s name and his signature quotes, ‘toad worshippers’ frequently ‘poach’ his quotes that are more versatile for everyday conversations (like ‘excited,’ ‘too simple sometimes naïve,’ ‘I’m angry,’ etc.) from their original contexts, and reappropriate them in alternative non-political contexts for meme creation. For years of memetic reappropriation, ‘toad worshippers’ have developed their own ‘grammar’ and ‘vocabulary’ of their collective vernacular. Without any background knowledge about Jiang’s hidden stories or at least the ‘Three Masterpieces,’ one would hardly relate these memes with China’s former leader. Like P6 said,

‘Toad worship’ is all about that rhetoric, that way of speaking, I mean these memes. Only ‘toad worshippers’ can get how funny they are. For those who don’t know the background story, they wouldn’t think it’s so amusing. It just doesn’t make sense to them.

P33 also said ‘this is just a kind of language, or you can say a social dialect.’ P19 described her excitement when finding another ‘toad worshipper’ in a group discussion:

I remember so vividly that we were in a group discussion, I said, this idea, excited (in English), and the boy sitting opposite raised his eyebrows and adjusted his black-framed glasses (to show that he got the 'hint' of this jargon). I was really, well, excited hahaha. That was really a surprise!

Most of my interviewees shared with me how they spotted and connected with other 'toad worshippers' through their cultural vernacular. And they particularly enjoyed this ambiguity of vernacular of being both quasi collective within their own group and open to new memetic iterations and potential cultural participants.

6.2.5 Spread in participatory media

With the primary logic of reappropriation, 'toad worship' culture is also closely intertwined with other popular cultures on the internet. The spread of 'toad worship' culture is not just viral, but memetic in the sense that it features intertextuality in its transformative reappropriation (Milner, 2016). 'Toad worship' from its beginning was deeply influenced by the culture of egao on the Chinese internet. Egao started to popularise in China around 2006. It was defined by the official newspaper *Guangming Daily* as 'a popular online strategy, in the form of language, picture, and animation, which comically subverts and deconstructs the so-called normal' (Gong and Yang, 2010). The core of egao is to use different and usually playful and creative media and language strategies to deconstruct normality. The targets for egao deconstruction include a wide range of objects and digital contents. P9 said, 'you could see egao on pretty much everything, and it was just a matter of time when political leaders also became targets of egao, and then there was "toad worship."' Like P9, quite a few interviewees defined 'toad worship' in this way as 'egao of Jiang,' as it can have different and 'ambiguous motivations not necessarily limited to irony or actual worship' (P14).

Apart from egao which can be seen as the overarching internet culture, 'toad worship' also connects with other different internet cultures. For example, the aforementioned 'Toad

Style' song was inspired by *guichu* culture, a mashup style of music videos combining, repeating, and auto-tuning audio and video clips (Davis, 2018). And like Figure 3 and Figure 4 above, 'toad worship' memes also very frequently remix discourses like Tom and Jerry, Harry Potter, Marvel stories, ancient Chinese mythology, stioj jokes, etc. These constant juxtapositions with other cultures, as well as timely events, are the essence to keep the vitality of 'toad worship' far beyond the 'Three Masterpieces.' This kind of spread in the sense of spreadable media (Jenkins et al., 2013) is always activating new contexts and inspiring new iterations.

6.3 Anecdotal analysis

From the introduction of the 'toad worship' culture above, we can find two different representations of Jiang. If we see it as part of the egao internet culture, then 'toad worship' is essentially about representing Jiang 'differently,' i.e. deconstructing one representation of Jiang with a novel alternative. As mentioned earlier, 'toad worship' started as a stark contrast between his behaviours and his political identity. According to my interviewees, this incongruity is the fundamental logic underpinning the memetic culture of 'toad worship' regardless of cultural participants' various motivations. The representation 'toad worship' attempts to deconstruct comes from the official image of Jiang as China's former leader. Thirty-nine out of my 40 interviewees were born after the 1990s (Jiang was President from 1993 to 2003). They said they only had a very vague impression of him before 'toad worship.' 'I was in elementary school when he retired so I hardly remembered anything about him. I just knew he was the third leadership of our country, he was our President, nothing else' (P20). Most of them only remembered him as a normal political leader, i.e. 'a loving and kind old man,' 'a dull and poker-faced politician,' 'always so stiff and official,' 'very serious and respectable,' 'not to be trifled with.' And a small part of interviewees had been affected by general public opinion, their elder family members, or the FLG propaganda against Jiang, and used to have a negative impression on him. 'I don't know why but Jiang himself is not a person with respectable character among the older

generations in general so I thought “toad worship” was just to laugh at him and to criticise him’ (P17). P30 said,

I was just a small kid in his time, all my knowledge came from the adults. They were very critical of him. They always said this was bad that was bad so I also tended to think he was bad. And all the FLG news when I used their VPN, the first few times when I had a glance over their front pages saying bad things about Jiang, I really did believe it. But then you know, what they said was just so absurd, just bullshit, so I realised that was all lies about him, and I’m angry (impersonating Jiang).

P26 was affected by her grandparents.

In the beginning, I felt quite negative about him. I remember there was corruption and laid-off workers, this kind of thing, so my grandma was not very satisfied with Jiang’s leadership.

P40 was more directly influenced by his family.

My parents used to work for a state-owned enterprise, and you know in the early 2000s a lot of state-owned enterprises were closed under the state policy, so my dad was laid off. So my family really, let’s say from my current perspective, had a really biased opinion about the third generation of leaders including Jiang.

Here the representation of Jiang as the target of deconstruction in ‘toad worship’ is produced in a social and discursive complex of official narratives, public opinion, and other opposing narratives like FLG’s propaganda. First, there has been official rhetorical construction of political leaders in China as part of the ideological construction to enhance the legitimacy of the Communist Party and the political authority of its representatives. Image construction has always been an important part of political elections in the US and other democratic countries (see for example Cwalina et al., 2005; Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles, 1996); it is also crucial in socialist China, perhaps even more

prominent. With extensive and rigid media control in China for political propaganda (Shambaugh, 2007), nationwide news reports and narratives about political leaders especially the President follow the official rhetoric from the central new agencies like *Xinhua* and *Renmin Daily*. My interviewees' general impression of Jiang as kind, respectable, serious, official, etc. comes from this official narrative of presidential image construction. Like what P8 described, 'Chinese Presidents are always the same, not that they are the same in themselves, but that they are portrayed and described in the same way, with that socialist style.' For those young Chinese who barely remembered anything concrete about Jiang, what was left for their impression (before they learned about the 'toad worship' culture) was merely a general presidential image like all other Chinese leaders.

Second, however, the party-state wants its leaders to be remembered, there is always public opinion among the general public. It is usually anecdotal, based on not only the official image but also the policies and social changes that they directly experience in everyday life. It is very common for those who actually live through a political leadership to have different and sometimes unsatisfied feelings about these leaders. Like what Fang (2020) found in his conversations with 'toad worshippers' (which is also consistent with my interviews) that many 'toad worshippers' are using Jiang's memes to criticise Xi's leadership, my interviewees also described how their parents and grandparents felt the same way about Jiang's leadership. According to my interviewees, as kids in Jiang's time, they were more easily affected by the opinions from the older generations, which contributed to the mediated image of Jiang among the youth.

Third, the FLG propaganda on Jiang's negative rumours also had an impact on forming Jiang's representation. As a few of my interviewees described, in the early 2010s when netizens needed to visit foreign websites blocked by the Great Fire Wall, the most popular and convenient VPN was developed by FLG. 'When you got successfully connected, the Epoch Times homepage popped up and all you could see was this kind of stuff' (P30). FLG's propaganda about Jiang can be seen as a counter-narrative that demystifies Jiang's

official image and further demonises him as ‘a toad.’ This kind of counter-discourse may also have influenced the general public opinion, but perhaps more likely the young netizens using their VPN simply to surf the internet.

This neutral and to some extent negative representation of Jiang reveals its social and discursive context of monolithic narratives, pre-digital communication, and the influence of counter-hegemonic discourse through the clever use of the internet in the early digital era. But ‘toad worship’ memes popularising on the internet since 2010s offer a sharply different representation of Jiang. Most of them knew about ‘toad worship’ from the ‘Angry Remarks’ video, which was immediately ‘surprising’ and ‘interesting.’ The ‘interesting’ parts about Jiang first and foremost come from his personal qualities in contrast with the presidential image in official narratives.

These political leaders are always dull and poker-faced and speak very slowly without any facial expression, but then you see this guy, this really interesting leader saying these really interesting things, that’s really interesting. (P34)

He doesn’t seem so serious as I expected, like that really stiff and rigid kind of style that you would normally see on political leaders. (P39)

He’s just so lively and vivid, like a young person that you can actually talk about and gossip around. (P17)

He makes me feel that our leaders are not someone up there who is so remote and robotic, he feels really real and human like any of us, he gets angry, he makes mistakes, he has problems, etc., and for me that makes him more attractive in a way. (P13)

Surprised at Jiang’s liveliness and down-to-earth personality from the ‘Angry Remarks,’ ‘toad worshippers’ were eager to know more about this unconventional political leader. Some of them went on to look for his other videos, interviews, public speeches, biography, even his university thesis, and made them into memes that were more suitable for public

transmission on the internet. At this stage, ‘toad worshippers’ found more personal traits about Jiang, including his language skills, his ‘talking and laughing with Wallace comfortably,’ his art talent, his technique as an engineer, etc. The memetic development of ‘toad worship’ encourages netizens to dig more about Jiang from different perspectives that they had not previously known about (even if these materials were available in mainstream media, they were too old for young ‘toad worshippers’).

Like he played the ukulele in Hawaii, and he’s high-educated, he could actually respond to really unfriendly and challenging questions from a western journalist, even questions like ‘Are you a dictator?’, that was really impressive. (P1)

Later I came to know that he knew English, Russian, Romanian, among other languages, and I saw his working paper he wrote as an engineer, very academic and professional, and he could even play musical instruments, that’s just so cool! (P8)

These interesting parts came more from what most of my interviewees concluded as his ‘personal charisma,’ which is appealing and attractive not only by contrast with his official image but more from this person himself. To this point, with the development of ‘toad worship,’ the representation of Jiang has gradually changed from a representative of a country to a representative of a person. As P9 very observantly pointed out,

I wouldn’t say if he is more genuine as a person because these things are still mediated—he’s still a politician after all—but you have to admit that what he performs is not just about state affairs. Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping are more like an image of our country, they are the one person who basically represents this country. But in Jiang Zemin, you can see his personal parts, whether they are real or not, biased or not, he does reveal some of the personal things; he pins this representative image of a country down to a real person.

However, the reason that netizens find the more personal side of Jiang particularly impressive and intriguing is precisely because of his political identity.

I still think this personal image of Jiang is not really about himself. This side of him as ‘toad worship’ is more like a symbol of the different sides of a state leader, a different representation of a state leader. Like we don’t care about his children his family his personal life. What we actually care about, is his identity as Chinese President and what he did that differs from the other Chinese Presidents, but he’s still the President, that’s the fundamental basis. (P10)

From this, we can see that the ‘personal charisma,’ while diverting away from his official image towards personal traits as an ordinary person, is still fundamentally premised on his political identity as a state leader. As ‘toad worshippers’ explored more materials about Jiang, they continued to make them into internet memes, as textual jokes, visual memes, audio remixes, video mashups, etc. as we see above. This is when ‘toad worship’ really started to popularise, as these small, creative, and versatile memes of multimodality and reappropriation are useful in diverse online contexts and resonate in a wider public. These memes have become so viral that they are known as catchphrases and popular memes used on an everyday basis.

Some of the phrases are widely known on the internet, like ‘excited,’ ‘naïve,’ ‘too young too simple.’ They had already been popularised across social media before I knew it was from Jiang. I thought they were just catchphrases like any other. (P2)

P8 told me that she came across a Chinese calligraphy work as part of the art collection in Peking University (see Figure 25 below, the one on the right is ‘Too young too simple’ in its Chinese transliteration “图样图森破”).



Figure 25. Calligraphy artwork collection in Peking University, photo by Peking University BBS

I remember in 2012 or so there was an art collection in our No.2 Teaching Building, and there was this Chinese calligraphy of a few internet buzzwords of the time, and ‘too young too simple’ was one of them. I thought that was also just a buzzword until later my classmates told me it was from the ‘Angry Remarks.’ I feel that these memes and these buzzwords are becoming more normalised, like very prevalent and suitable in everyday conversations. Like ‘I’m angry,’ ‘excited,’ it’s nothing different from the words themselves without its ‘toad worship’ hint. (P8)

Other interviewees also mentioned this popularisation of ‘toad worship’ memes, as ‘it has merged into my everyday language system without hinting on any particular message’ (P10), ‘become neutralised as a normal language’ (P23), and ‘one of the ways we communicate online’ (P11). The visual memes, too, have gradually depoliticised: ‘it’s nothing different from other memes and emojis, just to end a conversation, or start a conversation, like normal emojis, just for communicative purposes’ (P13). As a result of the memetic spread of ‘toad worship’ memes, the representation of Jiang has developed to be a comic and cultural symbol instead of Jiang himself as a real person. ‘It has become increasingly abstract, like you can think of him at a pair of black-framed glasses’ (P10). ‘It has become a cultural symbol, not really about him, but about something that is created and recreated on the internet’ (P39). P17 further explained that for him ‘it has been detached from Jiang

himself, like a derivative that has gradually deflected from its original source and purpose'. From what they described, the 'toad worship' culture through iterative mutations and memetic spread has become a representative of a representation. It is neutralised, normalised, and depoliticised. It is deflected towards multiple and ambiguous contexts and motivations of meaning-making and digital communication.

In this memetic process, this changing representation of Jiang reflected in 'toad worship' memes as representative anecdote differs greatly from the previously discussed representation grounded in the official rhetoric, pre-digital public opinion, and other counter-narratives. The 'toad worship' anecdote represents the landscape of spreadable media that encourages wider cultural participation and transmission (Jenkins et al., 2013) and the logics of memetic media that produce continuous cultural iterations (Milner, 2016). Contemporary media of these characteristics has comprehensively moved beyond the so-called Web 1.0 in the late 1990s and early 2000s when the authoritarian rhetoric of Jiang was produced by the state and anti-Jiang propaganda was promoted by dissident groups like FLG. Despite their opposition, the official narrative and its counter-narratives both spread their message in a traditional way of one-to-many communication. From the 2010s onwards, the internet in China has become increasingly reliant upon user-generated content and grassroots participation. As a result, neither the party-state of China nor any powerful counter-narrative is able to fully control representations of Jiang for their own interest. The memetic culture of 'toad worship' by its nature remains fluid, open, and diversified, as collective wisdom of the contemporary Chinese internet. Its practices of reinterpreting and reinventing representations of Jiang as former President signify an important move beyond a power struggle of rivalry and opposition between the official rhetoric and dissent. Instead of conforming to the official rhetoric or supporting its counterforces, 'toad worship' is taking a third position in mediating different and broad-ranging interpretations and representations of Jiang, enriching his image beyond the single dimension of repressions/resistance towards an open-ended public discourse of popular culture. The following section will elaborate on this process of mediation.

6.4 Memetic reconstruction of hegemonic narratives

The two representations of Jiang at stake in ‘toad worship’ culture reveal the different realities about media, political dynamic, and social cultures in which they are deeply grounded. As ‘toad worship’ spreads in a memetic way, the traditional image of Jiang as either a respectable President or a dictator has been gradually reconstructed. Most of my interviewees experienced a change of impression in their participation in ‘toad worship,’ either from simply little knowledge or a generally negative feeling about him to a completely different understanding depending on their own interest and motivations in ‘toad worship’ participation. Some of them have developed a much more fully-fledged understanding of him, including his career experiences, personal skills, interviews, even his political views. For example, quite a few of my interviewees were attracted by ‘toad worship’ memes to read his biography to know him better: ‘I really like it that he’s not just about these funny memes, I can actually know his ideals, his policies, how he matured as a politician’ (P34). Some of them simply have altered their previous impression.

To be honest, I’m not a very loyal ‘toad worshipper’ who knows everything about him, but I do feel that ‘toad worship’ has changed my negative feelings about him. There are so many positive things about him like his language skills, his engineering expertise that I really admire. (P8)

P40 whose parents were laid off under Jiang’s reform of state-owned enterprises said that his critical view of Jiang had changed to a more sensible and objective understanding as he learned more about the complicated social problems and contexts behind his policies. More interviewees were surprised to discover his lively and down-to-earth side as Chinese President and enjoyed this unconventional personality from a socialist state leader: ‘he’s so real,’ ‘he’s also human,’ ‘he feels more amiable now that I know he also gets pissed off,’ ‘he’s really honest about his feelings,’ ‘he knows how to fight back and that’s really cool.’ In short, ‘his image in “toad worship” humanises the image of a Chinese President’ (P9). This change is not just among enthusiastic ‘toad worshippers’; for those who do not really

participate in this culture but understand these memes and love to use them anyway, they also enjoy the symbolised image of Jiang, not as a person himself but more as a cultural derivative that is particularly useful in online communication with their peers. Like P6 said he was not very interested in knowing Jiang himself but he really enjoyed his comic representation in amusing memes. P31 also said ‘toad worship’ was just a particular way of communication among young people: ‘I think most young people are not really into politics, or politicians, they just want to find something to play with, to make memes with.’

Different from a single-dimensional image of Jiang as noble or evil in traditional narratives, ‘toad worship’ has promoted a variety of representations consistent with their multiple motivations in their cultural participation. Through their participation in ‘toad worship,’ they have gradually come to remember Jiang differently from previously perceived on either the official news reports or FLG’s propaganda. This reconstruction takes place essentially through the memetic logics of this internet culture. Multimodality and reappropriation ‘poach’ original materials of Jiang from their political contexts and recontextualise them in alternative discourse settings of communication modes and genres, which creates ambiguous effects between the depoliticisation of Jiang and politicisation of other non-political contents in the combo. And as these memes spread through mediated collectives and resonate with an increasing number of people, they get reappropriated for diverse ends in the memetic process of cultural participation (Milner, 2016). While revolving around the ‘fixity’ of Jiang, ‘toad worship’ meme-making is increasingly varied in its forms, diversified in its contents, and ambiguous in its participants’ motivations, revealing an essential quality of what Milner calls ‘the buzzing multitude.’ On the one hand, “‘toad worship’ is enriching Jiang as a person’ (P29) by digging out his unknown sides as a ‘remotely mysterious’ Chinese President. This contributes to a more comprehensive understanding or representation of Jiang among which either official narratives or the FLG rhetoric forms only a small, restricted, and biased segment. On the other hand, ‘toad worship’ has turned Jiang into a representative symbol that has to an increasing extent deflected from Jiang as a real person himself. He has become a cultural

icon that is remembered as a meme for self-expression, playful production, and collective vernacular. The presidential image of Jiang is completely deconstructed and even dissolved as ‘people don’t care where these jokes come from as long as they are funny and useful’ (P6), ‘you don’t know these memes then you are out’ (P8).

Either way, ‘toad worship’ memes *depoliticise* the ideological representations of Jiang in official narratives and its equally ideological counter-narratives. That is to say, Jiang’s representations in ‘toad worship’ are no longer aimed at mass persuasion and manipulation, but for cultural creation and communication from individuals themselves. And it is also in this sense that ‘toad worship; *repoliticises*, as the official representation of Jiang has been reconstructed, not as another reduced and partial representation like the FLG rhetoric, but rather towards diverse ends depending on individual participation in their specific contexts. These memetic logics inherent in the contemporary media landscape have been a significant force that encourages and accelerates popular participation in reconstructing the representation of a Chinese political leader which used to be dominated by top-down state power and only occasionally subverted by dissident groups in the same traditional ways of communication. What seems to be a change of representation is essentially a change of power dynamic, from a binary relationship of rivalry and opposition between the party-state and its dissidents, narrative and counter-narrative, hegemony and counter-hegemony, to constant multifarious discussions and interactions among a wide online public in forms of cultural participation.

This practice of repoliticisation through depoliticisation manifested in ‘toad worship’ culture responds to the idea of ‘decentring’ and ‘to critique from within’ in poststructuralist tradition. Indeed, any critique, reshape, or reconfiguration cannot take place from the external. As poststructuralist theories of hegemony and discourse have already argued, the system or structure inherently embeds its counterforces. However, I want to further this idea by arguing that we also need to reconsider the relationship between the established and its alternatives beyond rivalry and oppositions. In addition to the self-defending/self-

defeating duality of a system or structure that this poststructuralist argument indicates, another often neglected dimension of this poststructuralist notion is the possibilities of a system or structure being self-improving and self-evolving. Critiques, however significant and indicative as they may be, are not the whole story. There are, as I have stressed multiple times in this thesis, friendly and moderate iterations that are for fun and playfulness much more than for critique or subversion. What this friendly iteration does for the whole system has been seriously under-researched. It would oversimplify the complicated dynamic of this system if we understand this friendly iteration as defending or defeating it.

Situating my analysis in a hegemonic model of meaning negotiation, I argue that ‘toad worship’ humour nudges Jiang’s presidential image towards positiveness and pleasantness. Many participants’ impression of Jiang has generally experienced a change from negative to positive, which to their knowledge is very common among ‘toad worshippers.’ Even for those who are not interested in politics and treat him as a cultural symbol for non-political playfulness, this dissociation for fun indicates their light-hearted enjoyment in the ‘toad worship’ culture. Either way, narratives of Jiang as a political leader to a large extent have been painted colourful and enjoyable as compared with the boring, poker-faced, and authoritative official narrative. While enriching the one-sided official narratives, this culture is also reconstructing them to be appealing and agreeable among the public, even if these attempts are made in the cultural realm at a careful distance from politics. Although this is unlikely the intention of ‘toad worshippers’ to reconstruct and improve his presidential image, it is precisely their efforts in having fun with this culture that render Jiang’s stories and anecdotes interesting and this former President as a person more vividly relatable. Good for political authorities in China, this is exactly what they want to achieve with their ideological propaganda but unfortunately fails to achieve with its boring official stories. In this sense, cultural practices of ‘toad worship’ humour, while reconstructing official narratives, are also very much consistent with the goals of ideological persuasion. Socialist hegemony, then, is not resisted or subverted, but rather, redirected towards a widening common ground for reformation and reconstruction based on humour and ‘fun.’

Conclusion

The ‘toad worship’ phenomenon on the Chinese internet is particularly interesting as it is one of the very few playful cultures that remake a Chinese political leader into various memes. Emerging from participatory and memetic media, ‘toad worship’ can be seen as a representative anecdote that denotes a structural change not only in media logics but more importantly about the power dynamic regarding the representations of political leaders in authoritarian China. Existing research has provided an adequate analysis of the internet culture in China as grassroots resistance in opposition to the dominant political order. There have also been studies that move beyond this oppositional framework to explore the complexity, fluidity, and ambiguity of Chinese netizens’ cultural practices in relation to politics. Inspired by the study of ‘toad worship’ that comprehensively reveals the multi-layered motivations of ‘toad worshippers’ in their cultural participation that include both political and apolitical aspects (Fang, 2020), this study of ‘toad worship’ specifically looks into the political ambiguity from a perspective of Chinese presidential image construction.

Based on interviews and discourse analysis, this chapter uncovers memetic processes in which ‘toad worship’ memes are created and circulated across the internet and resonate widely among Chinese netizens. Analysis of ‘toad worship’ as a representative anecdote illustrates how this culture has deconstructed the traditional rhetoric of Jiang in a power struggle of rivalry towards diverse ends in a memetic process of cultural participation. While ‘toad worship’ *depoliticises* ideological representations of Jiang through cultural poaching, it also *repoliticises* the presidential image construction in China by destabilising ideological representations and opening the representation of Jiang to diversified cultural creations from the online public. Moreover, in decentring the official presidential image, these depoliticisation practices reshape the ideological discourse formations towards an appealing internet culture that is more widely accepted and appreciated among the public. Therefore, I argue that these cultural practices of ‘toad worship’ humour, while reconstructing the official ideology, also help with the building of hegemony.

CONCLUSION

Overview

This thesis was initially born out of my strong interest in a collection of creative ‘socialist memes’ emerging and popularising on the Chinese internet in December 2015. Not only was I immediately attracted to these funny political jokes as an active netizen and meme user myself, but I also had an instinctive feeling as a sociologist that this rather unconventional kind of humour had important sociopolitical implications embedded in amusement and laughter. Driven by my enthusiasm for this somehow ‘different’ type of political humour and my curiosity about its political relevance, I started my observations on Chinese social media as background research before my PhD. Based on this preliminary study, I defined this type of political jokes on the internet as *digital cultures of friendly political humour* and formed my overarching research question asking the role it plays in mediating the hegemonic relationship between the online public and the state in China.

Previous studies of both political humour and, more generally, internet culture mostly follow a dualist framework, analysing humour and/or contemporary digital culture as popular resistance or submission to the political order. This framework overstates the rebellious nature and subversive potential of the digitally mediated cultural practice of humour, especially in authoritarian contexts. As a result, it fails to capture the fluidity and ambiguity of the vibrant digital cultures on the Chinese internet. In this thesis, I have shown diverse kinds of political humour on Chinese social media about a variety of topics using different discourse techniques, as well as how they mutate and vary not only in a memetic process of media communication and cultural participation but also more importantly in a complicated process of interactions with political authority in China.

To account for the complexity of political humour in China that have received relatively

inadequate scholarly attention in existing research, I particularly look at the non-contentious, friendly and moderate cases of political jokes and memes—a different genre from explicitly critical and satiric political humour—and examine their role in mediating the hegemonic relationship between state and society. Among the rich data of friendly political humour that I collected through ethnographic observations on multiple platforms of Chinese social media, I distilled three categories according to how they connect to politics based on thematic analysis: 1) humorous recodings using official discourse to euphemise and justify controversial contents to avoid internet censorship, 2) jokes and memes remaking socialist propaganda posters and slogans, and 3) memetic cultures creating and circulating jokes and memes about Chinese political leaders most notably exemplified by the ‘toad worship’ culture about former Chinese President Jiang Zemin. As cases of political humour, they deal with censorship, propaganda, and official narratives respectively.

This research adopts a cultural perspective that studies political humour as popular culture mediated through digital social media while also trying to understand the workings of power underlying cultural practice. To do this, I develop a two-level poststructuralist approach to the politics of fun for theoretical analysis of humour. The first framework on the macro level of culture and power is built upon theories of culture, ideology, and discourse, each taking a different angle to address the workings of power in meaning signification. The interweaving of cultural struggle, hegemonic domination, and meaning construction in this framework lays out the main theoretical structure for my analysis of humour regarding the power dynamic between the online public and the ideological power that operates through discourse. The second framework, on the other hand, is more problem-oriented for the analysis of digital humour. It draws on humour studies, affect theory and contemporary media research of participatory culture and memetic media. Critical reviews of these studies bring out the importance of meaning multiplicity of humour, uncatalogued and ambiguous feelings of affect, and the affordances of digital media in facilitating cultural (re)formation in an iterative process. These two frameworks

are integrated into a poststructuralist theoretical approach to account for the digital humour characterised by polysemy, uncertainties, and ambiguities in a cultural dynamic. This epistemological orientation is particularly important for my research to move beyond the control/resistance binary in existing cultural studies and media research towards a more comprehensive understanding of the complexity and nuances of digital cultures.

Based on ethnographic observations on Chinese social media, discourse analysis of online humour, and 40 in-depth interviews with cultural participants, I find that practices of friendly political humour can lubricate communication on sensitive and controversial topics, and open up the official rhetoric on socialist ideology in China to personalised reinterpretations and redefinitions. Furthermore, while interweaving individuals' everyday experiences with ideological discourse, these practices of humour reconfigure the socialist hegemony in China from the single dimension of authoritarian coercion with resistance as its result towards being more consensual, that is to say, more based on active cultural participation from the mass public as a result of mutual construction of the ideological discourse instead of one-sided crafting and imposition of the socialist ideology. With these findings, I argue that humour plays an important role in negotiating the relationship between the dominant discourse of ideology and the public discourse of diversified voices orchestrated through practices of digital culture. In so doing, humour fundamentally enables the Chinese public to negotiate their hegemonic relationship with the state. Rather than signifying grassroots resistance to the authoritarian rule, friendly political humour can mobilise potentials of humour and digital affordances to steer political persuasion towards benign and harmonious ways of state-society interaction. This research of humour brings much-needed theoretical nuance to our understanding of the power dynamic in authoritarian societies as well as valuable empirical nuance to the discussion of culture and everyday politics in the digital age.

The word 'negotiation' as the key concept of argument in this thesis differs from its more common definition as two parties working through direct bilateral discussion to reach an

agreement. In this thesis, it means the other definition of the word: managing to find a way through obstacles and difficulty to get things done. This research focuses on the public side of the state-society relationship. In this context, ‘negotiation’ refers to how the online public carefully and strategically make their way through the many vague and uncertain restrictions, risks, pitfalls to have their voice in the discourse formation of dominant ideology. I am using this term to stress three aspects of this discourse participation practice. First, the space for public discourse formation on the Chinese internet is neither characterised by tightness that leaves no room for manoeuvre nor by tolerance of different voices. It is porous and intricate with twists and turns. Second, this complicated network of entanglements requires skills, tactics, expedients, and wits from the ‘players’ to navigate through the foggy space. Third and most important, the relationship featured in this discourse formation process is far from a simplistic control and resistance explanation, depicting the online public as the opposing side confronting the state. ‘Negotiation’ brings out all the careful and creative attempts not only to actively poke the porous obstacles and the elastic bottom line or passively dodge between them when tiptoeing around controversial issues. With these practices of humour shown in this thesis, the Chinese netizens are not simply resisting a system pressed upon them or celebrating temporary liberation deliberately granted in the authoritarian resilience. By the same logic, although not presented in this thesis, the state is not simply suppressing diversified voices or selectively allowing alternative discourses to relief tension. This huge foggy area of uncertainty is for both of them—if we are to reduce all the relevant parties down to the state and the online public—and both are *negotiating*, i.e. manoeuvring their way through it. What my thesis presents is the online public side of this story. When making their way through all the uncertainties in this **game** of discourse formation, they are painting their own ‘picture’ of discourse by leaving their voice and promoting the memetic reproduction of these voices. They are spreading their own various colours so that the rather dull and gloomy dominant colour painted by the state is diluted and also enriched with brightness and attractiveness through the popular appeal of light-hearted humour in cultural production. Instead of confrontational battles, this dynamic interplay is closer to a process

of organic blending or chemical reaction where variations and nuances are produced. It is on these three levels of analytical considerations that I describe this power relation underlying practices of humour ‘negotiation.’

In this chapter, I first summarise the major findings of this research based on the case studies in Chapters Four to Six, and discuss how I develop my central argument of humour as negotiation. Then, I assess the contribution of this research to current scholarly debates. Finally, I reflect on the limitations of this research as well as its implications for future studies of political humour and contemporary culture in China and beyond.

Findings and discussion

Previous chapters in this thesis have provided detailed empirical analysis of the three categories of political humour interacting with censorship, propaganda, and official narratives respectively. They all follow an analytical framework of critical discourse analysis, seeking to answer the following questions on three levels regarding 1) the textual features of political humour focusing on the rhetorical strategies in meaning making to create incongruity humour, 2) the memetic process of cultural participation in practices of political humour on the internet, 3) the cultural knowledge and the sociopolitical realities behind this political humour of incongruity, and the impact of political humour on this knowledge and the realities it represents.

Chapter Four studies euphemised humour that strategically uses official language to legitimise transgressive topics that would otherwise be censored on Chinese social media. Compared with the depoliticisation of political topics to bypass censorship, the politicisation of non-political topics such as obscenity and homosexuality is hardly seen in the research of resilience to censorship in China. This chapter focuses on the meaning making process of three socialist recodings of transgressive contents—literary pornography, queer fandom, and imported films—all of which are prone to strict censorship in China. Cultural analysis of these three cases shows how the practice of

‘socialist recoding’ varies from a simple circumvention strategy of masking pornography, to careful negotiation between subcultural values and the mainstream culture, then to active problematisation of censorship rules, and finally towards light-hearted playfulness and entertainment beyond censorship. This variation reveals a complicated dynamic in which resistance to censorship constitutes only one dimension of the multifarious cultural practice of recoding. This finding moves beyond the control/resistance understanding of practices to skirt and survive censorship on the Chinese internet. With cultural analysis of these three examples, I argue that censorship rules are not subverted, but in fact, played and messed with in a carnivalesque way, and the boundary between what can and cannot be said is not directly rejected, but rather blurred and problematised towards more uncertainties and hence possibilities. This way, socialist recoding practices of contents that are considered problematic in the current system of censorship unsettle its meaning regulation and mediate the interactivity between the mass public seeking fun and amusement on the internet and the dominant power in China.

Chapter Five focuses on a specific genre of ‘socialist memes’ popularising on Chinese social media in recent years. Based on my virtual ethnography, I reconstruct the whole process from their emergence on the internet in December 2015 to their ultimate normalisation today as an ordinary meme genre on Chinese social media. These memes originated first from textual humour remixing political slogans and romantic clichés in online ‘sentence-making competition’ forms of cultural participation, then developed into image macros as these texts were put onto old-fashioned propaganda posters for enhanced contrast in both visual and textual styles, and have finally been culturally reappropriated for everyday self-expression in online conversations among Chinese netizens today. This process shows how ‘socialist reworkings’ of memes are gradually accommodated in daily communication, with its political connotation and implications increasingly diluted to give way to non-political playfulness. Further to this, my discourse analysis reveals how the humour of ‘socialist memes’ interrupts the structure of propaganda language of Chinese hegemonic ideology, interweaves personal lived experiences and official rhetoric, and

engages the public affectively and therefore effectively in its continuous repetition through memetic media. As netizens are affectively engaged in repeated exposure to alternative and diversified interpretations of the authoritative political discourse while using these ‘socialist memes,’ these practices of cultural reappropriation are in fact reframing this diversity of interpretation as natural, which cumulatively can lead to habitual acceptance of these public-produced alternatives to state-sponsored rhetoric. Further to disrupting ideological language structures, public reiteration in friendly humour also enriches the increasingly empty and meaningless meanings of this authoritative discourse. Socialist ideology is made more relatable to everyday life, and its meanings more efficiently incorporated into individuals’ everyday cultural experiences in public life. And this, in fact, is what the political persuasion of Chinese socialist hegemony through ideological discourse ultimately aims to achieve. Therefore, I argue in this chapter that practices of political humour—through affective reiteration on memetic digital media—can potentially redirect the ineffective propagandistic persuasion towards cultural participation of the online public in reinterpreting and reasserting the ideological discourse. In this way, instead of challenging and subverting the dominant discourse and the whole political order imprinted in it, humour is essentially for netizens to negotiate their way in reconstructing the official discourse, and in so doing, enhancing and improving the socialist hegemony in China to be more firmly grounded in active and affective public participation instead of one-sided coercion from the state.

Chapter Six presents a case study of the ‘toad worship’ culture about former Chinese President Jiang Zemin. This culture originally emerged as political ridicule of Jiang with explicit malice and criticism in the early 2000s. However, with its popularisation on the Chinese internet in the context of egao culture of spoofing and parody, the mockery has gradually developed into a popular internet culture of remaking this Chinese President into a variety of memes for diversified cultural representations. This culture is unique and well worth studying because despite general restrictions in China on discussions making fun of the Communist Party leaders, ‘toad worship’ is broadly practised on the Chinese

internet and widely welcomed among the online public. Its popularity reflects a structural change in the power dynamic regarding the ways in which political leaders are remembered among ordinary Chinese people in the digital age. My cultural analysis demonstrates that the ‘toad worship’ memes have deconstructed the official narratives of Jiang Zemin as a stereotypical Chinese President towards diverse personalised interpretations and humorous remakings in the memetic process of cultural participation. While this culture *depoliticises* the official representations of Jiang through cultural poaching and multimodal juxtaposition, it also *repoliticises* the presidential image construction in China by destabilising these ideological representations and opening the representation of Jiang to a multiplicity of cultural creations from the public. This depoliticisation/repoliticisation ambiguity reveals the important role that memetic media plays in steering power relations in China from a binary between hegemony and its counterforces towards a dynamic of multifarious political discussions more widely between diverse positions among the online public. Furthermore, I argue that these depoliticisation practices—in decentring the official presidential image—reshape the ideological discourse formations in China from their rigid, boring, and formulaic rhetoric towards an interesting and appealing internet culture that is more widely accepted and appreciated among the public. Therefore, these cultural practices of friendly ‘toad worship’ humour, while reconstructing official rhetoric, also help with the building of socialist hegemony with diversified voices from the public integrated into the formation of official narratives.

These three chapters on humour dealing with censorship, propaganda, and hegemonic narratives each provide a sketch of what political humour does in mediating the state-society relationship in China. Altogether, they form a complete picture of humour as enabling negotiation and manoeuvre from the online public to make their way through the complicated landscape of public space in authoritarian China: netizens use censorship-related humour to negotiate the right to speak by problematising censorship and reconstructing the discursive boundary of what can and cannot be said; they use propaganda-related humour to negotiate the right to resignify official discourse by

reworking its ideological meanings for non-political purposes and therefore neutralising it in daily contexts; and finally, they use humour related to hegemonic narratives to negotiate the right to reinterpret political leaders and to reconstruct official rhetoric about how political figures and events should be publicly remembered. These three steps from being able to say, being able to unfix the dominant relationship of signification in political language, and then, being able to understand and remember differently, constitute this memetic process of meaning negotiation, and therefore more fundamentally, power negotiation.

What remains consistent in these three chapters is the conciliatory and intermediary functions of political humour that are hardly articulated in previous research. I am making this argument throughout this thesis that in addition to voicing criticism and fuelling activism for subversive purposes, political humour—especially its friendly and non-contentious representations—is in fact more versatile with various functions that have not yet been fully explored. In my analysis, I have demonstrated that friendly political humour plays an important role in bridging communication and negotiation rather than intensifying conflicts and contentions. First, with its playfulness and largely diluted seriousness in its motive, political humour lubricates communication between netizens and political authority on topics that would otherwise be considered controversial and problematic under censorship. Second, with its polysemy and constant fluidity in meaning making for amusement from incongruity, political humour opens up the state-monopolised official discourse of socialist ideology in China to creative and personalised reinterpretations and redefinitions. In a way, political humour is bringing the hegemonic ideology out of the rigid control of the party-state into the infinite possibilities of the mass public. These two functions of humour in mediating conversations and encouraging reappropriation of official political discourse essentially come from the ambiguity and fluidity of humour in its process of cultural production. ‘Ambiguity’ and ‘fluidity’ are two of the key concepts I use to summarise the general complexity and diversity of political humour on the Chinese internet. After using these terms multiple times in this thesis throughout my theoretical

review and empirical analysis, I shall now review what I mean by these two terms in this concluding chapter.

Studies of the Chinese internet have already noted the wide range of political humour in terms of its contents and forms, as well as intentions and motivations behind its practice. As mentioned in previous chapters, it takes different forms in juxtaposition with different discourse genres for intertextual/interdiscursive incongruity; it varies and fluctuates on the spectrum of radically satirical and moderately friendly; it serves purposes of voicing dissent, performing resistance, releasing stress, bridging conversations, strengthening social relationships, creating cultural enjoyment, etc. In a flux of possibilities of political humour on the Chinese internet, I choose ‘ambiguity’ and ‘fluidity’ to capture the interpretive indeterminacy as the core feature of political humour. ‘Ambiguity’ refers to the meaning multiplicity of humour and hence the multiple ways of humour can be interpreted. It used to indicate only two meanings in contrast as the necessary linguistic structure to create humour or laughter, but here in my research I stress ‘ambiguity’ as having more than two meanings and interpretations from its audience.

While ‘ambiguity’ describes the rather static quality of meaning multiplicity, ‘fluidity’ is used here to emphasise the moving state of humour as ‘being open to changes.’ Because humour can be interpreted differently, how it is intended (encoded) and how it is perceived (decoded) can vary greatly. More importantly, in a digital environment featuring memetic communication through spreadable media, humour can be continuously recoded, reappropriated, repurposed. This process of reproduction and reiteration leads to what Laclau and Mouffe (1985) call ‘the surplus of meaning’ or meaning excess, which means interpretation is always partial and incomplete, subjecting to resignification and even subversion. ‘Fluidity’ points to the quality of digitally-mediated humour of moving and shifting at an unprecedented speed between the infinite meanings assigned by its users (in the case of my research, individual netizens) in their specific context. Put together, ‘ambiguity’ inherent in the linguistic structure of humour and ‘fluidity’ featured in the

digital communication of humour describe not only the interpretive indeterminacy, but also how this indeterminacy is closely associated with changes in this dynamic of humour reproduction, which leads to humour's role in redirecting political persuasion and reshaping socialist hegemony in China.

The previous two functions of friendly political humour in lubricating communication and opening up official rhetoric to diversified public reformations ultimately contribute to the building of socialist hegemony in China by fostering popular participation in reconstructing ideological discourse and reshaping the boring and rigid ideology as a cultural enjoyment in everyday life. All these practices—'socialist recodings' of controversial materials to bypass censorship, 'socialist memes' repurposing political slogans and posters into everyday expressions, internet cultures reworking a political leader into jokes and memes—are essentially reiterating the official rhetoric and language of socialist ideology in China, albeit in forms of humorous amusement and motivated by fun and pleasure. While turning the meaningless and formulaic authoritative language of ideology into everyday entertainment on the internet, friendly political humour achieves what state-promoted propaganda and thought work to a large extent fails to achieve: to mobilise the masses to apply socialist ideology wholeheartedly out of their own willingness in their everyday life, albeit for purposes of fun and laughter rather than state-promoted propaganda. While this is not the only goal of propaganda, this is certainly one of the major steps for political persuasion.

As Yurchak (2005) argues in his study of political jokes in the Soviet Union, the state-sponsored authoritative language is too hegemonic and predictable to be read in its literal sense. Practices of this language are much more performative as ideological rituals in the reproduction of socialist hegemony. This is also the case in China. Ideological persuasion in late-socialist countries faces a similar paradox on the level of language construction: the more the authoritative language gets unanimously and mechanically repeated in public life as political rituals, the more it loses its concrete meanings to make meaningful sense among

the public. This language, after its ritualistic and performative rather than meaningful and engaging reproduction—through disciplinary and institutional practices imposed by the state—has become unanchored from reality as experienced by ordinary people. This provides an explanation on the level of language signification for the inefficiency of propaganda in China in generating political trust in the party-state and its ideology (Chen and Shi, 2001; Huang, 2018).

Friendly political humour, on the other hand, to a great extent helps solve this problem by introducing new interpretations to this increasingly empty language of ideology. Practices of friendly political humour in various mundane situations for personal and even private expressions on the internet reinvigorates this ritualised language, reanchoring it within the concrete and experienced everyday reality. Just like what Yurchak (2005: 295) argues about the Soviet jokes, these interpretations contribute to ‘a dynamic and agentic process of internal reorganization’.

Soviet youth so profoundly reinterpreted socialism that it was experienced not simply as a hegemonic rhetoric of the state but as ‘normal’ life, full of creative worlds, imaginary spaces, and meaningful forms of sociality.

Further to his argument of humorous reinterpretations as displacement of the authoritarian system from within, I want to stress that humour also contributes to the building of hegemonic *consent* in an ongoing process of meaning negotiation instead of meaning contestation. Based on my research, I develop an idea of ‘hegemonic consent’ that may differ from its theorisation in previous literature. In my thesis, ‘hegemonic consent’ refers to the fact that hegemony is not only constructed and promoted by the state to be imposed on the mass public, but also actively reconstructed and reconfigured by the mass public through cultural practices of political humour. The public is not simply accepting what the state tries to persuade them into believing, or getting used to it living with the ubiquitous ideology of Chinese socialism; in fact, there is a possibility implied in netizens’ participation in political humour that they are not whole-heartedly satisfied with

the official discourse or the way it is imposed on the public. Of course, they are not necessarily trying to overturn it as a whole either. Again, this is not an accepting/resisting binary. With these cultural practices of political humour on the internet, netizens are actively participating in the crafting or recrafting of socialist hegemony, making adjustments and refinements to the meanings of ideological discourse and how this discourse is incorporated in everyday life. They are not accepting or resisting the state-driven hegemony; it would be more accurate to say that they are adding their own ways of understanding and applying the official discourse into the base on which socialist hegemony is constructed and reconstructed. Rather than the public passively responding to what the state has to impose on them, both the state and the public are working on the hegemony simultaneously, using their own way in attempts to craft it to a more favourable shape. They are not speaking to each another in direct discussions aimed at reaching an agreement (the more common meaning of ‘negotiation’) regarding how hegemony should be constructed. Instead, they are working on the same project, communicating indirectly through how the project performs and continues to perform. This is another way of looking at what I mean by ‘negotiation’ as ‘finding their way through’ instead of ‘engaging in discussion to reach an agreement’—the online public is trying to redraw the lines or repaint the colours originally laid out by the state in order to depict what they perceive the picture to be. So is the state (although this side of the story is not presented in this thesis). Both are adjusting what the other has to offer on the plate in attempts to make the picture more favourable towards their side of interest or preference.

After clarifying the concept of ‘hegemony consent’ and ‘negotiation,’ we can now go back to humour’s role in ‘negotiating’ hegemony. As I have argued in multiple places of this thesis, hegemony cannot be achieved entirely through imposition from the dominant power; nor is it a fight of rivalry between the dominant power and its counterforces. Hegemony is formed in complicated interactivity between political authority and social actors from diverse positions, and this interactivity is not necessarily contentious, or necessarily non-contentious. Alongside contestations, there are also benign ways of

political interaction that take place not through traditional and identifiable ways of political engagement but mundane representations of politics as part of our daily entertainment. The role of friendly political humour in this process is to reify the abstract ideological terms in everyday experiences and integrate ideological concepts and values into public life. These concepts, then, are not just repeated in their precise forms as ideological rituals in formal conferences and political education at school to ‘perform’ conformity to the authoritarian state—they are actively reappropriated in vivid and creative ways as daily pleasures in our leisure time as we read erotic fiction, fantasise romance, watch fan-made videos, laugh at memes in a chat window, and use some catchy buzzwords to socialise among a crowd. People are using these ideological concepts not because they have to, or because they wish to deliver a message of dissent, but simply because it is *fun*. While applying this authoritative language of socialism in mundane contexts, they are normalising this formulaic ‘Newspeak’ to fit in their everyday life, and potentially endorsing it in reworked forms of humour. Of course, this endorsement with fluid and ambiguous motivations cannot be arbitrarily pinned down to one determinate political attitude about the authoritarian rule (in fact in most cases, it may be apolitical). Nevertheless, these humorous reworkings facilitate willing reassertion and meaningful reproduction of socialist ideology and its permeation in society. It is in this sense that I argue these friendly jokes reworking authoritative language in China contribute to a more public-driven and public-inspired hegemony of socialism.

Research contributions

Having presented the major findings and the key argument of humour as negotiation, it is now necessary to discuss how this research contributes to the current scholarly debates. It provides novel insights for a more accurate and comprehensive theorisation of humour, culture, and hegemony, conceptualising humour as a mechanism of intertextuality of bridging contrasts, understanding culture as a process of civic participation, and perceiving hegemony as a dynamic of meaning negotiation. More importantly, analysis of political

humour at the nexus of culture, and hegemony in this thesis contributes to existing research on the politics of fun and advances a comprehensive understanding of cultural and political dynamics beyond authoritarian determinism.

Regarding theoretical contributions, first, my research contributes to cultural studies in revealing the fluidity of contemporary culture in an ongoing process of civic participation. In all three empirical chapters, I have reconstructed how cultures of political humour evolved and unfolded in a memetic process as netizens participated in the reproduction and circulation of humour. As many scholars have already noticed, contemporary culture is far from rigid and static as conceptualised in the Birmingham tradition (Martin, 2002; Muggleton, 2000; Schiermer, 2014). To deal with this problem, they have made considerable attempts to capture its diversity and fluidity by moving away from the concept of ‘subculture’ to new concepts such as ‘neo-tribe’ and ‘lifestyle’ (Bennett, 1999; Bennet and Kahn-Harris, 2004; Jensen, 2018). My research is also an attempt to account for this fluidity, albeit in a different way—not through a change of conceptualisation, but through a change of perspective that views culture as a processual flow. The flux and nuances are not only synchronic but also diachronic, and therefore can only be unpacked in processual analysis. My sketch of digital cultures on the Chinese internet particularly stresses the process in which the online public strategically adjusts its way of engaging with political discourse and hence interacting with the political power behind this discourse. Cultural analysis is not just about defining what kind of relationship it constitutes and what power dynamic it reveals—it is more important about uncovering how this relationship develops and how the power dynamic fluctuates.

Second, this research addresses the function of humour in bridging communication between state and society and negotiating their hegemonic relationship, which advances the dualist conception of humour as control/resistance in existing research. What underlies the two closely entwined approaches of identification/differentiation and control/resistance in humour studies is the safety valve notion of humour as being both

informed control and legitimate resistance, i.e. humour's role in both challenging and stabilising the existing order. Although scholars like Lynch (2002) have moved beyond the understanding of humour as a static either/or position and suggest that humour moves along the control/resistance continuum, these approaches and the safety valve theory of humour are essentially a dualist conception of humour's socio-political effects that presupposes a binary relationship of rivalry and antagonism cast in a single spectrum. It fails to capture other possibilities and dimensions to power relations, between multiple parties, in various forms, and in an evolving dynamic. My research by no means denies the control/resistance functions of humour—in fact, my analysis of Chinese political humour in friendly forms also reveals the aspects of mild resistance to or disapproval of the official ideological discourse while to a large degree being tolerated by political authorities, which supports the safety valve explanation. However, what I stress throughout this thesis with my poststructuralist research perspective is that these aspects should not be arbitrarily placed on double-edged spectrum and viewed in opposition to each other. First, resistance and criticism consist only part of the meaning surplus in humour. What is more important is the infinite meanings available for netizens to turn the dominant discourse into their own personal interpretations and cultural creations. Second, what is essential about humour is not the opposing things per se, but rather, the mechanism of intertextuality that enables unexpected combinations of elements in contrast. The safety valve conception and its dualist implications about humour's effects have put more focus on the contrast and how contrast is identified, achieved, or enhanced. However, contrast also means that we have different notions, norms, beliefs, systems together on the same table, in the same channel. How do these differences come together? How do they 'talk' to each other? Are these talks necessarily quarrels and fights? In addition to revealing opposition and highlighting conflicts, it is also one of the fundamental logics of humour is to enable and even encourage conversations between diverse and even opposing ends. By exploring the potential of meaning multiplicity and ambiguity beyond duality, my research sheds light on a research perspective of humour studies that stresses its structure of blending and bridging contrasts rather than contrasts themselves. Third, aspects of control and

resistance do not remain static. Even if power play can be reduced, or to put it more nicely, summarised or generalised, to a binary relationship control and resistance, the two parties are moving in a dynamic, with one constantly attempting to outrun the other. Like how Declercq and El Khachab (2021) argue about the importance of historicised investigation into satire's political effects, studies of humour in its control/resistance continuum should also value how this relationship evolves. In this dynamic, the differences that humour bring together do not stay still once they are on the table; they mutate, propagate, diversify, creating new nuances, generating more possibilities, reproducing and simultaneously dissolving existing boundaries. That is how power relations through the continuous—in the case of digital humour, memetic—practices of humour can expand beyond the single spectrum of control/resistance. By situating this relationship in a hegemonic framework of analysis, my research of humour demonstrates the dimensions of conversations, negotiations, manoeuvres that are developed from but soon are able to move beyond the control/resistance dimension of contentions, oppositions, conflicts. In short, my research is by no means rejecting the control/resistance conception of humour; it starts from it, builds on it, and reaches an argument that extends and enriches this understanding on a historical and dynamic basis.

Third, my analysis provides valuable empirical support for the theoretical understanding of hegemony as a dynamic of meaning struggle and negotiation. I have shown how hegemony works through a mutually constitutive and configurative dynamic between the dominant ideology and cultural reworkings as its alternatives. Hegemony is not a once-and-for-all imposition from the dominant power; nor can it be effectively achieved through one-sided imposition, even in an authoritarian country. It relies on constant interactions between the dominant power and forces from social actors of active agency in diverse positions. Particularly, as stressed multiple times in this thesis, these interactions are not necessarily about repression and resistance. Friendly political humour as alternatives of interpretive pluralism—rather than resisting the dominant ideology—contributes to its reification in everyday experiences, which does more to enhance and improve the popular

ground of the hegemony for public participation in its formation, rather than actually to challenge and subvert it. This research maps out how socialist hegemony—rather than being static as one-sided imposition from the state—evolves and develops in a complicated (not necessarily contentious) interactivity between state and society. This is also how my argument about humour reshapes and reconfigures hegemony differs from the safety valve notion of humour that glosses over the dynamic process and reduces humour's complicated political effects and particularly how these effects *come into effect* into a simple explanation of humour's conservative role in maintaining the status quo.

In addition to theoretical contributions in studies of humour, culture, and hegemony, this thesis, more importantly, advances a politics of fun for its own sake in studies of political humour and moves beyond the authoritarian determinist approach in existing research for a more comprehensive understanding of cultural workings and power relations in authoritarian societies. These, I argue, are the two major contributions of this thesis in the scholarship on media, culture, and politics more generally.

First, my focus on non-contentious political jokes powerfully advances the perspective of studying fun for its own sake in studies of political humour. The fundamental stance that I take and endorse is to take 'fun' seriously. This view of politics as constituted through entertainment has been influential for decades. At the latest, it can date back to Raymond Williams's (1958b) conceptualisation of culture as 'ordinary' instead of necessarily 'elite.' Studies in popular culture, particularly with the rise of television and its social impacts in public life, have noted the political significance of mass entertainment in the course of everyday activities instead of formal political events (for example Dahlgren, 2009; Fiske, 1987; van Zoonen, 2005). The digital age further witnesses lost clarity and boundaries around politics, which gives rise to more empirical studies of the politics of fun (for example Dean, 2019; Wang, 2015; Wu, 2014). In short, fun is not mindless—'entertainment may be as important as traditional forms of political communication to the way we come to understand and react to our world' (Street, 2011: 100).

However, this perspective of taking ‘fun’ seriously has been relatively overlooked in studies of political humour. As mentioned in previous chapters, the dominant scholarship on political humour primarily focuses on criticisms and dissent embedded in political humour. It is more interested in serious ‘fun,’ i.e. entertainment that in itself has serious motives in relation to politics, rather than ‘fun’ for its own sake. The playful aspect of political humour and internet culture more widely is always seen as peripheral or subordinate to the political aspect regarding criticism and resistance. My research, on the other hand, attaches equal significance to its purely playful and entertaining dimension. I have shown in this thesis that playfulness plays a role of no less importance in engaging the public through affect, facilitating cultural participation, bridging political discourse with the everyday mundane, and opening up politics to creative alterations of diversity and possibilities. Furthermore, as mentioned above, playfulness has its unique significance in an authoritarian context like China as it can moderate critical and sensitive topics not only to avoid censors but also for ordinary netizens to avoid direct conflicts with political authority while seeking fun. Previous studies understand playfulness of political humour as a careful disguise of criticism and activism under authoritarian control, while I have shown with different cases of friendly political humour that netizens simply enjoy playfulness for its own sake. When they want to have fun as wildly creative as they can and do not wish to get into any trouble for making fun of sensitive topics, friendly political humour is as far as they can get. It is on the edge of being censored and forbidden and therefore is the very frontline where netizens seeking carnivalesque laughter interact with the authoritarian party-state. This is precisely why internet culture especially political humour in China can be so difficult to summarise—the Chinese netizens are still trying their best to balance between politics and humour. If we come back to where I started in Chapter One that political humour is an attempt to balance between political criticisms and light-hearted pleasure for culture consumption, my thesis has shown how Chinese netizens have managed and are still managing to achieve this balance. I have tried to argue throughout this thesis that it is this process of balance seeking instead of the duality of this balance that reveals the fundamental logics of power play in authoritarian China.

This stress on negotiation and balance instead of repression and resistance is also part of the second major contribution of this thesis regarding authoritarian determinism in contemporary social research. All my literature review and case studies in this thesis point to a key problem in existing studies of applying the political logic of liberal democracies to authoritarian societies. In democratic societies, social institutions and regulations are established and developed with clear definitions, references, and boundaries. However, this clarity is not guaranteed in authoritarian circumstances. As Glasius et al. (2018: 9) point out: ‘There are laws, many laws, but they are not consistently applied, they contradict each other...you never know whether you are crossing a red line or not.’ In this context of fluid lines, it would be arbitrary to make definite statements. More specifically in the case of China, this ambiguity is not only cultivated in its political system but also deeply grounded in the Chinese culture. Either way, this clear-cut paradigm or mindset from the westernised paradigm of politics is too simplistic to capture the equivocity and expediency of how the Chinese say things, do things, deal with problems, and interact with each other.

Understanding authoritarian societies through the liberal democratic logic further leads to the problematic approach of authoritarian determinism that understands cultural and power dynamics in authoritarian societies as a necessary result from their political system, like how Guan (2019) argues about the research of media-politics relations. Studies of authoritarian societies, especially (and perhaps predominantly) from a westernised perspective, tend to overstate the extent to which authoritarian social structures differ from democratic societies. As a consequence of ‘othering’ countries like China and Russia as distinct in the political typology, studies would easily and often too quickly draw on their political systems to develop explanations of social phenomena in these societies. Despite arguments for new classifications beyond the dual typology of political regimes to account for hybrid regimes (see for example Bogaards, 2009; Gilbet and Mohseni, 2011), the divide between democracy and non-democracy, or authoritarianism and non-authoritarianism, remains influential not only among scholars but also more widely among the general public.

This authoritarian determinist approach as well as the overarching dual typology of democracy and non-democracy not only underestimates the importance of other social factors in the play but also leads to a misunderstanding that these (mostly conflict-focused) phenomena are external and irrelevant to democratic countries. In fact, the boundary between authoritarianism and democracy is not as clear-cut as implied in this typology. For example, Boyer and Yurchak (2010) have noticed a rise of late-socialist aesthetics of political parody in the United States. They argue that these aesthetics of overidentifying with the dominant media and political discourse can emerge in both socialist and liberal regimes. From a different perspective of research methodology, Glasius et al. (2018) in their handbook for field research in authoritarian societies also point out that while staying alert to rigid requirements for foreigners in authoritarian countries, western researchers often forget the equally strict regulations of non-residents in their own countries.

My research challenges this authoritarian determinist approach that foregrounds repression and resistance by demonstrating benign interactivity of reorganisation and negotiation within China's socialist hegemony. In this thesis, I have highlighted the rather counterintuitive fact that it is precisely the authoritarian control that gives rise to a different mode of state-society relations. This is manifest in two aspects—a hegemonic process of ideological construction and a disciplinary result of authoritarian control.

First, as Yurchak (2005: 295) points out, late-socialist hegemony has an internal paradox:

the more meticulously and unanimously the system's authoritative forms were reproduced in language, rituals, and other acts, the more its constative meanings became disconnected from form and thus allowed to shift in diverse and increasingly unanticipated directions.

That is to say, the ideological construction of socialist hegemony through recursive normalising practices in discourse, in fact, would undermine its own efficacy by nibbling the ideologically bound meanings it attempts to promote. However, this is not the end of

the story. As these ideological meanings get unanchored from concrete reality to be open-ended for public reinterpretations, this authoritative language is then reinvigorated with diverse and reality-based meanings. My analysis of humorous reworkings on the Chinese internet has shown how meaning resignification and reanchoring in mundane everyday life is of particular significance in cementing socialist ideology in public life.

Second, while studies of internet activism in China have demonstrated how state efforts to regulate online information have not only led to more creative and diversified acts of subversion (Tang and Yang, 2011; Thornton, 2002; Yang, 2009), they leave out the other side of the picture—the disciplinary effect of censorship, and accordingly, a dynamic and evolving relationship between censors and internet users manifest in a process of cultural reproduction. Under long-term pervasive and effective authoritarian control over online information, the online public has learnt to interact with political authority in strategic, moderate, and peaceful ways. As mentioned in previous chapters, China-focused or authoritarianism-focused research often pays too much attention to what gets censored, ignoring what remains visible below the radar—another manifestation of authoritarian determinism. My research fills this gap by presenting how the online public communicates and negotiates with the state in benign ways through friendly political humour within an acceptable and manageable range. For example, I have shown in Chapter Four how fans have strategically adjusted their way of expressing enthusiasm about the queer TV drama so that they would not get into conflicts with political authority ‘from above.’ All these practices of friendly political humour are exercised in a very careful manner as their primary concern is not to voice dissent for wide social recognition or persuasion but for fun and for cultural (re)production. Netizens do not wish to get into trouble for being playful, but at the same time, they also want to have fun with everything including politics while they can and participate in their own ‘industry’ of manufacturing fun. Just like how Chen (2015) argues about online literature under censorship in China as a process of ‘production’ or ‘alter-production’ instead of ‘counter-production,’ cultural responses to censorship cannot be reduced to a binary struggle. These responses span a broad range

and feature vibrant diversity and heterogeneity. According to Chen, this dynamic between online literary censorship and responses to it is in fact a continuous reproduction of literary work under surveillance. It is ‘always a work in progress, not only carried on hand in hand among interconnected worlds but handed on, as light continues to shine after the star itself is gone’ (Chen, 2015: 34-35). By the same logic, friendly political humour is also indicative of this dynamic about censorship that gives rise to not simply a binary relationship of control and resistance, but more comprehensively a process of cultural reproduction in which netizens are carefully keeping a safe distance from the ‘red line,’ adjusting their strategies to outwit censorship rules, and meanwhile trying to enjoy themselves to the fullest through cultural participation.

In unveiling these two aspects of authoritarian control that lead to friendly and moderate instead of critical and rebellious state-society interactivity, this thesis contributes to an understanding of cultural and power dynamics beyond authoritarian determinism. Cultural practices in the Chinese context bear more ambiguities and complications that allow for flexible interpretations and operations to get away with in case of undesired conflicts and risks. In proposing a different power dynamic featuring moderation and negotiation, I am by no means denying the realities of contentious political humour and digital culture as activism in China or downplaying their importance in Chinese society. What I aim to do with my research is to bring the non-contentious or at least less contentious aspects of social realities in China back into the overly conflict-based research landscape and argue for their importance in authoritarian societies like China. In this way, this research advances a different research angle to probe into these societies for a more comprehensive understanding beyond repression and resistance.

Finally, in questioning authoritarian determinism, my research is also a valuable attempt to promote common understanding among both democratic and less democratic societies, bringing useful experiences of humour’s positive functions from an authoritarian context into the liberal democratic world. The dualist typology of authoritarianism and liberal

democracy has resulted in the ‘othering’ of authoritarian societies and a tendency of studying social phenomena under democratic and authoritarian circumstances as unrelated. As mentioned above, societies with different political systems are not so much different from each other in many social aspects. While experiences from democratic societies are often considered useful and valuable for positive social change in less democratic societies, experiences from less democratic societies for the most part are not taken in the same way or to the same degree in democratic countries. In rejecting authoritarian determinism, my thesis of humour as negotiation hopes to provide useful insights for dealing with antagonisms and social divides not only in China or authoritarian societies but more widely across the world. In the hyper digital world of growing polarisation, how social actors in China navigate in grey areas of uncertainties and ambiguities through the clever and creative use of humour illustrates humour’s potential in reconciling conflicts and bridging peaceful communication from opposing ends. I believe this research of political humour is not only relevant to authoritarian societies but also more widely in more democratic countries as an attempt in exploring possible ways to combat rising tensions and oppositions worldwide.

Limitations and implications for future research

The last section in this concluding chapter reflects on the limitations of this research and discusses the possible directions for future studies in this area. One major limitation in this study is to do with research methods about whether interviews are needed. As mentioned in Chapter Three, while interviews are necessary for the case study of ‘toad worship’ in Chapter Six, this is not the best method for analysis of ‘socialist recoding’ and ‘socialist memes’ in Chapter Four and Chapter Five. These two case studies are built on discourse analysis instead of first-hand responses from BL fans of and users of ‘socialist memes.’ This difference in research methods comes from the different research questions in these three rather independent case studies. Chapter Six aims to understand how the former Chinese President is remembered differently among the ‘toad worshippers’ compared with

his official image. Therefore, it was by no doubt necessary to conduct interviews for analysis of their interpretations and motivations in participating in this culture. Chapter Four and Chapter Five, by contrast, focus on the discursive construction process of humour, asking how political discourse was reworked into humour and how humour mobilised conversations between the political and the non-political, in which case interviews were not as necessary. Considering the affective nature of humour in arousing emotional intensity in a very much unconscious or subconscious way, interviews that ask participants to provide reasonable explanations of and reflections on their encounters with jokes and memes are not helpful to capture humour's essential qualities of in-betweenness as yet to be registered, formed, catalogued. My analyses in these two chapters, therefore, are based on textual materials including social media threads of retweets and comments that to a certain degree reveal netizens' reactions and interpretations. I also used secondary materials like media reports and other empirical studies of the same case(s) to ensure the validity of the findings of my discourse analysis. However, given more time and efforts to fill in more details for more solid and persuasive arguments, I believe these two chapters can further benefit from interviews that focus on the discourse strategies and motivations for socialist recoding where necessary instead of affective experiences of humour. For Chapter Four on circumvention practices, interviews with authors and readers of 'socialist pornography' and BL fans of 'socialist brotherhood', for example, can provide more details about their motivations behind socialist recodings and, if any, their concrete acts in adjusting their strategies to avoid conflicts with political authority. For Chapter Five on 'socialist memes,' I have explained in Chapter Three that interviews asking meme users to qualify and categorise their feelings about these memes hardly help with my analysis of fluid and uncatalogued affect. Nevertheless, with a different set of questions, this case study can usefully draw on interviews as background research to offer more details about the popularisation of these memes and netizens' general attitudes towards this 'socialist' meme genre as compared with other non-political memes. These interviews would not change the main body of these case studies, but they can provide useful supplement for this presentation of political humour to be more meticulous and convincing.

In response to this limitation, future studies of political humour on the Chinese internet can take a different perspective from discourse analysis, focusing on the Chinese netizens as ‘cultural insiders’ and asking how they think and feel about political humour. Just like how Nordin and Richaud (2014) used interviews to assess previous text-based studies of ‘river crab’ jokes, it is hoped that further research can be done to understand netizens’ motivations and interpretations in practising political humour. As mentioned in Chapter Three, I have myself done an interview-based user study of ‘socialist memes’ as a side-project of this research to examine whether these memes are necessarily used by Chinese netizens for political implications. The interview results show that Chinese netizens are primarily seeking fun and amusement with these types of friendly political humour, rather than implying any political viewpoints.

Another limitation of this research is related to my focus on the online public as one side of the interactivity, which raises questions on how the party-state feels about and reacts to these emerging digital cultures of friendly political humour. Discourse analysis in this research or interview-based user studies as suggested above as a necessary direction for future studies can only enlighten us about the acts and mentality of the mass public, but what about the government? Would it see these practices of friendly political humour as harmful and threatening? Does it have any strategies using similar types of humour to further enhance the hegemonic ideology (given the debatable effects of its current system of political persuasion)? For example, in recent years, the party-state has made great efforts in changing its propaganda strategies to engage and persuade the public with affect and emotion instead of boring and old-fashioned slogans and posters. Many non-conventional forms of socialist propaganda have emerged in recent years, such as the webcomic *Year Hare Affair* promoting nationalist pride, high-quality advertising videos of the Chinese Communist Party, etc. This sign of an alteration in propaganda techniques seems to be bringing about changes to the dynamic between state and society and the self-adjustment of socialist hegemony in China. Future studies can work on these aspects and further refine understandings about the political dynamic from the side of the government in the

complicated context of China.

Furthermore, this power dynamic is not bilateral consisting of only the online public and the party-state; there are also social media platforms and the entertainment industries. With their economic interest in digital cultures, they are also playing important roles in mediating between political authority and their customers. What are their roles in the emergence and popularisation of these digital cultures? How do they adjust their commercial behaviours and production activities to stay in line with dominant political values while also appealing to the market? Further studies of this power dynamic behind digital cultures of friendly political humour can focus on these parties of interest for political economy analysis.

Despite the wide popularisation and increasing normalisation/depoliticisation of these cultures reworkings of official language for friendly and non-contentious humour on the Chinese internet, they are nevertheless prone to censorship. Some of the data I collected, for example, were still ephemeral due to censorship or self-censorship. Although I have argued that these cases of humour are more visible on the Chinese internet and have important positive functions in bridging negotiation instead of subversive potential, this interactivity between netizens and the political authority remains ambiguous and puzzling in the long run. We can hardly foresee how this dynamic shall further develop, but what can be foreseen is that this dynamic will continue to be structured and restructured in these mundane daily practices of fun. At the close of this thesis, I wish to stay open to the uncertainties and possibilities in this fluid and ongoing process of cultural participation and political communication.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX ONE: Interview guide

1. Initiation

- When and how did you first know about ‘toad worship’?
- What were the cultural materials you came across? Content-wise: Jiang’s quotes and speeches? His career-related formal stories? His anecdotes? Etc. Form-wise: Plain texts (subjective reports or publications)? Jokes? Visual images? Videos? Etc.
- What was your immediate feeling? Unbelievable? Interesting? Exciting? What else?
- Did you know much about Jiang when you first knew about ‘toad worship’? What was your impression of him at that time?
- Did your first encounter with ‘toad worship’ change your then impression of him?

2. Cultural practice

- Where do you usually see ‘toad worship’ jokes or memes? Are there any specific social media accounts, online forums or chat groups that you might recommend?
- Can you share with me the funniest and most interesting ‘toad worship’ jokes or memes from your experience?
- What are your cultural routines as a ‘toad worshipper’? Online interactions? Meme sharing on social media and among friends? Ever bought any ‘toad worship’ merchandise?
- Is there any widespread and widely recognisable signature ‘jargon’ among ‘toad worshippers’?
- What are your primary and immediate feelings when you are ‘toad worshipping’? Pure playfulness? Sense of achievement for knowing more about him in addition to the very limited official reports? Excitement for challenging censorship by openly making fun of him? Or else?

- Is your participation in ‘toad worship’ purely online, or do you also do ‘toad worshipping’ in real life? From what you know, are there many like-minded ‘toad worshippers’ among your friends in reality? How do your friends respond when you tell a ‘toad worship’ joke?

3. Identification and interpretation

- There seem to be different motivations for ‘toad worshipping’ behaviours within this culture such as political criticisms of Jiang, criticisms of the current sociopolitical situation, whole-hearted admiration of Jiang, pure playfulness without any political intention, a natural interest in political figures and their anecdotes, etc. What else do you know? What are your major motivations for ‘toad worshipping’? Have they changed over the years?
- What do you think of ‘toad worship’ in general? Can you perhaps try to give it a definition from your perspective?
- Do you think there is a cultural group of ‘toad worshippers’? Why or why not? If there is, how would you situate yourself in relation to this group?
- Have your feelings and opinions about ‘toad worship’ ever changed? Or in your experience, has this culture changed in any way over the years?

4. Political implications

- What do you think about Jiang now?
- Do you think your ‘toad worshipping’ practices or your interest in this subculture has more to do with Jiang himself or its cultural humour per se? When you consume these jokes and memes, would you see him as an abstract symbol (like a comic figure), or a politician, or just an ordinary individual like any of us, or any mixture of these?
- In your experience, does the ‘Great Firewall’ has any impact on this culture? Are there any differences between ‘toad worship’ jokes on domestic websites and

blocked foreign platforms like Twitter? E.g. the cultural creativity, the explicitness of political implication, the truthfulness of Jiang-related 'facts,' etc.?

- Have you ever worried about censorship when you use and share 'toad worship' memes on the internet? Do you use any specific strategies to avoid being censored?

5. Personal information

- General habits of using social media: Hours spent on your mobile phone? Most frequently used mobile apps? Leisure activities on your mobile phone?
- Age? Education? Job? Main place of residence?

APPENDIX TWO: Interview consent form

Title of Project: Discourse Practices of Playful Political Humour on the Chinese Internet⁶

Name of Researcher: Ruichen Zhang, PhD candidate in sociology, University of Cambridge [Email redacted]

As part of my Sociology PhD research project on discourse practices of playful political humour on the Chinese internet, I am conducting interviews. The ‘playful political humour’ that I am going to study in this research refers to online content that connects to politics in a creatively playful and amusing way. This interview particularly draws on ‘toad worship’ as one of the examples of playful political humour. You are recruited as a participant in this culture and you will be asked questions about your experiences, feelings, and understandings related to your participation in this subculture. The main focus of this research is not to study your political views or attitudes, but rather, the unique and creative forms of amusing online expressions including texts, emoticons, images, videos in diverse modes. Therefore, my research as well as our interview will by no means include any judgements of political values. As the researcher, I will stay politically neutral throughout our interview. Please rest assured that in no circumstances will your opinions be interfered with, judged, or disclosed in any way without your consent. Should you feel uncomfortable or reluctant to continue in the interview, you are free to end our conversation and withdraw from this research at any time. In no circumstances will this incomplete interview be disclosed in any way or applied in any research project.

This interview will take about 60 minutes.

If you are interested in receiving further information about this project, please leave your contact information here.....

Please tick box

- 1. I confirm that I have understood these instructions and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

- 2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason.

- 3. I understand that my responses will be anonymised and only used

⁶ This was the working title of my PhD project in 2018 when I did my interviews for this research.

for academic research.

4. I understand that my interview will be recorded.

5. I agree to take part in the above project.

.....
Name of Participant

.....
Date

.....
Signature

.....
Name of Researcher

.....
Date

.....
Signature

APPENDIX THREE: Basic information of interviewees

Participant No.	Age group	Gender	Location	Date of interview
1	31-35	Male	UK	2 July 2018
2	21-25	Male	Beijing	9 September 2018
3	21-25	Male	Beijing	16 September 2018
4	21-25	Male	Beijing	16 September 2018
5	21-25	Male	Beijing	21 September 2018
6	26-30	Male	USA	22 September 2018
7	16-20	Male	Beijing	5 October 2018
8	26-30	Female	Hubei	17 October 2018
9	21-25	Male	Beijing	17 October 2018
10	16-20	Male	Beijing	18 October 2018
11	21-25	Male	Fujian	18 October 2018
12	21-25	Male	Beijing	18 October 2018
13	21-25	Male	Beijing	20 October 2018
14	26-30	Male	Spain	21 October 2018
15	21-25	Male	Jiangsu	22 October 2018
16	21-25	Male	Switzerland	23 October 2018
17	16-20	Female	Zhejiang	6 November 2018
18	16-20	Female	Hubei	9 November 2018
19	16-20	Female	Sichuan	10 November 2018
20	16-20	Male	Shandong	11 November 2018
21	26-30	Female	USA	12 November 2018
22	26-30	Female	Zhejiang	12 November 2018
23	31-35	Male	Zhejiang	13 November 2018
24	21-25	Male	Shandong	14 November 2018
25	21-25	Female	Shanghai	14 November 2018
26	16-20	Female	Hubei	15 November 2018
27	21-25	Male	Shanghai	19 November 2018
28	21-25	Male	Sichuan	19 November 2018
29	21-25	Male	Beijing	25 November 2018
30	21-25	Male	Japan	26 November 2018
31	21-25	Male	Henan	26 November 2018
32	21-25	Male	Heilongjiang	26 November 2018
33	21-25	Male	Hunan	26 November 2018
34	21-25	Male	Jilin	27 November 2018
35	21-25	Male	Jiangsu	27 November 2018
36	21-25	Male	Shanghai	27 November 2018
37	21-25	Female	Shanxi	28 November 2018
38	21-25	Male	Beijing	28 November 2018
39	21-25	Male	UK	28 November 2018
40	21-25	Male	Guangdong	29 November 2018

