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The Academy of Film
Hong Kong Baptist University
CVA937, Lee Shau Kee Communication and Visual Arts Building, 5
Hereford Road, Kowloon Tong, Kowloon, Hong Kong.
Tel: (852) 3411 7493
Email: gstjournal@hkbu.edu.hk
Website: <https://research.hkbu.edu.hk/project/global-storytelling-journal-of-digital-and-moving-images>

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Special Issue 3.2 – Satirical Activism and Youth Culture
in and Beyond COVID-19 China
(Winter 2023)

Special Issue Editor: Haiqing Yu

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COVID-19, Satirical Activism, and Chinese Youth Culture

An Introduction

HAIQING YU

Abstract

This article introduces the key theme of the special issue on “satirical activism and youth culture in and beyond COVID-19 China.” It contextualizes the case studies offered by the five articles in the special issue in three key terms: COVID-19, satirical activism, and Chinese youth culture. It asks: What are the new and evolving forms and genres of satirical activism in China, and what is the implication of satirical activism on Chinese youth culture? The article points out the significance of the study of dynamics and politics of the relationship between humor and satire, youth, popular culture, and citizen activism in the era of digital connectivity and vernacular creativity; it calls for more research on the roles of humor and satire in manufacturing and managing consent and opinion.

Keywords: COVID-19, satirical activism, youth culture, humor and satire, China

To most Chinese people, the COVID-19 pandemic is full of stories of death and loss, pain and suffering, sorrow and frustration, tragedy and heroism. As Guobin Yang notes, “How are we going to document these months of tragedy, suffering, sorrow, and heroism? How to write about the life, death, and loss of each and every concrete individual?”¹ This is quoted from Xiao

1. Guobin Yang, *The Wuhan Lockdown* (Columbia University Press, 2022), chpt. 7.

Yin, one of many Chinese citizens to record the quotidian lives and human sufferings in COVID-19 China. Perhaps the most famous diary is from Fang Fang, whose *Wuhan Diary* “offers an angry and eerie view” about lives in quarantine.² The anger and despair is illustrated by Fang’s response to the death of whistleblower Dr. Li Wenliang in February 2020: “Yesterday Li Wenliang died. I’m distraught. As soon it happened, my circle of friends said that night all of Wuhan was weeping for him. Who could have guessed that people across the whole of China were weeping for him! The flood of tears became a mighty wave on the internet! That night, Li Wenliang was ferried into another world on all the tears shed for him.”³

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only left people with memories and records of suffering and anger but also various forms of humor, mockery, and wry laughter as people struggled to fight boredom, frustration, and despair in lockdowns and quarantine. From anonymous witty and sarcastic online comments about the “patriotic virus” in early 2020 to university students crawling on the ground (known as creepers) in late 2022,⁴ Chinese people resorted to textual, graphic, audiovisual, and physical formats of humor, sarcasm, or simply silliness to cope with boredom and stress, express frustration, voice, act or perform civil disobedience, or let oneself go.

There is a long history of humor, comedy, and satire in serving as a force for social change. Creative resistance has been a key feature of popular culture. The Internet, social media, data, and digital technologies have

2. Dwight Garner, “‘Wuhan Diary’ Offers an Angry and Eerie View from Inside Quarantine,” *New York Times*, May 15, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/15/books/review-wuhan-diary-fang-fang.html>.

3. “She Kept a Diary of China’s Epidemic. Now She Faces a Political Storm,” *New York Times*, April 14, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/14/world/asia/coronavirus-china-fang-fang-author.html>.

4. “The Mysterious Epidemic in Wuhan Was Seriously Exposed and the patriotic Virus Was Concealed,” France Broadcasting Corporation, January 17, 2020, <https://www.rfi.fr/cn/中国/20200117-中国武汉疫情严重遭曝料隐瞒-有爱国病毒冠称>; Lily Kuo and Pei-Lin Wu, “Life’s Tribulations Have Chinese Students Crawling—Literally,” *Washington Post*, November 16, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/11/16/china-university-students-crawling-groups/>.

brought creative resistance from the cultural to the digital domain. Across the world, with its widely varying norms and regimes of public speech, the digital domain is the primary site of articulation for popular discontent and resistance through satire and political humor in a multitude of genres and forms by a wide range of actors. People used jokes, comedy shows, graffiti, street art, cartoons, memes, mashups, and user-generated video clips to criticize political figures and the political systems, to shed light on the absurdity of their sociopolitical realities. The COVID-19 pandemic, with its absolute disruption of daily life, unprecedented state interventions, and the reliance on digital platforms for most forms of social contact, has encouraged a wide range of satirical and pointed humor across the region.

COVID jokes are abundant in all cultures and countries. From Facebook to TikTok, or from Douyin and Bilibili to Weibo and Zhihu in the Chinese context, people create and share digital humor—from jokes, memes, and GIFs to short videos—to relieve stress from COVID restrictions. Pandemic control strategies—from lockdowns and mask mandates to contact tracing, mass vaccination, and restrictions in mobility and economic activities—have caused grievance, complaint, resistance, and backlash. Even ill-spirited misinformation has adopted the discourse and format of satire and “funny” memes.⁵ There are abundant and telling examples across diversified age and geographical differences on how people used humor, satire, and networked practices (via liking, sharing, or commenting) to engage in social activism. In India, stand-up comedy has flourished in the country’s online video culture, engaging critically with the right-wing and authoritarian turn in the political domain as a form of creative resilience and political subversion, and WhatsApp as the carrier of the vernacular public sphere has become a vast network of sarcasm, wit, and politics.⁶ In Israel, people use

5. Jack Goodman and Flora Carmichael, “Covid-19: What’s the Harm of ‘Funny’ Anti-Vaccine Memes?” BBC, November 29 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/55101238>.

6. Farhan Ahmad, Sohaib Alam, and Anmolpreet Kaur, “Performative Retrieving of Humour for Socio-Political Subversion: Stand-Up Comedy as a Form of Creative Resilience,” *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 9, no. 1, <http://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2022.2131968>.

humorous memes to mock, alleviate stress, and build solidarity in face of common enemies.⁷ In China, digital humor provides a critical mechanism for people to cope with the emotional and psychological stress and live with the country's strict zero-COVID policies, and such humor often has subversive functions as veiled criticism of their sociopolitical realities.⁸

Young people are often at the forefront of what I call *satirical activism*. Satirical activism involves using satire, humor, or humorous formats and genres to voice dissent and evoke collective resistance to the dominant discourse—in the Chinese context, the state-sanctioned discourse. It appears lighthearted in various forms of cynicism and pranking yet it embodies cognitive dissonance, if not changes, in public culture. Satirical activism is youth-led and youth-centered social activism in the era of digital connectivity. From climate change and social justice to political protests,⁹ youths have led the charge in using creative means and parody formats to question, mock, and challenge authorities and authoritarianism.¹⁰ What is absurd can be a mechanism for community-building, truth-telling, and surviving censorship.¹¹

7. Tsafi Sebba-Elran, "A Pandemic of Jokes? The Israeli COVID-19 Meme and the Construction of a Collective Response to Risk," *HUMOR* 34, no. 2 (2021): 229–57, <https://doi.org/10.1515/humor-2021-0012>.

8. Ji Pan, Gang (Kevin) Han, and Ran Wei, "Duanzi as Networked Practice: How Online Satire Shapes Psychological Well-Being, Social Support, and Issue Knowledge for Chinese with Different Social Capital during COVID-19 Outbreaks," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 18 (2021): 9783, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18189783>.

9. For example, see Neas Sally, Ward Ann, Bowman Benjamin, "Young People's Climate Activism: A Review of the Literature," *Frontiers in Political Science* 4 (2022), <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpos.2022.940876>; Guobin Yang and Min Jiang, "The Networked Practice of Online Political Satire in China: Between Ritual and Resistance," *International Communication Gazette* 77, no. 3 (2015): 215–31; Geoffrey Baym and Jeffrey P. Jones, "News Parody in Global Perspective: Politics, Power, and Resistance," *Popular Communication* 10, no. 1–2 (2012): 2–13.

10. Umut Korkut, Aidan McGarry, Itir Erhart, Hande Eslen-Ziya, and Olu Jenzen, "Looking for Truth in Absurdity: Humour as Community-Building and Dissidence against Authoritarianism," *International Political Science Review* 43, no. 5 (2022): 629–47, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512120971151>.

11. Siu-yau Lee, "Surviving Online Censorship in China: Three Satirical Tactics and Their Impact," *China Quarterly*, no. 228 (2016): 1061–80, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26291589>.

Youth activism takes place in the digital space. Young people have long embraced social media and digital media technologies to make their voices heard, develop civic identities, and encourage social and political engagement in creative ways. The witty and humorous digital activism has taken on new genres and formats. From memes, online satires, webtoons, digital art, to deepfakes, it has also taken on more complicated features. In some instances, these new forms of dissent and citizen activism have weaponized social media platforms through satire, irony, and parody. This can be illustrated by the case of the Arab Spring in the early 2010s, when “Facebook, mobile phones, and Twitter became the primary means of circulating the jokes; jokes thus became one of the revolution’s most crucial weapons,”¹² or by the case of “TikTok intifada” during the 2021 Israel–Gaza warfare when Palestinian activists engaged in playful activism on the short-video platform through vernacular creativity in various forms of TikTok’s #challenges.¹³

This special issue aims to bring satirical activism to the center of enquiries on the politics of youth culture and digital publics during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. China is used as an ethnographic site in studies of human creativity and ingenuity among ordinary people who bore the economic, emotional, and psychological costs of COVID-related restrictions and lockdowns. The special issue examines digital interventions in the public sphere enacted through lighthearted, creative, and satirical communications in multimedia forms (from text and meme to short video and livestreaming) across digital platforms and networks. It highlights the lighthearted and humorous nature of such digital practices in everyday life, the vernacular and mundane agency of China’s digital generation, and the limitation of satirical activism as a form of social advocacy and political engagement.

12. Sabine Damir-Geilsdorf and Stephan Milich, eds., *Creative Resistance: Political Humor in the Arab Uprisings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 11.

13. Laura Cervi and Tom Divon, “Playful Activism: Memetic Performances of Palestinian Resistance in TikTok #Challenges,” *Social Media + Society* 9, no. 1 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231157607>.

The Special Issue

The special issue on satirical activism and youth culture in and beyond COVID-19 China includes five articles from interdisciplinary scholars in digital media and communication studies, cultural studies, sociology, Chinese language and literature studies, and gender studies. It has discussed how everyday users, influencers, bloggers, journalists, activists, and professional comedians have used humor, comedy, and satire to deal with psychological stress and existential crisis and engage with social and political issues before, during, and after COVID lockdowns in China. It addresses two broad questions through empirical studies: (1) What are the new and evolving forms and genres of satirical activism in China? And (2) What is the implication of satirical activism on Chinese youth culture?

The special issue starts with Ying Zhu and Junqi Peng's article "From *Diaosi* to *Sang* to *Tangping*: The Chinese DST Culture Online," which sets the stage for the other articles and provide contextual discussions on the origin, evolution, and impact of youth cyber culture. The youth cyber culture is represented by three cultural phenomena in the title, *diaosi*, *sang*, and *tangping* (DST). The article explores the motivations, perspectives, and actions of participants of DST as well as reactions and responses of the Chinese government and the media. The three phenomena start with *diaosi*, a Chinese slang for underdogs, which first appeared on the Chinese Internet in 2010, capturing youth discontent amid cutthroat competition in China. The term became the most popular word by 2012 but would soon be overtaken by *sang* (bereavement), a new youth phenomenon akin to beatnik/hippie/punk culture in the West, which manifested itself in a variety of catchphrases and memes that amplified the weary and suffering human body. The rise in 2021 of the *tangping* (lying flat) movement continues the self-deprecating and self-mockery ethos among Chinese young people living under unrealistic societal pressures and political constraints to express moments of relief and freedom.

Such moments of relief are the focus of investigation in Shaohua Guo's article, "Moments of 'Madness': Cynicism in Times of COVID." The paper zeroes in on several transient yet significant moments that emerged in China during November- to December 2022, when the country's strict zero-COVID policy transitioned to an abrupt lift of all restrictions. It analyzes three types of phenomena to deepen our understanding of how cynicism operates as a coping mechanism for individuals to make sense of their everyday lives: (1) "literatures of madness" (*fafeng wenxue*), (2) group crawls on college campuses, and (3) pandemic jokes (*duanzi*) satirizing policy changes. The three selected moments illustrate a spectrum of cynical responses that challenge the distinctions between the real and the fictional, truths and rumors, and the playful and the political. Consequently, cynicism emerges as a diverse set of strategies on both textual and performative levels, aiding in the interpretation of the absurd. Further, an investigation of these cases sheds light on understanding contemporary youth culture in the context of a global health crisis. Amid the popular rhetoric about youth celebrating passivity, all three cases, as moments of madness, illustrate the liminal space in which youth navigates between passivity and agency, between disillusionment and hope.

In many moments of madness during the pandemic, Chinese women have led the charge in writing, laughing, performing, mimicking, or appropriating forms of satirical engagement with COVID politics and in COVID protests.¹⁴ Despite the social barriers, cultural bias and political repression, Chinese young women have been at the forefront of satirical activism. Their humorous writings—literally and metaphorically—onto their bodies and their society can make people laugh, think, and make changes. Three articles in this special issue are devoted to the gendered

14. This can be illustrated by the "White Paper Movement" led by female university students in November 2022. See Matt Murphy, "China's Protests: Blank Paper Becomes the Symbol of Rare Demonstrations," BBC News, November 28, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-63778871>.

perspective on Chinese satirical activism and youth culture in the networked, digital, and social media era.

Howard Choy studies humorous and satirical imagetexts found in eleven Chinese women's online diaries composed between 2020 and 2022 during the time of COVID-19, in his article "Laughter in the time of Coronavirus: Epidemic Humor and Satire in Chinese Women's Digital Diaries." The eleven Chinese female diarists recorded their everyday life from Wuhan, Xi'an, Chongqing, Chengdu, Shanghai, and New York City, across six Chinese social media platforms. These feminine expressions of comic feelings point to communal laughter as a strategy for survival, subversion, and non-violent resistance against unprecedented state surveillance and interventions in everyday life.

Epidemic humor and satire in these lockdown narratives are approached from interdisciplinary perspectives, including sociological studies, political philosophy, psychological theory, and literary criticism. The same approach is also taken by Shaoyu Tang in "Political In-Between: Streaming Stand-Up Comedy and Feminist Reckoning in Contemporary Mainland China." The article examines stand-up comedy, based on seven-month participant observation in comedy clubs in mainland China. Tang analyzes social media comments about women stand-up comedians and conducts textual analyses of comedians' performances in a popular online variety show, *Roast & Rock*. The article reveals the twisted joking and laughing relationships in female stand-up comedy and in turn argues that the debates over "what is the proper women's voice in public culture," or what Tang calls "feminist reckoning," have become a politicized feminist expression that is performed and embodied in-between online streaming and live club comedies. The article asks in which ways comedy and feminism can gesture political critique and resistance around public culture. It argues that the (re)politicization of stand-up comedy offers possibilities to make feminist media practices visible in mainland China's censored public culture.

Navigating the tension between freedom of expression and pervasive state intrusion, Chinese pan-feminist communities employ new discursive strategies, which Jingxue Zhang and Charlie Yi Zhang call “feminist counter-appropriation” in their coauthored article “The Power of Citation: Feminist Counter-Appropriation of State Discourses in Post-Reform China.” The article examines two types of counter-appropriation practices: *deliberate counter-appropriation* that involves parodic and satirical redeployment of the party-state’s stigmatizing framing of feminism and *promotional counter-appropriation* that embraces the sanitized version of feminism following the statist and nationalist logic yet creates room for discussion of gender-related social inequalities. These tactics entail strategic adaptation of the state-sanctioned discourses by feminist netizens to tell their own stories while shielding them from punitive measures. While acknowledging inherent limitations and susceptibility to manipulation by conservative forces, the article argues that feminist counter-appropriation demonstrates the resilience of civil societies in navigating censorship and oppression to subvert the oppressive intentions of the party bureaucrats, expose inherent flaws of the official languages, and challenge the entrenched gender inequalities in post-reform China.

Conclusion

Although COVID-19 provides the context of many of the case studies in the special issue, the significance of these studies goes beyond the COVID-19 context or China. The five articles in the special issue illustrate new dynamics and politics of the relationship between humor and satire, youth, popular culture, and citizen activism in the era of digital connectivity and vernacular creativity. As a safe entry into and exit from taboo topics or censorship, these practices can be wry and artfully witty in their entertaining and affective value or motivating and stirring in their instrumental value.

It is important to point out that what are powerful tools for artists, comedians, satirists, and activists in nonviolent resistance can be appropriated and used by the ruling elites to create, propagate, and manipulate messages of their own, as in the case of China, as illustrated by digital parody art *The Last G7* in 2021—created by an independent computer graphic illustrator to mock the G7 Summit as the Last Supper—that went viral in Chinese social media and made international headlines as the Chinese official visual propaganda,¹⁵ thus blurring the boundary between grassroots political activism, censorship, and propaganda. The political authorities and business establishments can also employ or reappropriate parodies to promote mainstream discourses and diffuse the potential of satirical activism for social change¹⁶ and as such blur the boundary between activism and propaganda. This is an area that calls for critical scholarship grounded in empirical research. I look forward to seeing more such work on the roles of humor and satire in manufacturing and managing consent and opinion.

15. Manya Koetse, “Digital Art or Visual Propaganda? China’s New Wave of Online Political Satire,” *What’s on Weibo*, June 19, 2021, <https://www.whatsonweibo.com/digital-art-or-visual-propaganda-chinas-new-wave-of-online-political-satire/>.

16. Shuning Lu, “I Have a Meme: Political Satire on the Chinese Internet,” *Sixth Tone*, October 20, 2016, <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1454>.

Research Articles

From *Diaosi* to *Sang* to *Tangping*

The Chinese DST Youth Subculture Online

YING ZHU AND JUNQI PENG

Abstract

Diaosi, Chinese slang for “underdogs,” first appeared on the Chinese Internet in 2010, capturing youth discontent amid the cutthroat competition in China. The term became the most popular word by 2012 but would soon be overtaken by *sang* (“bereavement”), a new youth phenomenon akin to beatnik/hippie/punk culture in the West, which manifested itself in a variety of catchphrases and memes that amplified the weary and suffering human body, eventually leading to the rise in 2021 of the *tangping* (“lying flat”) movement that called for a life free from societal pressures. This article traces the origin, evolution, and impact of this youth cyber culture, what we call DST. It explores the motivations, perspectives, and actions of participants as well as reactions and responses of the Chinese government and the media.

Keywords: diaosi, sang, lying flat, Chinese digital youth, Cyber culture

Introduction

Diaosi, Chinese slang for “underdogs,” first appeared on the Chinese Internet in 2010, capturing the discontent with, and the determination to overcome the uneven playing ground amid, the cutthroat competition in China. Popular initially among less-privileged youth, the word soon went mainstream and viral, becoming the most popular term by 2012, the year

Xi Jinping took power.¹ A large-scale survey conducted in 2014 reported that three-fifths of the 213,000 respondents self-identified as *diaosi*.² With young Chinese from diverse walks of life embracing the term, a team of researchers declared in 2015 that *diaosi* constituted the most significant identity-making event in China in recent years.³ As it entered its sixth year, *diaosi* would be overtaken by *sang* (“bereavement”), a new youth cultural phenomena akin to beatnik/hippie/punk culture in the West, albeit with Chinese characteristics that captured deepening youth frustration with widening gaps in educational and economic opportunities in a rapidly changing Chinese society.⁴

Emerging in 2016, *sang* soon replaced *diaosi* as the new buzzword. Frequently used as an adjective, *sang* connotes loss, deprivation, powerlessness, and hopelessness, registering a decisively more passive and pessimistic outlook on life than *diaosi*.⁵ The *sang* phenomenon manifested itself in a variety of youth catchphrases and memes that amplified the weary and suffering human body.⁶ Surveys reveal that urban youth in their twenties and early thirties were the leading demographic group who related to *diaosi* and *sang*

1. Key, “10 Most Popular Internet Phrases in China in 2012,” ChinaHush, January 6, 2013, <http://www.chinahush.com/2013/01/06/10-most-popular-internet-phrases-in-china-in-2012>.
2. The online survey, which collected 21,3795 samples, was done by ganji.com, a Chinese life information website, and written by the Market Research and Media Center of Peking University in 2014. The respondents, who were also ganji.com users, worked in various professions and came from more than fifty Chinese cities on different scales. See the survey at “2014屌丝生存现状报告 [2014 *diaosi* survival condition report],” Ganji.com, October 2014, <http://doc.xueqiu.com/14973b22dea37b3fcf47fdd1.pdf>.
3. Peidong Yang, Lijun Tang, and Xuan Wang, “*Diaosi* as Infrapolitics: Scatological Tropes, Identity-Making and Cultural Intimacy on China’s Internet,” *Media, Culture and Society* 37, no. 2 (2015): 197.
4. David Cowhig, “Taking It Lying Down: China’s Bereavement Youth Culture,” *David Cowhig’s Translation Blog*, June 12, 2021, <https://gaodawei.wordpress.com/2021/06/12/taking-it-lying-down-chinas-bereavement-youth-culture/>.
5. Zeng Yuli, “Turn Off: Drop Out: Why Young Chinese Are Abandoning Ambition,” *Sixth Tone*, June 27, 2017, <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1000407/turn-off%2C-drop-out-why-young-chinese-are-abandoning-ambition>.
6. Chief among these are “feel like my body is hollowed out,” “I am almost a disabled person,” and “the human world is not worth it.”

sentiments and adopted *diaosi* and *sang* phrases and memes in their daily life. The popularity of these digital phrases and memes eventually led to the rise in 2021 of *tangping* (“lying flat”), yet another youth trend that advocated for a life away from the rat race. Framed as a “nonviolent, noncooperative, and passive resistance’ against the authoritarian state by the Western media,⁷ *tangping* became the top trending term in China in 2021.⁸

This article sets out to trace the origin, evolution, and impact of this particular type of youth cyber culture, which we call DST (*daosi*, *sang*, *tangping*) for easy reference and to differentiate it from other more upbeat youth trends in China. What conditions have given rise to the arrival of the DST phenomena and what accounts for the metamorphosis of youth sentiment from *diaosi* to *sang* to *tangping*? This article explores the generative mechanisms of DST and examines the motivations, perspectives, and actions as well as reactions of major stakeholders involving political, technological, economic, and public interests. It further examines the nature and characteristics of DST and its means of expression and circulation. It seeks to tease out common threads running through all three periods while laying out the intricate relationship among the major stakeholders involving the DST participants, the Chinese state, and the commercial sectors. In what

7. See, for example, David Bandurski, “The ‘Lying Flat’ Movement Standing in the Way of China’s Innovation Drive,” Brookings, July 8, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/the-lying-flat-movement-standing-in-the-way-of-chinas-innovation-drive/>; Pass Notes, “The Low-Desire Life: Why People in China Are Rejecting High-Pressure Jobs in Favour of ‘Lying Flat,’” *Guardian*, July 5, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/05/the-low-desire-life-why-people-in-china-are-rejecting-high-pressure-jobs-in-favour-of-lying-flat>; Lily Kuo, “Young Chinese Take a Stand against Pressures of Modern Life by Lying Down,” *Washington Post*, June 5, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/china-lying-flat-stress/2021/06/04/cef36902-c42f-11eb-89a4-b7ae22aa193e_story.html; Elsie Chen, “These Chinese Millennials Are ‘Chilling,’ and Beijing Isn’t Happy,” *New York Times*, July 3, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/03/world/asia/china-slackers-tangping.html>.

8. According to the Sogou Pinyin method, the dominant input software in China, *tangping* was the most popular Chinese buzzword in 2021. See “搜狗输入法2021年度榜单出炉“躺平”排流行语第 [Sogou Input released annual list of buzzwords in 2021, *tangping* ranks the first],” qq.com, December 7, 2021, <<https://new.qq.com/rain/a/20211207A0000P700>.

follows, we will describe each phenomenon in a broad stroke, following a chronological order, with a main focus on the origin, contributing factors, and characteristics of the DST phenomenon. This bird's-eye view hopes to serve as a foundation for future research on the interplay between culture, politics, and commerce on the transformation of a particular brand of Chinese youth culture.

Diaosi/Underdogs

A compound word of sexual nature in Chinese that describes someone who licks or kisses up, *diaosi* is literarily and figuratively a sucker or a loser who kisses up. Self-identified *diaosi* embraced the term with good humor, turning biting satire into playful self-mockery, which has come to define the style of *diaosi*, making it cool and admirable.⁹ As opposed to the more privileged youth of inherited wealth and power, a typical early *diaosi* was an Internet-savvy male college student with ample native intelligence but limited financial means and family connections to secure social mobility and romantic partners. One running joke among the bachelor *diaosi* was their collective desires for beautiful young women—what they called *nvshen* (“the goddess”)—who presumably would only date *fuerdai* (“the second-generation rich”), Chinese slang referring to the children of the rich and powerful. *Diaosi* became “losers” for their repeated failure in securing dates with goddesses.¹⁰ *Diaosi*'s underdog status concealed the groups' intense drive to

9. Yang et al., “*Diaosi* as Infrapolitics,” 202n3.

10. Incredulously, the sexist *diaosi* rubric was taken up by the party's official organ *Global Times* in its special annual coverage of China and the world politics at the end of 2012. In *Global Times*'s analogy, China was *diaosi* and the United States the tall-rich-handsome. China was striking back and surpassing the US economy. China was depicted as chasing the effeminized fair-rich-beautiful Taiwan who seek protection from the alpha tall-rich-handsome United States. But the United States despises and ignores Taiwan. *Global Times* further portrayed North Korea as the underdog *diaosi* as opposed to the tall-rich-handsome South Korea, whereby North Korea struck back by successfully launching a rocket, and Sub-Saharan countries *diaosi* with their economy struck back in 2012 as

overcome. One popular *diaosi* catchphrase was *diaosi de nixi* (“*diaosi* strikes back”), which referred to one’s ability to beat the odds and eventually obtain wealth and marrying a goddess. With mostly single young males “congregating” on the online *diaosi* forums, misogyny prevailed. *Diaosi* objectified women, grading them by appearances and sexual appeal and ranking them into either goddesses or female *diaosi*. Up against their privileged counterparts, *diaosi* named the time they lived as the era of *pindie* (“competition of dads”) and came to equate themselves with “self-made” men. Hanhan (韩寒), a best-selling novelist and race-car driver of humble origin, claimed himself “a pure *diaosi* from the rural area of Shanghai,”¹¹ which set him apart from “the second-generation rich.”¹²

In a playful twist, young, Internet-savvy IT workers, a core group of self-claimed *diaosi*, facetiously called themselves *manong* (“code peasants”) and their jobs *banzhuan* (“moving the bricks”), which captured the repetitive nature of their coding jobs while showing off their highly sought-after IT profession, seen as a symbol of success. White-collar office workers called themselves *dagongren* (“laborers”) while creative practitioners and academics identified themselves as *yingshi mingong* (“film and TV migrant laborers”) and *xueshu mingong* (“academic migrant laborers”). But the irony was lost in mainstream media’s initial framing of *diaosi*. Mainstream media coverage characterized *diaosi* as an individual or a group of people of lower social strata doing the real manual labor of “moving the brick” at minimum wage and associated *diaosi* with losers or the subaltern.¹³ ifeng.com, of the

the result of Chinese aid. See “环球吐槽2012 [Global Tucao],” *Global Times*, accessed July 6, 2019, <http://world.huanqiu.com/special/tucao2012/index.html?agt=34474>.

11. Lai Lisi, “韩寒微博回应‘代笔门’ 自称纯正上海农村屌丝 [Hanhan responds to counterfeit accusation and claims himself a pure Shanghai rural *diaosi*],” *cjn.cn*, April 6, 2012, <http://news.cjn.cn/nv/201204/t1747688.htm>.
12. David Cohen, “Could This Be China’s Youth Movement? David Cohen on the Rise of the ‘*Diaosi*’ Culture on the Chinese Internet and the terms Evolution and Meaning,” *The Diplomat*, March 30, 2013, <https://thediplomat.com/2013/03/could-this-be-chinas-youth-movement/>.
13. In addition to Yang et al., academic writings of *diaosi* as losers include Marcella Szablewicz, “The ‘Losers’ of China’s Internet: Memes as ‘Structures of Feeling’ for Disillusioned

independent but prostate Phoenix New Media, offered the first comprehensive coverage of *diaosi* in February 2012.¹⁴ Within a few days, Tencent News followed up with its own full coverage.¹⁵ NetEase soon followed suit, publishing “*Diaosi*, don’t feel ashamed of yourself; sisters do like you,” and “Loser, Otaku, and *Diaosi*.”¹⁶ The common conception of *diaosi* in mainstream reporting was people of rural origin with little social, cultural, and financial capital (see figure 1).

In reality, the self-identified *diaosi* were college-educated youth in affluent coastal cities,¹⁷ with Shanghai having the highest *diaosi* identification rate (76.14 percent).¹⁸ The style of humblebragging prevailed among the Internet-savvy urbanities, eventually crystalized for the mainstream media of *diaosi*’s more elite status. As *diaosi*’s disposable income fueled China’s nascent virtual economy, Chinese Internet companies quickly positioned to tap into *diaosi*’s purchasing power. Lei Jun, the founder of Xiaomi, China’s biggest

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- Young Netizens,” *China Information* 28, no. 2 (2014): 259; Ngau-Ling Sum, “The Makings of Subaltern Subjects: Embodiment, Contradictory Consciousness, and Rehegemonization of the *Diaosi* in China,” [*Globalizations* 14, no. 2 (2017): 298; Karita Kan, “The New ‘Lost Generation’: Inequality and Discontent among Chinese Youth,” *Current Affairs* 2 (2013): 67.
14. I-talk, “自由谈, 屌丝: 一个字头的诞生 [*Diaosi*: The birth of a buzzword],” ifeng.com, February 27, 2012, <https://news.ifeng.com/opinion/special/diaosi/>.
15. Topic Today, “屌丝: 庶民的文化胜利 [*Diaosi*: The cultural victory of ordinary people],” Tencent News, March 1, 2012, <https://view.news.qq.com/zt2012/diaosi/index.htm>.
16. NetEase Women, “屌丝弟弟别自卑, 姐姐也很喜欢你 [Little brother *Diaosi*, don’t feel ashamed of yourself; sisters do like you too],” NetEase, March 2, 2012, <https://www.163.com/lady/article/7RJPOL2J002649P6.html>; He Wei, “卢瑟、宅男与屌丝 [Loser, otaku, and *Diaosi*],” NetEase, March 19, 2012, <https://www.163.com/tech/article/7SU5LD4500094M0K.html>. *Otaku* in Japan refers to a young person who is obsessed with computers or particular aspects of popular culture to the detriment of their social skills.
17. Another survey of *diaosi* was done by Analysys in 2013, with 34,500 samples across thirty-one domestic provinces and sixty-seven global regions. Of these, 13,092 samples were gamers of the Internet game “仙侠世界 [The mythical realm].” See Analysys, “中国互联网‘屌丝’用户游戏行为调研报告 [China Internet “*Diaosi*” user game behavior survey report],” Analysys, April 3, 2013, <https://www.analysys.cn/article/detail/9925>.
18. Analysys, “中国互联网‘屌丝’用户游戏行为调研报告 [China Internet].”

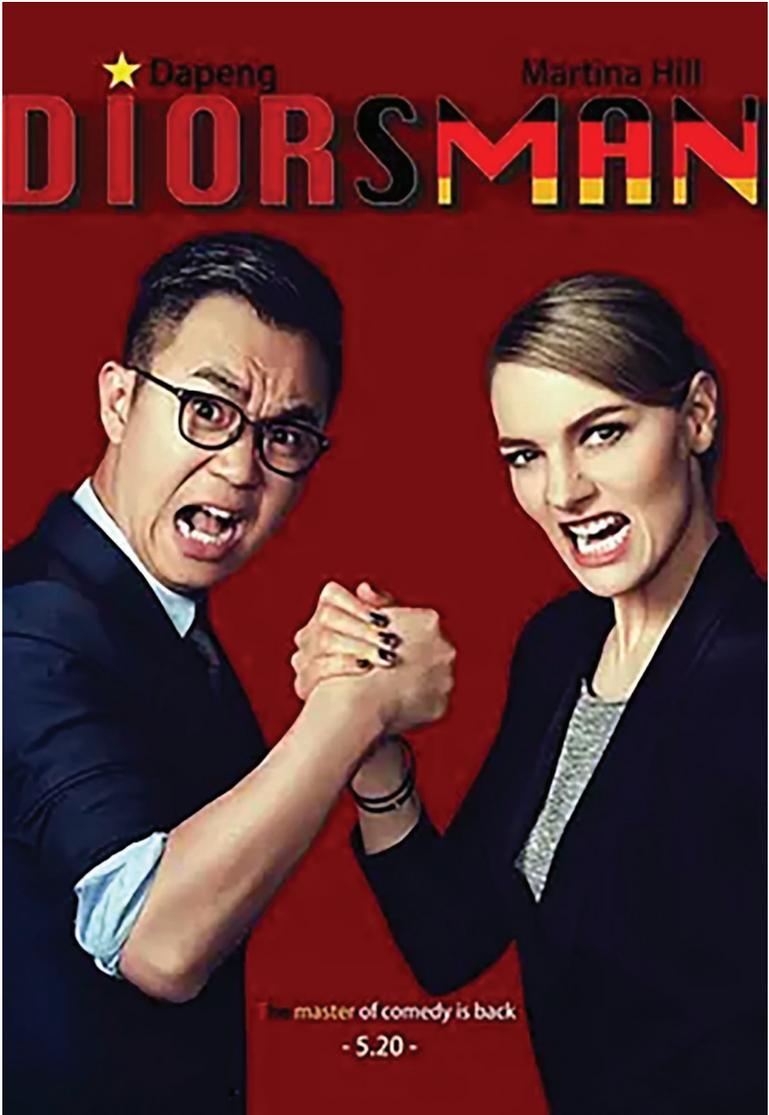


Figure1: Dapeng and Martina Hill appeared on the poster of the Chinese web series *Dior's Man*.

Source: sohu.com

cell phone company, called himself the leader of *diaosi*, and promoted Xiaomi's first smartphone release in 2011 as a phone made for *diaosi*.¹⁹ Other companies soon followed suit, rushing to capitalize on *diaosi*. By early 2012, Sohu imported *Knallerfrauen* (2011–2015), a German TV sketch comedy, and gave it a Chinese title, *Diaosi Lady* (屌丝女士), never mind that the literal meaning of the original German title is closer to “the spicy lady” or “firecrackers.” The show was more successful in China than in Germany. Martina Hills, the show's lead actress, was later invited to join the production of a similar Chinese sketch comedy called *Dior's Man* (屌丝男士, 2012–2015). In April 2012, when *Titanic 3D* (2012) was released in China, the film was marketed as a typical *diaosi* strike-back narrative, with the “lower-class” Jack capturing the heart of the pale and beautiful “upper-class” girl, Rose.²⁰

Diaosi found expression through low-budget, parodic, and farcical dramas, which surged during the first half of the 2010s. Fast-paced and short (ranging from four to twenty minutes per episode), many of these web series were designed to be mobile-phone friendly, capable of generating millions of hits and thousands of comments in a short time span. Dialogue from these shows easily entered ordinary people's daily lexicon.

Though an act of rebellion against the status quo, *diaosi* ultimately conformed to the established narrative of social mobility, which celebrated success.²¹ State media eventually came to wearily endorse *diaosi* but sought to address the underlying social problems that led to the rise of it. On November 3, 2012, *People's Daily*, the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), ran an article, “The Greatest Power Stimulating China Moving

19. Mai Tan Weng, “小米的屌丝烙印究竟从哪儿来的? [Where does Xiaomi's *Diaosi* mark come from?],” *zhihu.com*, April 25, 2020, https://zhuankan.zhihu.com/p/113564271?utm_oi=1135592776333946880.

20. “泰坦尼克号：白富美与穷苦逼的禁忌之恋 [Titanic: The taboo love between a fair-skinned-rich-beautiful and a poor-bitter-sucker],” *Youjiu Comments*, accessed August 20, 2020, <http://news.uuu9.com/shuoshi/ss76>.

21. Xinyu Huang, “Why Do Chinese Young People Call Themselves ‘Losers’? *Diaosi*: A Counter-hegemony Identity,” *Gnovis* 17, no. 1 (2016): 39.

Forward,” for the party’s eighteenth National Congress,²² which coined the term “*diaosi* mentality” (屌丝心态). At the conclusion of the National Congress of the CCP, Xi Jinping, the newly anointed CCP leader, launched an anti-corruption campaign to clean up malfeasance within party ranks seen as contributing to the rise of “*diaosi* mentality.” As the party’s wariness over youth negativity grew, a new term, “positive energy” (正能量), appeared in 2012 that called for uplifting messages as antidotes to the negative energy of *diaosi*.²³ As a direct response to the growing *diaosi* wave, Xi made a speech in early 2013, urging young people to “dare to dream” and “contribute to the nation’s revitalization.”²⁴

In August 2013, Liao Hong, the president of *People’s Daily* online, spoke at a conference admonishing the Chinese Internet to generate positive energy rather than functioning as a pressure-relief valve.²⁵ The term *positive energy* was elevated to become an official guideline at the Central Forum on Arts and Literature in Beijing in October 2013, after Xi gave a speech to remind artists that cultural creation should induce positive energy.²⁶ The Chinese state launched a sustained Internet Cleansing Campaign from 2013 to 2015 to wipe out “coarse” languages, including the very term *diaosi*.²⁷ The *Diaosi* phenomenon dwindled by the end of 2014.

22. Chen Kun, “陈琨, 激发中国前行的最大力量 [The greatest power stimulating China moving forward],” *China Daily*, November 3, 2012, <https://www.12371.cn/2012/11/03/ARTI1351888114187839.shtml?from=groupmessage>.

23. CMP Staff, “The CMP Dictionary: Positive Energy,” China Media Project, April 16, 2021, https://chinamediaproject.org/the_ccp_dictionary/positive-energy/.

24. Xi Jinping, “习近平: 在同各界优秀青年代表座谈时的讲话(全文) [Xi Jinping: A talk with distinguished youth of all sectors (full text)],” *Xinhua News*, May 4, 2013, http://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2013-05/05/content_2395892.htm.

25. Liao Hong, “廖虹: 上网的人应该珍惜自己的麦克风 [Liaohong: People who go online should treasure their microphones],” CCTV, August 16, 2013, <http://news.cntv.cn/2013/08/11/ARTI1376199822669932.shtml>.

26. Xi Jinping, “在文艺工作座谈会上的讲话 [Talk on the symposium of literary and art work],” *Xinhua News*, October 14, 2015, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-10/14/c_1116825558.htm.

27. Li Yiguan, “自我矮化可以休矣 [Self-degradation can be stopped],” *People’s Daily*, December 2, 2014, <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n/2014/1202/c1003-26128810.html>.

Sang/Bereavement

Barely two years after the disappearance of *diaosi*, a new youth online phenomenon in the form of shared expressions and memes of dejected sentiment quietly crept in. An assortment of despondent catchphrases such as “feel like my body is hollowed out,” “just want to lie down,” “I am almost a wasted person,” “the human world is not worth it,” etcetera, appeared on the Chinese Internet. These catchphrases soon evolved into popular Internet memes; one of which was the now iconic “Ge You Slouch,” the image of a skinny, balding, and middle-aged man sagging on a couch staring blandly into the distance. The man, Ge You, happened to be a well-liked comedian in China known for playing underdog characters in film and TV dramas. The couch meme is a screenshot from the Chinese sitcom classic *I Love My Family* (1994), in which Ge You played an idler living a parasitic life on the couch of a good Samaritan who kindly took him in. The couch scene occurred when family members urged him, whom they nicknamed loafer (二混子), to find a job and move on. In response, he threatened suicide but then quickly slouched back on the couch, complaining that he was too weak to work. The image was repurposed to epitomize feelings of apathy and exhaustion. “Ge You Slouch” spawned a variety of pictorial memes and multimedia remixes of creatures, from cute animals to cartoon characters, lying flat.

While *diaosi* was represented largely in web dramas, *sang* was expressed mostly in pictorial memes. A survey done in 2017 ranked “Ge You Slouch” as one of the six most popular *sang* memes.²⁸ An online article written by a citizen journalist, “Seeing Ge You Slouch Everywhere; *Sang* Culture All the Rage,” appeared on July 12, 2016, linking “Ge You Slouch” to the great

28. The survey was done by UC Browser, one popular web browser in China. See UC Big Data, “‘小确丧’是年轻人对困境的温和反击 [‘Little-certain-sang’ is youth’s gentle resistance toward predicaments],” *digitaling.com*, June 23, 2017, <https://www.digitaling.com/articles/37990.html>.

resignation among young people who felt trapped and with no will or desire to fight.²⁹ Sympathetic toward the feelings of youth entrapment, the author predicted that a culture of *sang* was on the horizon. The article soon went viral, and by September 2016, the term *sang culture* was adopted by a major party newspaper, *Guangming Daily*, which urged Chinese youth to boycott *sang* culture.³⁰ The intervention by *Guangming Daily* brought the notion of *sang* culture to wider mainstream media and public attention. Businesses reacted quickly, eager to cash in on yet another potentially lucrative youth trend. A new milk tea brand, *Sang* Cha/Sung Tea (丧茶), which was a joint effort by Ele.me (饿了么, “Hungry?”), a food delivery application, and NetEase News, a news feed application, appeared in late April 2017, with its first store in Shanghai opening to instant popularity (see figure 2).

Sung Tea was positioned to counter China’s most popular milk tea brand, Hey Tea/Happy Tea (喜茶). Sung Tea stores sold six types of tea, with *sang*-inspired names ranging from “My-ex’s-life-is-better-than-mine red tea” to “No-end-to-work-overtime-and-no-hope-to-get-a-raise green tea” and “You-are-left-with-nothing-but-sickness oolong tea.”³¹ Sung Tea soon became a *sang* icon. So much so that the state media People.cn published an article, “Don’t Drink ‘Sang Tea’ Added with Mental Opium,” urging people to boycott Sung Tea.³² Criticism from state media did not deter other brands from adopting similar *sang* designs to reach the lucrative *sang*

29. Du Lili, “杜莉莉, 到处都是‘葛优躺,’ 因为‘丧文化’真的很流行啊啊啊 [‘Ge You Lie’ is everywhere, because ‘sang culture’ is really popular],” Pingwest, July 12, 2016, <https://www.pingwest.com/a/78751>.

30. Xia Zhiyan, “引导青年人远离‘丧文化’侵蚀 [Guide young people to stay away from the erosion of sang culture],” *Guangming Daily*, September 30, 2016, https://epaper.gmw.cn/gmrb/html/2016-09/30/nw.D110000gmrb_20160930_1-10.htm.

31. Ouyang Lining, “上海真开了家丧茶: 排队两小时, 限购两杯, 只营业4天 [A real Sang teahouse opens in Shanghai: Wait in line for two hours, each is limited to purchase two, and the shop only opens for four days],” ThePaper, April 29, 2017, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1673835.

32. “加了精神鸦片的‘丧茶’喝不得 [Don’t drink ‘sang tea’ added with mental opium],” *People’s Daily*, August 16, 2017, <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0815/c1003-29472615.html>



Figure 2: People flocking to the opening of Sang Tea in Shanghai in April 2017.

Source: HK01

market. Slogans such as “Hopeless Yoghurt” and “Negative energy coffee” proliferated, transforming *sang* from an emotional expression into a purchasable commodity.³³

The rise of *sang* owed much to the unprecedented growth of digital technology and economy in China. China’s economic growth rate dropped from 9.6 percent to 6.6 percent from 2011 to 2018; yet the digital economy’s share of China’s GDP increased from 9.5 percent to 34.4 percent during the same period. According to CNNIC data, broadband ports in China surged from 188 million to 762 million from 2010 to

33. Bingkuaine, “‘没希望’酸奶用负能量段子写成的广告文案 句句扎心 [‘No hope’ yogurt’s ad copies, written by negative energy jokes, strike people with every sentence],” 4A Advertising Circle, April 26, 2017, <https://www.digitaling.com/articles/36804.html>.

2017.³⁴ Internet users increased from 298 million in 2008 to 839 million in 2018. The rapid growth of the digital economy shifted labor-intensive activities from the previous manufacturing industry into the digital sector, burdening young tech workers with the so-called 996 work schedule (in office from 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m., six days a week). According to a survey in 2016, employees in Internet companies worked longer hours than people in other industries.³⁵ China's fast-developing mobile technology and instant message apps such as WeChat further extended working time, with employers bombarding young employees with work-related messages 24/7.³⁶ The overdrive of China's online sector took a toll on young techies. From 2013 to 2018, the average sleep hours of Chinese dropped from 8.8 to 6.5 hours. The top-ranked "sleepless cities" were Shanghai, Guangzhou, Beijing, and Shenzhen where more than 60 percent of Chinese Internet companies were located.³⁷

If the *diaosi* generation benefited from the expansion of digital technology and connectivity in their aspirations for success, the *sang* generation fell victim to commercial forces that exploited *diaosi* buzzwords to encourage ever-expanding online labor without due compensation. Unlike *diaosi* whose satirical expressions belied their hidden ambition and desire to succeed, *sang* was genuinely burned out and wished to quit, or at least hit a pause. The discontent erupted into the 996. ICU online campaign in 2019,

34. See the CNNIC reports released in 2009, 2011, 2012, and 2019, China Internet Network Information Center, "中国互联网络发展状况统计报告 [Statistical report on internet development in China]," wap.cac.gov.cn, accessed June 20, 2019, http://wap.cac.gov.cn/sjfw/hysj/A091601phoneindex_1.htm.

35. Didi Media Research Center and CBNDData, "2016智能出行大数据报告 [2016 intelligent commute big data report]," pdf.dfcfw.com, accessed June 20, 2019, http://pdf.dfcfw.com/pdf/H3_AP201703210424075986_01.pdf.

36. Huang Vincent Lei and Zhang Ke, "Engagement, Formality, and Visibility: Managing Paradoxes of Using Mobile Instant Messaging for Work," *International Journal of Communication* 13 (2019): 1919.

37. Chinese Medical Doctor Association Sleep Medicine Academy Society, "2018年中国睡眠指数报告 [2018 China sleep index report]," dydata.io, June 26, 2019, <https://www.dydata.io/datastore/detail/1755555620309831680/>.

crying out that “developers’ lives matter.” A 996. ICU repository appeared on GitHub, an online community where programmers worldwide share code and software tools. The repository received thousands of stars within a few days, making it the top trending topic on GitHub. Tech workers drew up a blacklist of hundreds of Internet companies requiring overtime work, either coercively or tacitly.³⁸ On the list were Alibaba, JD.com, ByteDance, and Huawei, China’s largest digital companies.

The rise of *sang* contradicted China’s state campaign of national rejuvenation/the Chinese Dream touted by Xi Jinping. The Chinese dream demanded Chinese youths to perform assiduously as workers and consumers so as to serve the collective needs of the Chinese society. Upward mobility through hard work, which *sang* called out as exploitative labor practices, was endowed with the national purpose of making China strong and prosperous.³⁹ Socialist collective values and capitalist individualism were now seamlessly integrated into the narrative of national rejuvenation. Yet individual youths who contributed to China’s exceptional growth suffered, their benefits slipping away as prices soared and incomes stagnated. Housing costs increased almost 20 percent from 2015 to 2017, especially in first-tier cities where technology companies were located and where young techies resided, making it practically impossible for the young to buy an apartment and start a family. Stagnation led to the prevailing sense of fatigue and hopelessness, which emerged as the most popular catchphrases of *sang*. Indeed, though inheriting humor and parody from *sang* took a gloomier and decisively pessimistic turn. Memes of psychological woes, such as insomnia, social phobia, and depression, and memes of physical woes, such as aging, hair loss, stomach discomfort, infertility, and even death, became predominant during the era of *sang*.

38. Yuan Yang, “China Tech Worker Protest against Long Working Hours Goes Viral,” *Financial Times*, April 3, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/72754638-55d1-11e9-91f9-b6515a54c5b1>.

39. K. Cohen Tan and Shuxin Cheng, “Sang Subculture in Post-Reform China,” *Global Media and China* 5, no. 1 (2020): 86.

The evolution of youth online culture from *diaosi* to *sang* was further shaped by the evolution and variation in digital platforms. *Diaosi* was the product of the earlier platform of Sina Weibo, in particular the more traditional community-based Baidu Forum. The arrival of more diverse platforms and applications on video streaming sites such as Youku, Bilibili, and TikTok; music platforms such as NetEase Cloud Music and QQ Music; social networking sites like Douban; and question-and-answer website zhihu.com led to the loss of a core community, the bedrock of *diaosi*. During the era of *sang*, relevant memes and catchphrases spontaneously spread throughout the whole network on diverse media platforms. The more focused *diaosi* subsequently gave way to a more diffused *sang*.

Bilibili.com, a video streaming platform for user-generated videos, became the most popular platform for *sang*. The platform's most prominent feature is the bullet comment, a subtitle system that displays user comments as streams of moving subtitles overlaid on the video playback screen. Previous comments become part of the video content for future viewers. It creates a chat room experience where users watch, resonate, and interact with others. Many videos on the website went viral as the result of bullet comments. As young people shared their pessimistic feelings by collectively venting through bullet comments, the *People's Daily* stepped in, accusing bullet comments of spreading negative energy.⁴⁰ Stricter regulations were called for, leading to Norms for the Administration of Online Short Video Platforms and Detailed Implementation Rules for Online Short Video Content Review Standards in January 2019, banning short videos, including titles, bullet comments, and memes purportedly promoting *sang* culture, suicide, and pessimistic views of life.⁴¹

40. “弹幕语言, 多元也要有规范 [Danmu language, diverse but need to be regulated],” *People's Daily*, overseas edition, April 5, 2019, https://www.sohu.com/a/306045576_157267.

41. China Netcasting Services Association, “网络短视频内容审核标准细则 [Detailed rules for online short video content review standards],” cnsa.cn, January 9, 2019, http://www.cnsa.cn/art/2019/1/9/art_1488_22441.html.

One feature distinguishing *sang* memes was the emphasis on bodily suffering and its visual exhibition. The incessant and obsessive focus on the body eventually led to the rise of yet another youth online cultural phenomenon, the lying flat movement, or what the Chinese call *tangping*, a term that emerged in 2021.



Figure 3: Screenshot of the original post from “Kind-Hearted Traveller” on Baidu.

Source: Baidu Forum

Tangping/Lying Flat

What ushered in the era of lying flat was an iconic posting made by a Baidu Forum user, Kind-Hearted Traveller, in April 2021, with the subject heading “Lying-flat is the right thing to do.” In the post, Traveller, whose real name is Luo Huazhong wrote that “lying flat is my intellectual movement of philosophy. Only by lying flat, man became the measure of everything.”⁴² Probably not by coincidence, the declaration was posted on Baidu’s Population Forum (人口吧) at a time when China was anticipating the release of a national census predicting a looming demographic crisis of an aging population and low birth rates. Traveller’s posting equated the posture of lying flat with the need for bodily autonomy and for escaping the trap of mandatory childbearing. His became the manifesto of the lying flat movement.⁴³

A high school dropout born in 1990, Luo traveled around the country, getting by with minimum needs while working part-time jobs. He documented his minimalistic lifestyle through online posts. To earn a few quick bucks, Luo travelled to Hengdian, the world’s largest film production backlot, to play minor roles, including appearing as a dead body, literarily “lying flat,” in a variety of costume drama films and television serials. As Luo put it, “Life is about lying flat in different forms.” One or two months of performing death by lying flat could easily keep him afloat for an entire year. Luo’s minimalistic practice earned him the nickname of the “Master of Lying-Flatism.”⁴⁴

Lying flat became the trendiest term in China by 2021. Numerous memes about *tangping* were posted online, with young adults claiming to be lying flat and quitting the rat race, what the Chinese called “involution.” Compared with *diaosi* and *sang*, lying flat was a more explicit physical demonstration of refusal to participate in China’s national rejuvenation campaign.

42. B. R. Deepak, “Chinese Millennials Take to Lying Flat,” *Sunday Guardian*, July 3, 2021, <https://www.sundayguardianlive.com/opinion/chinese-millennials-take-lying-flat>.

43. Chen, “These Chinese Millennials Are ‘Chilling.’”

44. Chen.

Public sentiment in China to lying flat was ambivalent. While some celebrated *tangping* as a manifesto against materialism and the state-capitalist system, others denounced it as nihilistic escapism.

The Seventh National Population Census was eventually released on May 11, 2021, confirming the slowest population growth in PRC history.⁴⁵ On May 20, 2021, *Nanfang Daily*, a party newspaper from Guangdong province, ran a commentary with the heading “Lying Flat Is a Shame, Not Justice.”⁴⁶ The same day, *Guangming Daily*, which was instrumental in leading the debate on *sang* in 2016, published an article by Wang Xingyu, the branch party secretary of the School of Economics and Management of the China Institute of Labour Relations, making it clear that “the ‘lying flat group’ clearly posed problems for China’s economic and social development” and that “we should be concerned about the ‘lying flat group’, particularly at a time of slowing birth rate.”⁴⁷ The article urged society “to cultivate a positive working environment for these young people and to promote positive values through the joint efforts of the state, society and schools.”⁴⁸ By May 28, 2021, Li Fengliang, the dean of the Institute of Education at Tsinghua University, published an article on *China Science Daily* and its public account on WeChat, denouncing *tangping* as “an extremely irresponsible attitude, which disappoints not only the youths’ parents but also millions of taxpayers.”⁴⁹

45. National Bureau of Statistics, “第七次全国人口普查主要数据情况 [Key data of the Seventh National Population Census],” stats.gov.cn, May 11, 2021, http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/202105/t20210510_1817176.html.

46. Wang Qingfeng, “‘躺平’可耻，哪来的正义感? [‘Lying flat’ is a shame, not justice],” *Nanfang Daily*, May 20, 2021, http://www.xinhuanet.com/comments/2021-05/20/c_1127467232.htm.

47. Wang Xingyu, “引导‘躺平族’珍惜韶华奋发有为 [Guide the ‘lying flat youth’ to treasure time and endeavor],” *Guangming Daily*, May 20, 2021, https://epaper.gmw.cn/gmrb/html/2021-05/20/nw.D110000gmrb_20210520_2-11.htm.

48. See the article reposted by the Communist Party of China News Network website: Wang Xingyu, “引导‘躺平族’珍惜韶华奋发有为 [Guide the ‘Lingping people’ to cherish their time and work hard to achieve success],” cpcnews.cn, May 20, 2021, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2021/0520/c40531-32108237.html>

49. Li Fengliang, “‘内卷’是教育发挥筛选功能的成本 [‘Involution’ is the cost of education for performing filtering function],” *China Science Daily*, May 5, 2021, <https://news.sciencenet.cn/sbhtmlnews/2021/5/362832.shtm>.

In an effort to avert a demographic crisis, China officially announced the Three-Children Policy on May 31, 2021, relaxing birth quota from two in recent years to three children per household moving forward. The state-allocated target in family planning was a reminder to young people that their bodies belonged to the state and served at the pleasure of the state. Lying flat renewed attention to the body as a locus of power struggles where the presence of the party-state loomed large. One meme that became popular among the lying flats was “green chives” (韭菜), a vegetable in China frequently linked to fecundity for easy growth and harvest. In recent years, green chives became a metaphor for ordinary Chinese toiling away to serve the rich and powerful.⁵⁰ The companion meme is the image of a sickle, a tool for harvesting that happens to be the symbol of the Communist Party, which has had a long tradition of disciplining and regulating the bodies of Chinese citizens. The only way for the green chives to escape from being harvested by a sickle was to lie flat because “a chive lying-flat is difficult to reap (躺平的韭菜不好割).” Green chive’s purported nourishing effects on male virility and female fertility makes lying flat an emancipatory act of evading harvest.

In July 2021, an article in *Deutsche Welle* linked *tangping* to the Three-Children Policy, predicting that the Chinese government would not be amused with youth withdrawal, especially at a time when China was trying to boost birth rates to ensure economic growth.⁵¹ The article used *tangping*’s own slogan, “Don’t buy a house, don’t buy a car, don’t get married, don’t have children, don’t consume,” to capture the phenomenon. Sure enough, the concern over the lying flat phenomenon prompted the Chinese government to issue the Double Reduction (双减) measure in July, banning

50. Pang Laikwan, “China’s Post-Socialist Governmentality and the Garlic Chives Meme: Economic Sovereignty and Biopolitical Subjects,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 39, no. 1 (2022): 81.

51. He Sai, “中国‘躺平族’都是怎么想的? [What does China’s ‘tangping group’ think],” *Deutsche Welle*, June 8, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/zh/中国躺平族都是怎么想的/a-57814519>.

all for-profit, after-school tutoring programs to ease cost and pressure of child education.⁵² In August, the Supreme People's Court and the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security published guidelines on labor law violations, signaling to the Big Tech firms the need to relax the notorious 996 overwork culture.⁵³ The same month, Xi Jinping mentioned that development opportunities should be afforded equally to more people to discourage *tangping*.⁵⁴

DST as Civic Engagement?

Young Chinese construct playful narratives of personal and social experience through web dramas, online catchphrases, and memes, as well as multimedia remixes, which allow the emergence of new forms of communities, identities, and authenticities. As political participation remains off-limits, online communities in China create, share, and trade playful memes and short videos as a form of civic participations. In discussing the rise of

52. See the General Office of the Central Committee of China's Communist Party and the General Office of the State Council, "Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Homework and Off-Campus Training for Compulsory Education Students," moe.gov.cn, July 24, 2021, http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xgk/moe_1777/moe_1778/202107/t20210724_546576.html. The sudden major crackdown was so impactful that the whole after-school tutoring industry evaporated virtually overnight, with hundreds of billions of dollars in Chinese education technology companies stock value wiped out, and hundreds of thousands of workers have since been laid off. For more details, see Qin Chen, "The Turmoil Following China's Crackdown on Private Tutoring," TechNode, February 3, 2022, <https://technode.com/2022/02/03/lunar-new-year-special-the-turmoil-following-chinas-crackdown-on-private-tutoring/>.

53. The Ministry of Human Resources and the Supreme People's Court of the People's Republic of China, "The Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security and the Supreme People's Court Jointly Issue Typical Cases of Overtime Work Labor and Personnel Disputes," court.gov.cn, August 2021, <https://www.court.gov.cn/zixun-xiangqing-319161.html>.

54. Xi Jinping, "扎实推动共同富裕 [Solidly advance common prosperity]," Qiushi, October 15, 2021, http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2021-10/15/c_1127959365.htm. It is quoted from his speech in the tenth meeting of the Financial and Economic Commission of the CPC Central Committee on August 17, 2021.

the satirical TV programs that merge entertainment and politics, Jeffrey P. Jones highlights sarcastic expressions as an important mechanism for public engagement with legislative and electoral politics.⁵⁵ Though there is limited room for civic engagement and electoral politics in China, satire has become the dominant mood of expression in DST, evolving from *diaosi's* playful optimism to *sang's* sardonic pessimism and to *tangping's* languid humor. In what he calls “cynicism,”⁵⁶ Peter Sloterdijk contends that irony and sarcasm can be a form of ideological subversion that rejects the official culture.⁵⁷ As Jones observes, ordinary citizens routinely encounter mediated politics through seemingly pedestrian pursuits of pleasure, distraction, curiosity, community, sociability, and happenstance.⁵⁸ Political engagements are thus embedded in everyday cultural discourse and practices on and offline. Looking at the specific instance of the Chinese Internet, Guobin Yang notes that “play has a spirit of irreverence. It always sits uncomfortably with power. . . . Chinese Internet culture, in general, is enlivened with this spirit of play.”⁵⁹ Thomas Poell and colleagues argue that Chinese “netizens” have positioned themselves as a distinct component of the public who monitor social events discreetly while hiding behind the screen.⁶⁰ The collective and anonymous

55. Jeffery P. Jones, *Entertaining Politics: Satiric Television and Political Engagement* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010).

56. Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

57. The everyday banality and to hold them up to ridicule, thus exposing the sublime noblesse of the ideological phrases the egotistical interests, the violence, the brutal claims to power. This procedure, then, is more pragmatic than argumentative: it subverts the official proposition by confronting it with the situation of its enunciation; it proceeds ad hominem (for example, when a politician preaches the duty of patriotic sacrifice, cynicism exposes the personal gain he is making from the sacrifice of others).

58. Jones, *Entertaining Politics*, 366n63.

59. Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 224.

60. Thomas Poell, Jeroen de Kloet, and Guohua Zeng, “Will the Real Weibo Please Stand Up? Chinese Online Contention and Actor-network Theory,” *Chinese Journal of Communication* 7, no. 1 (2014): 12.

identity of netizens allows for civil participation and group solidarity without revealing individual identity.

The prevalence of satirical memes and remixes as both an outlet of expression and evasion of detection in China are the result of Internet censorship. Rather than eliminating political expression, Astrid Nordin and Lisa Richaud argue that censorship engenders the prevalent use of coded language in political satire.⁶¹ The extensive use of humor can be seen as coded political resistance. In the 2000s, the buzzwords “river crab” (*hexie*, homophone of “harmony”) and “grass mud horse” (*caonima*, homophone of “fuck your mom”) as parodies of the government censorship stood out for their wide circulation. More than wordplays, these expressions are frequently accompanied by images, videos and music, and other forms of multimedia representations. *Egao* (online spoofs or wicked for fun), for instance, is a form of online parody that uses digital technology to make visual collages.⁶² Satiric and ludicrous, *egao* playfully subverts a range of authoritative discourses and provides a vehicle for comic criticism and emotional catharsis. Bingchun Meng notes that *egao* “shares an artistic tradition with parody and satire” and “an anti-establishment spirit with medieval carnivals.”⁶³ Digital technology and networks brought new dimensions to the ancient tradition, furthering the fusion of entertainment and politics in China, establishing China-specific nonconfrontational cultural politics. Political connotations

61. Astrid Nordin and Lisa Richaud, “Subverting Official Language and Discourse in China? Type River Crab for Harmony,” *China Information* 28, no. 1 (2014): 47.

62. *Egao* has been extensively written about. See Bingchun Meng, “From Steamed Bun to Grass Mud Horse: E Gao as Alternative Political Discourse on the Chinese Internet,” *Global Media and Communication* 7, no. 1 (2011): 33; Christopher G. Rea, “Spoofing (e’gao) Culture on the Chinese Internet,” in *Humour in Chinese Life and Culture: Resistance and Control in Modern Times*, ed. Jessica Milner Davis and Jocelyn Chey (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013); Haiqing Yu, “After the ‘Steamed Bun’: E’gao and Its Postsocialist Politics,” *Chinese Literature Today* 5, no. 1 (2015): 55; Haomin Gong and Xin Yang, “Digitized Parody: The Politics of *Egao* in Contemporary China,” *China Information* 24, no. 1 (2010): 3; Paola Voci, *China on Video: Smaller-Screen Realities* (London: Routledge, 2010).

63. Meng, “From Steamed Bun to Grass Mud Horse,” 47n72.

disguised in visually stimulating and pleasurable forms make the text more likely to be widely shared and remembered. As scholars observed a decade ago, visual trickery, symbolic manipulation, parody, humor, and intense interaction have become essential practices in China's online repertoire.⁶⁴

On the other hand, recent studies on the Chinese Internet have sought to move beyond the singular focus on civic participation and political engagement. David Kurt Herold, for example, proposes to study the Internet as an online forum instead of a tool for political resistance.⁶⁵ Using the metaphorical notion of "online carnivals" to counter the perception of the Internet as a public sphere, Herold argued that the Internet serves as the "second life" of Chinese people, and carnivalesque empowerment "can be far more democratic (people-rule) than any representative democracy."⁶⁶ Scholars such as Haiqing Yu and Shaohua Guo further propose an alternative framework to look at the Chinese Internet. Addressing the dichotomy between control and resistance in scholarly and journalistic discourses, Yu shifts the focus from the usage and function of the Internet to how ordinary people imagine their relationship with the Internet.⁶⁷ By elaborating metaphorical views on the Internet as *jianghu* (the milieu or community in the Chinese martial arts world), battlefield and playground, Yu showcases the framing of the Chinese Internet by its users and goes beyond the binary power struggle to reflect more on the cultural-historical legacy and the quotidian needs of pleasure-seeking. Employing the concept of "the network of visibility," Guo shifts the focus from "what has been censored" to "what is visible," which

64. See Poell et al., "Will the Real Weibo Please Stand Up?" 7n69; Xiao Qiang, "The Rise of Online Public Opinion and Its Political Impact," in *Changing Media, Changing China*, ed. Susan L. Shirk (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China*, 68.

65. David Kurt Herold, "Noise, Spectacle, Politics: Carnival in Chinese Cyberspace," in *Online Society in China: Creating, Celebrating, and Instrumentalising the Online Carnival*, ed. David Kurt Herold and Peter Marolt (New York: Routledge, 2011), 15.

66. Herold, "Noise, Spectacle, Politics," 15.

67. Haiqing Yu, "Social Imaginaries of the Internet in China," in *The Routledge Companion to Global Internet Histories*, ed. Gerard Goggin and Mark J. McLelland (New York: Routledge, 2017).

highlights the negotiations and dynamics among multiple actors, including divergent layers of the state, netizens, and business.⁶⁸ Through a detailed description and situated analysis of landmark events in different sociohistorical periods, Guo showcases “the evolution of the Chinese Internet” by presenting and contextualizing the competition among diverse players for “visibility” and legitimacy, which are measured by market popularity and content authority. Yu and Guo’s approaches shed light on the nuances and complexity of the DST culture by directing us to look at how users make sense of their practices and how the youth online subculture is cocreated by multiple participants. As Richard Dawkins put it in his seminal book *The Selfish Gene*, which introduced *meme* as analogous to the *gene*, a cultural unit that can spread by replicating itself,⁶⁹ Internet memes or other means of expression do not emerge unless users respond to it, alter it, and enact it. User participation and the pleasure derived from participating thus become the driving force for the survival of memes and other online expressions.

Conclusion

This article has traced, in broad strokes, the evolution of Chinese youth online subculture from *diaosi* to *sang* and finally to *tangping*. Expressed through web dramas, online memes, and multimedia remix, the evolution of Chinese youth sentiment from sarcastic yet upbeat *diaosi* in the early 2010s to the disillusioned *sang* by the mid-2010s and the resigned *tangping* since the early 2020s is indicative of China’s shifting political and economic milieu at large. In tracing and contextualizing the DST culture over the past decade, the article serves as a first step toward understanding motivations, perspectives, and actions and reactions of various stakeholders in the DST

68. Shaohua Guo, *The Evolution of the Chinese Internet: Creative Visibility in the Digital Public* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020).

69. Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 30th ann. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

phenomenon. It argues that the transformation of the DST from *diaosi* to *sang* and to *tangping* witnesses Chinese DST youth's gradual disenchantment with and an eventual disengagement from the established societal expectation as the young generation grew increasingly averse, indeed resistant, to partaking in China's national rejuvenation drive.

It will be fruitful for future study to look at how China's unique one-child policy, which lasted from 1979 to 2015, might have contributed to youth disillusionment. In 2004, anthropologist Vanessa Fong published groundbreaking ethnographic research on the social, economic, and psychological development of urban youth born under China's one-child policy. Fong discovered that the singletons carried the sole burden of parental expectations of upward social mobility across gender and family income divides. Growing up as the only child and the center of family attention, the singletons were groomed to be winners amid fierce competition. The zero-sum contest led to stress and eventual distress when reality took hold. What Fong described as the "incongruities between the status they expected and the status they attained" can perhaps partially account for the singletons' collective frustration and despair.⁷⁰ Fengshu Liu's research on China's E-generation, based on interviews with urban teenagers and young adults born into one-child families, reinforces Fong's observation. Liu points out further the contradictions for the one-child generation contending with the weight of parental expectations, an exam-oriented education system, and a competitive labor market while living with boredom, loneliness, and isolation without siblings and peers. Liu's interviewees stated that they turned to cyberspace and Internet cafés to escape from reality and parental, and by extension state, expectation and control.⁷¹ The Internet provided the glue for the birth and growth of the DST phenomenon.

70. Vanessa L. Fong, *Only Hope: Coming of Age under China's One-Child Policy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 98.

71. Fengshu Liu, "It Is Not Merely About Life on the Screen: Urban Chinese Youth and the Internet Café," *Journal of Youth Studies* 12, no. 2 (2009): 167.

A look at similar and parallel cyber subculture among youth elsewhere, including Japan, the United States, and beyond, will also be useful as we undertake a larger project concerning the origin, evolution, affect, and effect of the youth DST culture. Many catchphrases of *diaosi* and *sang* had their counterparts or origins from other countries or regions. *Foxi* (“Buddhist-like”), for instance, derived from a 2014 issue of *Non-no*, a Japanese women’s fashion magazine, referred to monk-like Japanese men who are too exhausted to interact with women and enjoy being alone. When *diaosi* went viral in China in the early 2010s, *lushe*, meaning “masturbating snake,” a homophone for loser, was trendy in Taiwan. Young people in Taiwan mocked themselves as a little snake (小蛇) or little *lu* (小鲁) and called the wealthy and affluent people *wen na* or *wei jun* (“great king”), homophonous words of “winner.” The recognition of youth disenchantment and frustration across diverse cultures and regions will help us position DST as a global phenomenon.

Moments of “Madness”

Cynicism in Times of COVID

SHAOHUA GUO

Abstract

This paper zeroes in on several transient yet significant moments that emerged in China during November to December 2022, when the country's strict zero-COVID policy transitioned to an abrupt lift of all restrictions. It analyzes three types of phenomena to deepen our understanding of how cynicism operates as a coping mechanism for individuals to make sense of their everyday lives: (1) “literatures of madness” (*fafeng wenxue*), (2) group crawls on college campuses, and (3) pandemic jokes (*duanzi*) satirizing policy changes. The explored scenes illustrate a spectrum of cynical responses that challenge the distinctions between the real and the fictional, truths and rumors, and the playful and the political. Consequently, cynicism emerges as a diverse set of strategies on both textual and performative levels, aiding in the interpretation of the absurd. Further, an investigation of these cases sheds light on understanding contemporary youth culture in the context of a global health crisis. Amid the popular rhetoric about the youth celebrating passivity, all three cases illustrate the liminal space in which youths navigate between passivity and agency, between disillusionment and hope.

Keywords: literatures of madness, group crawls, pandemic jokes, youth culture, cynicism

Introduction

On May 5, 2023, the World Health Organization declared the end of the Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) for COVID-19. Since its initial outbreak in January 2020, the global death toll from COVID has reached nearly seven million.¹ This pandemic has not only posed a severe health crisis but has also exposed and intensified various societal issues, including class disparities, global inequities, and geopolitical conflicts.

The Chinese government’s response to COVID-19 has been characterized by its extensive use of lockdowns and associated measures, including widespread testing, contact tracing, and quarantine mandates. Initially lauded for their effectiveness in containing the virus’s spread, over time, these measures have drawn substantial criticism. Concerns have been raised regarding such issues as a lack of transparency, threats to privacy, restrictions on freedom of expression, and the stringent enforcement of containment measures.² According to Jiacheng Liu, “The response to the coronavirus in China unfolded as a highly contested public performance, where loyalty was tested, political order was questioned, and an ideological crisis became evident.”³ Liu sees this as the “transformation of personal suffering into a public spectacle,”⁴ constituting a series of ongoing social dramas interwoven with the evolving pandemic. Focusing on the less sensational aspect of “social drama,” this essay is a study of a handful of transient yet significant

1. Giulia Heyward and Marc Silver, “WHO Ends Global Health Emergency Declaration for COVID-19,” NPR, May 5, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsand-soda/2023/05/05/1174269442/who-ends-global-health-emergency-declaration-for-covid-19>.

2. Eva Pils, “China’s Response to the Coronavirus Pandemic: Fighting Two Enemies,” *VerfBlog*, May 25, 2020, <https://verfassungsblog.de/chinas-response-to-the-coronavirus-pandemic-fighting-two-enemies>.

3. Jiacheng Liu, “From Social Drama to Political Performance: China’s Multi-front Combat with the Covid-19 Epidemic,” *Critical Asian Studies* 52, no. 4 (2020): 475.

4. Liu, “From Social Drama to Political Performance,” 476.

scenes in response to the pandemic in China. It argues for the significance of investigating transitory occurrences of moments of “madness” in the context of everyday life.

Notably, the term *madness* is a homophone of *lockdowns*, thereby, metaphorically, hinting at the collective state of upheaval experienced during the ongoing pandemic. Originally, the notion of “moments of madness” referred to outbursts seen in radical social movements during tumultuous historical eras, primarily focusing on political conflicts and contentious events.⁵ Moving beyond the scope of these moments tied to political movements, an examination of instances of “madness” in everyday life unveils their role as a means of social commentary. They highlight the creativity and resilience of individuals grappling with adversity and offer a platform for a diverse range of experiences to be shared. Further, in a Foucauldian sense, *madness* is defined by those who possess the authority to determine what is normal and abnormal. Thus, madness is not purely an individual condition but a product of broader societal mechanisms.⁶ Institutions such as asylums and psychiatric hospitals functioned as mechanisms of social control, which reinforces the dominance of rationality and marginalizes those who deviated from established norms.⁷ Consequently, investigating instances of “madness” within everyday life offers pivotal moments of truth, which provides critical insights into the varied nature of social responses to the health crisis. In this light, the essay seeks to answer two key questions: What kind of frames of reference can we use to make sense of pandemic experiences? How can the concept of cynicism enrich our understanding of the pandemic experiences?

To address these questions, I identified, tracked, and recorded content posted on two social media platforms, Weibo and WeChat, as well as two popular websites, Douban and Zhihu, during November and December 2022. I examine three types of phenomena that emerged during the

5. Aristide R. Zolberg, “Moments of Madness,” *Politics & Society* 2 (1972): 183–207.

6. Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965).

7. Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*.

pandemic: (1) “literatures of madness” (*fafeng wenxue*), (2) group crawls on college campuses, and (3) pandemic jokes (*duanzi*) satirizing policy changes. In analyzing these phenomena, I illustrate how cynicism operates as a coping mechanism for individuals trying to make sense of their everyday lives. These responses effectively bring the unseen to light and give voice to the unspoken. They showcase the ways in which transient moments bear significant implications for the dialectics of agency and passivity surrounding pandemic politics. Moreover, my investigation into these cases sheds light on understanding contemporary youth culture in the context of a global health crisis. At a time when popular rhetoric is concerned with how youths celebrate passivity, all three cases involve the opening up of liminal spaces in which young individuals grapple with the delicate balance between disillusionment and hope and between embracing passivity versus asserting agency.

Literature Review: Narrating the Pandemic

The question of how to narrate the pandemic is a battleground with various participants. On a global scale, the othering of the virus in liberal democracies highlights the lack of compassion between populations and a tendency to unscrupulously associate the virus with particular political systems.⁸ Consequently, a collective memory lapse occurs, wherein the initial account of failure and the corresponding pleas for accountability are eclipsed by conflicting narratives of systemic supremacy or inadequacy.⁹ The politics of laying blame between China and the United States, for instance, showcases

8. Marius Meinhof, “Othering the Virus,” *Discovering Society*, March 21, 2020, <https://archive.discoveringsociety.org/2020/03/21/othering-the-virus/>.

9. Yawen Li and Marius Meinhof, “Imagining Pandemic as a Failure: Writing, Memory, and Forgetting under COVID-19 in China,” in *COVID-19 in International Media: Global Pandemic Perspectives*, eds. John C. Pollock and Douglas A. Vakoch (New York: Routledge, 2021), 87.

how both countries react to each other's discourse and engage in competing narratives about the origin of COVID and racial profiling.¹⁰ In addition, popular memories about the pandemic are soon appropriated by various actors to fulfill their particular agendas.¹¹ Two early examples of this appropriation are Li Wenliang, a whistleblower who passed away during the outbreak in Wuhan, and Fang Fang, a writer whose posts on lockdowns sparked controversy. The Chinese government reacted differently to the two cases, commemorating Li as a national hero while remaining mostly silent about Fang. What the two cases have in common is that their public stories were appropriated to demonstrate the failure of liberal democracy in the Western context.¹²

That narrating the pandemic produces such a hotbed of discursive competition demonstrates the importance of entry points when telling a pandemic story. The early successful stories of "containing" the virus in China contribute to sustaining the political legitimacy of the Xi Jinping administration.¹³ The state soon appropriated these stories to consolidate the dominant order by having tragic memories rewritten.¹⁴ Narratives about the pandemic appearing in television drama series, for instance, adopt a humanistic approach to evoke a sense of collectivism.¹⁵ In contrast, the richness of digital memories complements and contests the official narrative and draws public attention to the importance of remembrance. Survivors of COVID

10. Bernadette Nadya Jaworsky and Runya Qiaoan, "The Politics of Blaming: The Narrative Battle between China and the US over COVID-19," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 26 (2021): 295–315.

11. Li and Meinhof, "Imagining Pandemic as a Failure."

12. Li and Meinhof.

13. Ran Ran and Yan Jian, "When Transparency Meets Accountability: How the Fight against the COVID-19 Pandemic Became a Blame Game in Wuhan," *China Review* 21, no. 1 (2021): 7–36.

14. Jeroen de Kloet, Jian Lin, and Juelling Hu, "The Politics of Emotion during COVID-19: Turning Fear into Pride in China's WeChat Discourse," *China Information* 35, no. 3 (2021): 366–92.

15. YunYun Zhou and KaiLing Xie, "Gendering National Sacrifices: The Making of New Heroines in China's Counter-COVID-19 TV Series," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 15, no. 3 (2022): 372–92.

have narrated their experiences of suffering from exclusion, discrimination, and stigmatization, factors neglected by the state-led memory-making process.¹⁶ New forms of political participation have also emerged. The collective mourning in the comments section of Dr. Li Wenliang’s Weibo account moves beyond conventional contentious politics and expands the scope of activism.¹⁷ Revisiting Li’s Weibo at different moments, netizens formulate alternative narrations of the pandemic by transforming personal experiences into collective memories, a process that defends social justice and advocates citizens’ rights.¹⁸

Insightful as these studies are, they mostly focus on sensational political and media events, as well as the documented experiences of witnesses to those events. This paper instead focuses on the mundane moments of everyday life that are typically characterized by incoherence, fragmentation, and ephemerality. It adopts what Guobin Yang calls a “scenic view.” Yang notes, “Scenes are dynamic moments of action in concrete settings. Not structures or institutions, they enact and encapsulate social structures and institutions in powerful ways.”¹⁹ Consequently, a “‘scenic’ view . . . promises an open, multilayered, and dialogic understanding of . . . politics and society more broadly.”²⁰ For Kimberly Creasap, a scene must be conceptualized as “a process” instead of “as a stable context where political activity happens.”²¹ Both approaches would reject a fixed reading of pandemic stories and would instead advocate analysis situated within particular circumstances. Given the ever-changing landscape of the pandemic, adopting a scenic approach helps to unveil the transient,

16. Yi Yang, “Pandemic and Memory: Online Memory Narratives of COVID-19 Survivors in China,” *Chinese Journal of Communication* 15, no. 4 (2022): 611–34.

17. Xun Cao, Runxi Zeng, and Richard Evans, “Digital Activism and Collective Mourning by Chinese Netizens during COVID-19,” *China Information* 36, no. 2 (2022): 159–79.

18. Cao, Zeng, and Evans, “Digital Activism and Collective Mourning.”

19. Guobin Yang, *The Wuhan Lockdown* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 212.

20. Yang, *The Wuhan Lockdown*, xvii.

21. Kimberly Creasap, “Social Movement Scenes: Place-Based Politics and Everyday Resistance,” *Sociology Compass* 6, no. 2 (2012): 182.

situation-dependent moments experienced by groups and individuals during this time, along with the innovative ways individuals have responded to them.

Methods and Data

The scenic view for this article is taken via case studies. I conducted a qualitative content analysis focusing on posts published online during November and December 2022. This time frame marked a significant shift in China's approach to the COVID-19 pandemic, an abrupt transition from stringent lockdowns to reopening. In the middle of this period, college students joined protestors to memorialize those who tragically died by fire in Ürümqi, Xinjiang, on November 24, 2022. Holding blank pieces of paper, students from a total of fifty-three universities demanded the end of the country's zero-COVID policy on November 27, 2022.²² Soon after, on December 7, 2022, all restrictions were abruptly lifted, resulting in an unprecedented surge of COVID-19 cases nationwide.

Throughout these two months, I visited the four sites, Weibo, WeChat, Douban, and Zhihu, on a daily basis. I employed key words search such as “pandemic” (*yiqing* or *xinguan*), “pandemic humor” (*yiqing youmo*), “hell jokes” (*diyu xiaohua*), “pandemic memories” (*yiqing jiyi*), and “pandemic narratives” (*yiqing xushi*) to collect content relevant to my study. These key words were selected to gather content encompassing a wide array of perspectives and expressions related to the pandemic. In organizing the collected content, my selection criteria were shaped by the prevalent themes that surfaced, leading to categorization of online content that shared similar themes or subjects. During the data collection phase, I assumed the role of

22. Manya Koetse, “The ‘Blank White Paper Protest in Beijing’ and Online Discussion on ‘Outside Forces,’” *What’s on Weibo*, November 27, 2022, <https://www.whatsonweibo.com/the-blank-white-paper-protest-in-beijing-and-online-discussions-on-outside-forces/>.

an observer and refrained from participating in discussions to avoid any potential disruption to the dynamics of online communities. All collected data were organized and stored in a password-protected Word file. While the majority of this content remains accessible online, some of it has disappeared. Given the anonymity of content contributors, I attribute their online aliases when quoting their posts.

It should be noted that some content was posted prior to the designated data collection period, while most emerged during the specified time frame. Given the constantly evolving nature of the pandemic, my analysis is intended to capture a snapshot of the then ongoing phenomena, shedding light on facets that may have been underrepresented and underexplored in scholarly discussions. All the posts are originally published in Chinese, and all translations are mine.

Cynicism in Times of Uncertainty

Moments of uncertainty, especially during times of drastic societal transformation, serve as fertile ground for nurturing a rise in cynicism. In analyzing discourses surrounding cynicism and moral decay in Russia, Nancy Ries observes the ways in which cynical discourse provides effective metaphors individuals can use to make sense of Russia’s post-socialist transformation:

Through talk about cynicism (and through cynical talk), people actively deconstruct whatever legitimizing discourses or practices are presented on behalf of the reformulated political-economic order, and thus regularly inoculate themselves against any naive belief in state or market ideology; at the same time, the notion of ubiquitous cynicism explains and justifies their own less than honest actions—actions such as misrepresenting their income on tax declarations or as criminal as hijacking trucks or perpetrating scams. Finally, but perhaps most importantly, cynicism in its

many guises is metaphoric shorthand—a way of encapsulating, depicting, and circulating a view of the present world.²³

Alexei Yurchak analyzes the use of cynicism as a form of noninvolvement during official events. Writing about the period of late socialism in the Soviet Union, Yurchak draws a distinction between official events and what he calls “parallel events,” as part of a “parallel culture,” noting that the latter “stress[es] their grounding in personal noninvolvement in the official sphere.”²⁴ Cynicism matters less in terms of the extent to which people believe in official ideologies than how it relates “to the official representation . . . based on intricate strategies of simulated support and on ‘nonofficial’ practices behind the official scenes. This relation between subject and power gradually brought about a major crisis of the system and provided the inner logics of change [in the Soviet Union] in the mid-1980s.”²⁵ Consequently, cynicism not only serves as a helpful lens individuals can use to make sense of drastic societal transformations but also has the potential to foster political changes.

Contextualizing the discourse of cynicism under a contemporary authoritarian regime, Kevin Latham delineates three types of cynicism that characterize Internet use and regulation in China. First, there is cynicism prevalent within particular social circles, as well as among those who are excluded from these circles. Second, cynicism exists among the general population skeptical about government propaganda. Lastly, cynicism is present from within the party and government itself, as they harbor a sense of distrust toward their own propaganda.²⁶ While these three types of cynicism

23. Nancy Ries, “‘Honest Bandits’ and ‘Warped People’: Russian Narratives about Money, Corruption, and Moral Decay,” in *Ethnography in Unstable Places: Everyday Lives in Contexts of Dramatic Political Change*, eds. Elizabeth Mertz, Kay B. B. Warren, and Carol J. Greenhouse (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 277.

24. Alexei Yurchak, “The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism: Power, Pretense, and the Anekdot,” *Public Culture* 9, no. 2 (1997): 163.

25. Yurchak, “The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism.”

26. Kevin Latham, “Differentiating Cynicisms: Irony, Cynicism and New Media in Contemporary China,” In *Irony, Cynicism and the Chinese State*, eds. Hans Steinmüller and Susanne Brandtstädter (New York: Routledge, 2015), 173–91.

manifest in distinct ways, they all share a common thread—lack of trust in official ideologies—and are observed in both nonstate players and state actors.

Drawing on these findings, this essay analyzes three pandemic-era scenes that have given rise to novel manifestations of cynicism in reaction to official policies and rhetoric. I elucidate how the creative practices manifested within these three scenarios exemplify various cynical strategies that challenge social norms and lampoon the absurdity of society. Analyzing these practices can enrich our current understanding of cynicism, and I seek to demonstrate that what may be perceived as political apathy can, in fact, be harnessed to actively engage in political discourse.

Scene 1: Literature of Madness

Around 2021, a genre of Internet posts called “literature of madness” (*fafeng wenxue*) went viral online. As the name suggests, the genre uses incoherent language to simulate the words spoken by a person during a state of madness, creating a sense of irrationality and expressing intense emotions.²⁷ For instance, one message complaining about poor customer service reads:

I understand that I do not deserve to get my shipping order processed. Everyone else has had theirs processed, while I, on the other hand, have to be extra cautious even when following up with the shipment schedule, becoming a subject of ridicule. I have a rough life, subject to cold gazes from everyone. Even online, I know I do not deserve to meet the threshold for an early scheduled delivery. I want to speak up for myself. I swear

27. Yu Bingyue 余冰玥, “‘Feihua wenxue’ ‘fafeng wenxue’ . . . weishenme dajia xihuan bu haohao jianghua” “废话文学”“发疯文学” . . . 为什么大家喜欢不好好讲话 (Literature of madness and literature of nonsense: Why do people enjoy speaking improperly), *zhongguo qingnian* 中国青年 (Chinese youth), September 28, 2021, http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2021-09/28/nw.D110000zgqnb_20210928_2-09.htm.

to the cold, ruthless night and the icy wall that I want to be part of it.
But I am incapable. Oh my god, I am exactly a wandering pumpkin seed
floating restlessly in the corn and pumpkin soup.²⁸

Another example goes as follows: “It’s okay, I’m not important. I’m just a withered fallen leaf, drifting away with the wind.”²⁹

Both examples employ a self-deprecating tone to convey sentiments and states of emotion, conveying the futility of harboring such mundane desires as expecting timely order deliveries when one lacks the authority to make such demands. This discursive act shares similarities with the theater of the absurd, in which “the dialogue . . . consists of meaningless clichés and the mechanical, circular repetition of stereotyped phrases.”³⁰ The incorporation of this rhetorical style into everyday conversations underscores the absurdity inherent in certain mundane activities. It appears that this narration, being a novel approach to expressing consumer dissatisfaction, has proven to be an effective strategy for customers to engage with customer service representatives. Subsequently, this discursive pattern was quickly adapted to portray diverse situations related to the pandemic.

Playing on the homophonic association between *feng*, meaning “insanity,” and *feng*, meaning “lockdowns,” the literature of madness captures the ironic aspects of everyday life during the pandemic. This creative avenue extends to the realm of parody, wherein classical literary works are re-invented to satirize contemporary circumstances, reflecting the zeitgeist of the times. On March 18, 2022, a user with the handle @K posted an update on Douban that imitated the opening of *The Metamorphosis* by Kafka: “One

28. Dazongshizengjia 大宗师曾迦, “Fafeng wenxue shi shenmegeng” 发疯文学是什么梗 (What is literature of madness), Zhihu, March 17, 2022, <https://www.zhihu.com/question/483823561/answer/2393983881>.

29. “Fafeng wenxue: nianqingren de jiaoliu mima” “发疯文学”，年轻人的交流密码 (Literature of madness: The secret code of communication among young people), Sohu, October 29, 2022, https://www.sohu.com/a/600753604_120546417.

30. Martin Esslin, “The Theatre of the Absurd,” *Tulane Drama Review* 4, no. 4 (1960): 5.

morning, Gregor Samsa woke up from an uneasy dream to find out that his neighborhood had been locked down.” Netizens began to share @K’s post and create new content in a similar style. An online community known for its users interested in literature and arts, Douban received thousands of submissions. These iterations drew inspirations from various sources, including classic literary works, screenplays, popular songs, and poems to describe the repetitive experiences of COVID testing, quarantine, and contact tracing. Below is a small selection of examples of this genre:

[Example 1]

Baoyu changed into the crimson gold python-patterned jacket with fox fur trim and adorned with stone-blue sash and tassels. He was about to go and visit Lin Daiyu, who had been confined for a week. He wondered if she was feeling better. Just then, Xi Ren hurriedly came out and stopped him, “Madam Lian has already said that even if you have a green code, you can’t go out. Whoever goes out must take precautions!” But Baoyu refused to listen, hastily saying that he just wanted to see her for a moment. Unable to persuade him, Xi Ren couldn’t help but shed tears in sadness. Truly, they were a pair of unfortunate adversaries.³¹

[Example 2]

As the conversation was about to end, Colonel Aureliano Buendía looked at the long line of nucleic acid tests, the people wearing masks with blurred faces, and felt lost in loneliness. Sadly, he typed the message: “Nucleic acid test in the neighborhood.” There was a long silence on the other end, indicating that the other person was typing. Suddenly a cold WeChat message popped up from Colonel Aureliano Buendía: “Don’t be

31. aaron, “Yitiao douban dongtai yinfa de ‘yiqing wenxue’ fuxing” 一条豆瓣动态引发的“疫情文学”复兴 (A renaissance of “pandemic literature” inspired by a post on Douban), Douban, March 19, 2022, https://www.douban.com/note/827837123/?_i=1770292JTVe8hD.

silly, Aureliano. To tell the truth: Nucleic acid tests in the neighborhood are the norm.”³²

[Example 3]

He [Runtu] stopped, his masked face showing a mixture of joy and desolation. Holding a cotton swab, he remained silent. He finally turned stern, and clearly exclaimed, “Open your mouth.” A shiver ran down my spine; I knew that a sorrowful barrier had formed between us.³³

[Example 4]

As the post is already made visible to oneself only, let’s try the comment. How I wish I could go back to the time of doing nucleic acid tests while not thinking about the absurd aspect of it. In fact, today, my memory of those nucleic acid tests itself is where the absurdity lies.³⁴

Example 1 changes the setting of the classic novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*, bringing it to a contemporary age of quarantine, with protagonist Baoyu insisting on visiting Lin Daiyu despite her confinement and COVID precautions. Example 2 summons up the character of Colonel Aureliano Buendía to convey his sense of detachment as he observes the long lines and masked faces during nucleic acid testing, presenting the normalized nature of COVID testing and conveying a resigned acceptance of the situation. Example 3 captures the mixture of emotions experienced during a COVID test. The story the post parodies, Lu Xun’s “Hometown,” depicts the estrangement that has developed between the narrator and his childhood friend Runtu due to years of separation. The rewrite showcases the unsettling nature of the authoritative imperative to “open your mouth.” This gesture generates a feeling of unease and establishes a psychological barrier

32. aaron, “Yitiao douban dongtai yinfa de ‘yiqing wenxue’ fuxing.”

33. aaron.

34. aaron.

between the individual undergoing the test and the person administering it. Example 4 reflects frustration and a longing for a simpler time when COVID testing wasn't a constant practice. The post highlights how one's memory of the tests becomes a source of absurdity in the present moment. It also hints at the practice of censorship. When a post is set to be visible only to the poster, it implies that those within the poster's friend circle can't access it. If the poster isn't aware of this, there's a presumption that the post is published. Seasoned Internet users often comment on such posts to test if fellow posters have access to the content.

These four examples of the literature of madness capture mundane moments typical of life during the pandemic and draw on literary classics, both domestic and foreign, as the sources for their parody. While these sources are both short stories and novels, the parodies are only a few sentences long. The brevity of the genre aligns with the episodic nature of such real-life activities as COVID testing, which disrupts the rhythm of everyday life and makes the abnormal normal. Taking a departure from the “moments of madness” that are oriented toward political movements,³⁵ the literature of madness exemplifies a micro level of social commentary that is satirical, episodic, and minimal.

Further, the “madness” of such literature refers to the act of “embracing eccentricity” or “acting crazy” (*fufeng*) at a textual level, a response to socio-political circumstances that push individuals toward a state of irrationality. This emerging genre of humorous storytelling embraces an unorthodox narrative style to articulate ideas that the official system would prohibit. A case in point is Lu Xun's seminal 1918 work “Diary of a Madman,” which follows the descent into madness of the narrator as he gradually comes to believe that the people around him are cannibals. The presentation of the narrator's mental status in the form of a diary is conducive to conveying how the established societal order can drive individuals to a state of psychological turmoil. Similarly, texts in the literature of madness genre take advantage of

35. Zolberg, “Moments of Madness.”

their form and its brevity in their portrayal of scenes related to pandemic experiences. Moreover, the literature of madness genre lends novel interpretations to the act of parodying the literary canon, a prevalent practice that initially gained traction online during the late 1990s.

The contemporary trend of works that parody texts from the literary canon is largely inspired by the 1994 movie *A Chinese Odyssey*, a playful adaptation of the literary classic *Journey to the West*. Such works challenge cultural authorities and bear “implications for the spread of cynicism and political apathy amongst Chinese youth.”³⁶ The growing sense of cynicism among youth in that era, the 1990s, was connected to the concurrent drastic societal transformation as China transitioned to the socialist market economy and the accompanying decline in ideological beliefs in the 1990s. In comparison, the literature of madness appropriates the canon to blur the boundaries between reality and fiction, offering alternative perspectives that invite critical reflection on dominant discourses. Herein, reappropriation of the literary canon legitimizes Internet users’ endeavor to satirize the status quo and constitutes one of the many cynical strategies that construct a reality that could not be otherwise articulated.

Scene 2: Performing Madness

Since the 2010s, Internet buzzwords such as “involution” (*nei juan*), “lying flat” (*tang ping*), “Buddhist youth” (*foxi qingnian*), and “feeling like a loser” (*sang*) have gained widespread cultural popularity. The latter three Internet memes promote an escapist attitude toward life and celebrate passivity. The term “Buddhist youth” describes the younger generation who opt for an indifferent lifestyle, distancing themselves from the competitive work culture that dominates contemporary society. Another noteworthy lexicon,

36. Dongfeng Tao, “Making Fun of the Canon in Contemporary China: Literature and Cynicism in a Post-Totalitarian Society,” *Cultural Politics* 3, no. 2 (2007): 205.

“lying flat,” gained traction between April and July 2021. When an individual chooses to “lie flat,” they are making a statement of opting out of intense competition. The bodily position of “lying flat,” therefore, symbolizes a way of reclaiming autonomy over one’s own body and time. These terms may be read in reaction to the discourse surrounding “involution,” a recently coined term depicting the youth’s “feelings of burnout, ennui, and despair” amid the intense competition prevalent in contemporary society.³⁷

Scholars hold different interpretations about the “lying flat” phenomenon. Zixuan Zhang and Ke Li argue that the wide circulation of memes related to these terms showcases how young people are constructing counter-narratives about the prevalent sentiments of anxiety.³⁸ In contrast, Junqi Peng proposes that while young people may engage with the rhetoric of “lying flat” as a means of stress relief and self-mockery, most come from middle-class families and eagerly strive to achieve according to the models of success defined by mainstream society.³⁹ Yanqiu Zhou suggests that youth responses to the term “lying flat” from across the world on Reddit, a global platform, demonstrate that the feeling of defeatism is prevalent worldwide.⁴⁰ Wendy Su argues for a more nuanced understanding of “lying-flatism” (*tang ping zhuyi*), as it is “nonconformist vis-à-vis official ideology and doctrine” yet “falls short of being a radical movement with a revolutionary spirit.”⁴¹ Diego Gullotta and Lili Lin describe how discourses about youth since the early twentieth

37. Yi-Ling Liu, “China’s ‘Involved’ Generation,” *New Yorker*, May 14, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/chinas-involved-generation>.

38. Zixuan Zhang and Ke Li, “So you Choose to ‘Lie Flat?’ ‘Sang-ness,’ Affective Economies, and the ‘Lying Flat’ Movement,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 109, no. 1 (2023): 48–69.

39. Junqi Peng, “Chinese Youth from *Diaosi* to *Sang*: The Cyberculture of Self-Mockery and Self-Defeat in the 2010s” (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Hong Kong Baptist University, 2023).

40. Yanqiu Rachel Zhou, “The Lying Flat Movement, Global Youth, and Globality: A Case of Collective Reading on Reddit,” *Globalizations* 20, no. 8 (2023): 679–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2023.2165377>.

41. Wendy Su, “‘Lie Flat’—Chinese Youth Subculture in the Context of the Pandemic and National Rejuvenation,” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 37, no. 1 (2023): 11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2023.2190059>.

century have gradually shifted from framing young people as revolutionary subjects to urban subjects rooted in middle-class upbringings. In discussing three types of cultural practices among youth, they argue that “the fluidity of youth continues to exceed the fixed positioning of the dominant culture”:

The emergent cultural practices on the one hand have the potential to exceed the demands of the market and the state, and open up a space for critical engagement and reflection, or even social intervention. The emergent practices characterized by excess and fluidity call into question the very existence of a subject: it emerges at times but disappears at other times; when it emerges, it is denied, and when it affirms itself, it disperses to find itself elsewhere.⁴²

Adaptable and dynamic, analyzing “lying-flatism” within youth culture avoids a rigid approach when examining urban phenomena like group crawls. On November 9, 2022, an anonymous message was posted to the online forum of the Communication University of China that asked whether people would be shocked to see someone crawling across campus and announced the poster’s intent to do so the following day. Responses soon followed, with one person asking if they could join, saying they hadn’t done something so silly in quite some time, while another person expressed concern over their own mental state. Soon after, a photo circulated online showing a group of students crawling together in front of the library and southern sports field at the Communication University of China. The trend then spread to other universities in and outside of Beijing, including Tsinghua University, Renmin University, and the University of International Business and Economics. Memes, jokes, and posts related to group crawling soon propagated online.

42. Diego Gullotta and Lili Lin, “Beyond ‘Rising Tides’ and ‘Lying Flat’: Emergent Cultural Practices Among Youth in Urban China,” *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 24, no. 1 (2022): 8–9, <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.4292>.

Reversing the body language of lying flat, these group acts of crawling not only provided companionship for college students but also served as a reminder of the resilience and creativity of the human spirit in the face of adversity. In the context of human behavior, crawling is typically associated with animals or infants, emphasizing a position of submission and vulnerability. In the context of lockdowns, however, the act of crawling is subversive precisely because it embraces a self-alienating gesture that disconnects an individual from one’s inherent human qualities or dignity. By engaging in an act that diminishes the traditional human stance, individuals demonstrate a willingness to defy norms.

The predecessor to group crawls was the activity of making cardboard pets, mostly dogs, and walking them on college campuses.⁴³ Creating and walking cardboard pets, inanimate objects, may be read as a response to the lack of mobility and agency during times of lockdown. One comment voicing support for this trend noted that cardboard pets won’t get disinfected, alluding to an incident in which a pet died at the hands of local health workers who had come to disinfect a home while its owner was under quarantine elsewhere.⁴⁴ Transitioning from cardboard pets to crawling—emulating the movement of these inanimate objects—completes the process of self-dehumanization.

Moreover, the absurdity of these group acts functions as social commentary on the absurdity of the era, in which one or two COVID cases could result in group quarantine, community lockdowns, and disinfection of the

43. Mandy Zuo, “‘Cute but Sad’: Bored, Lonely Chinese University Students Are Making Cardboard Pets to Relieve Tedium of Campus Coronavirus Lockdowns,” *South China Morning Post*, November 4, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/news/people-culture/trending-china/article/3198263/cute-sad-bored-lonely-chinese-university-students-are-making-cardboard-pets-relieve-tedium-campus>.

44. Li Zhen 李震, “Yangwan ‘zhigou’ kaishi ‘xue goupai’? Daxue xiaoyuan liuxing ‘yuepa’, xuesheng huiying: paxing keyi xuanxie qingxu” 养完“纸狗”开始“学狗爬”? 大学校园流行“约爬”, 学生回应: 爬行可以宣泄情绪 (After raising the “paper dog,” start “learning to crawl like a dog”? “Group crawls” become popular on university campuses; students respond that crawling serves as a means to release emotions), *Xin Huanghe* 新黄河 (The new Yellow River), November 21, 2022, https://www.sohu.com/a/608646901_121347613.

entire neighborhood. One new invention put forward by the Chinese state and Internet companies during the pandemic was a health code system. Initially widely acclaimed, health codes divided users into three groups: green, red, and orange. Tracking individuals' locations and other data through their smartphones, the system is ubiquitous—health codes monitor the movement of individuals and restrict the mobility of those who happen to have been in areas with identified cases. Mobile phones thus become an extension of and synonymous with the body, as the color of codes determines the extent to which an individual may be allowed to move around.⁴⁵

Situated in this context, such acts as group crawls and walking cardboard pets draw public attention to the absurd elements of living in the pandemic. As Susan Brownell writes, “The culture of the body is strongly shaped by power relations, including state/society, class, gender, and ethnic relations, as well as the international relations between nations; attention should be paid to the ways in which power affects the culture of the body.”⁴⁶ The movements of students' bodies are responses to the restrictions imposed on their bodily movements by authorities and, in a way, declare the right to take control of one's own body. Performative gestures of subordination act as a defiant response to oppressive control measures, generating an alternative narrative to the rigidity of lockdown policies. By surrendering the act of standing upright, this gesture represents a conscious rejection of the conventional standards that dictate how one should behave or present themselves. Collective acts of relinquishment can also be a form of solidarity that showcases unity in challenging the established order, evoking a sense of empowerment among participants. Consequently, through collective, symbolic, and performative acts of relinquishment, these gestures may function as potent demonstrations.

45. Haiqing Yu, “Living in the Era of Codes: A Reflection on China's Health Code System,” *Biosocieties* (2022): 1–18.

46. Susan Brownell, *Training the Body for China: Sports in the Moral Order of the People's Republic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 8.

As explored earlier in the discussion of cynicism’s role as disengagement, in response to disbelief of official ideologies, here we witness how ostensibly insane acts—such as group crawls—morph into a form of participation with potential for subversion. A group crawl, much like the fluidity inherent in lying-flatism, is a multifaceted thing, at once playful, unconventional, and therapeutic, as well as containing a thread of cynicism. Such atypical practices also recall the ancient Greek philosopher Diogenes of Sinope, known as Diogenes the Cynic, for his defiance of societal norms. Like Diogenes’s choice to sleep in a barrel, group crawls serve as a cynical rebellion against the dominant societal rule. Indeed, mere weeks after group crawls captured so much attention, students took to the streets in protest against the country’s zero-COVID policy, illustrating the political potential inherent in cynicism and the blurred line between the playful and the political.

Scene 3: Laughing Madness

Perhaps the most popular genre of “madness” during the COVID lockdowns was pandemic jokes, known as *duanzi* in Chinese. Originally a term from the traditional comedic art form known as “crosstalk” (*xiangsheng* 相声), *duanzi* evolved to mean “online jokes” with the rise of mobile phones in the 1990s.⁴⁷ This transformation coincided with the introduction of affordable short message services (SMS) in 2000, which soon surpassed phone calls in popularity.⁴⁸ *Duanzi* has numerous functions: seasonal greetings, social satire, and as part of daily communication in interpersonal relationships. Typically quite brief, ranging from one-liners to short paragraphs, *duanzi*

47. Guobin Yang and Min Jiang, “The Networked Practice of Online Political Satire in China: Between Ritual and Resistance,” *International Communication Gazette* 77, no. 3 (2015): 226–27.

48. Jingting Shen, “SMS Down as Wireless Data Texting Rises,” *China Daily*, September 10, 2012, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2012-09/10/content_15746798.htm.

employs narrative techniques such as suspense, plot twists, and contrasts to generate ironic effects.

Widely produced and shared, *duanzi* circulates without credited authorship. Early on, studies of the phenomenon attest to the value of *duanzi* in offering alternative viewpoints on current affairs, diverging from official narratives. Scholars like Zhou He argue that the Internet and SMS platforms serve as “a major carrier of the nonofficial discourse universe.”⁴⁹ Haiqing Yu’s research on jokes shared via SMS details the role they played as a “third realm,” bridging the state and civil society during the SARS outbreak in China.⁵⁰ Mobile technologies have enabled the creation, rapid distribution, and occasional modification of *duanzi* as a “networked social practice.”⁵¹ Newer platforms such as blogs, microblogs, and WeChat have further accelerated the circulation of *duanzi*.

The emergence of pandemic jokes echoes the history of *duanzi* and SMS. These jokes chart new territory in their diverse subject matter, an expansion due in part to the ease of creating memes in the 2020s and to the stringent measures of control enacted in China over the span of four years. This has paved the way for an outpouring of pandemic humor that satirizes nearly every facet of prevalent living conditions. According to Cristina Moreno-Almeida, while Internet memes were first created for entertainment or as outlets for humor, they have the power to cultivate communities of participation and ignite political engagement. Such memes thus catalyze political discussions that would otherwise be underrepresented.⁵² Similarly, pandemic jokes provide a glimpse into COVID experiences that often remain obscured in official narratives.

49. Zhou He, “SMS in China: A Major Carrier of the Nonofficial Discourse Universe,” *Information Society* 24 (2008): 182–90.

50. Haiqing Yu, “The Power of Thumbs: The Politics of SMS in Urban China,” *Graduate Journal of Asia-Pacific Studies* 2, no. 2 (2004): 30–43.

51. Yang and Jiang, “The Networked Practice of Online Political Satire in China.”

52. Cristina Moreno-Almeida, “Memes as Snapshots of Participation: The Role of Digital Amateur Activists in Authoritarian Regimes,” *New Media & Society* 23, no. 6 (2021): 1545–66.

In one revealing case, following the lifting of the Shanghai lockdown in summer 2022, despite prior accounts of food and medical scarcities experienced during the lockdown, the then party chief, Li Qiang, declared victory in the battle to safeguard Shanghai.⁵³ Then, two months after easing COVID restrictions, the Politburo Standing Committee announced a “decisive victory” over the pandemic, touting China’s shift away from a zero-COVID policy as a “miracle.”⁵⁴ These heroic official narratives stand in stark contrast to the gritty reality portrayed through pandemic jokes, which strive to make sense of everyday life in a world of chaos. The following are a few examples of pandemic jokes that circulated around this time:

[Example 1]

[In the midst of the Shanghai lockdown, two individuals encounter each other on the deserted streets.]

A: Hey, hey! You there! Show me your pass!

B: What pass?

A: How dare you roam without a pass?!

B: Why? What’s the matter?

A: Shanghai is under lockdown, didn’t you know that?

B: I honestly had no idea. I was just released from prison.

A: I see, no wonder. What were you in for?

B: I got charged for spreading a rumor half a month ago, claiming that Shanghai was going to be locked down.⁵⁵

53. Pinghui Zhuang, “Shanghai Party Chief Declares Victory in Covid Battle as City Records Zero Cases at Start of Major Political Meeting,” June 25, 2022, *South China Morning Post*, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3183075/shanghai-party-chief-declares-victory-covid-battle-city-records>.

54. Amber Wang, “Chinese Leadership Hails ‘Decisive Victory’ over Pandemic in Ending Zero-Covid Policy,” February 17, 2023, *South China Morning Post*, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3210487/chinese-leadership-declares-decisive-victory-over-pandemic-ending-zero-covid-policy>.

55. “Shanghai yiqing xianzhuang tai ‘mohuan’ bifeng jumin, zhongguoshi sulian xiaohua wan-glu fengchuan” 上海疫情现状太「魔幻」逼疯居民 中国式苏联笑话网路疯传 (The current COVID-19 situation in Shanghai is so “surreal” that it’s driving residents crazy;

[Example 2]

Journalist: When will the restrictions be lifted?

Expert: 10.

Journalist: 10 months?

Expert: 9.

Journalist: 9 weeks?

Expert: 8.

Journalist: 8 days?

Expert: 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, lifted.⁵⁶

[Example 3]

Question: Lockdown has been lifted. Why are there still no people on the streets?

Illustration: When I was little, I was prohibited from going outside, reportedly due to the presence of wolves in the vicinity. Now, as an adult, I'm cautioned against leaving my home due to the prevalence of sheep [a homophone for "positive," alluding to COVID-positive cases] in the area.

Answer: [The reasons are that] some are at home battling a fever of 38.6 degrees Celsius [101.5 degrees Fahrenheit]. Some have acquired the necessary medication and are awaiting a 38.6 fever to arrive. Others are busy taking care of those battling a 38.6 fever. Simply put, everyone's too busy [to get out].⁵⁷ (See figure 1)

These three examples contain a cynicism that creates its own pandemic narrative. In the dystopia of a locked-down Shanghai, a chance encounter between two individuals highlights the absurdity of the situation. The first person, representing the authoritarian measures, demands to see identification. The second person is taken aback by this abrupt inquiry, which points

Chinese-style Soviet jokes are going viral on the Internet), *Ziyou shibao* 自由时报 (Liberty times), April 23, 2022, <https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/world/breakingnews/3903088>.

56. Weibo account of Qihuo laosiji (期货老司机), December 8, 2022. <https://weibo.com/u/1353879573>.

57. Weibo account of Haibao 049100 (海宝940199), December 21, 2022.

问：全解封了，街上咋还没人呢？



Figure 1: “Why are the streets deserted after the lockdown has been lifted?”
Source: Weibo

to the excess nature of this level of control. This cynical depiction serves as a satirical commentary on the heavy-handed measures taken in response to COVID-related crises. Even more ironically, the second individual had previously received a prison sentence for “spreading rumors” that foretold the very event that transpired shortly afterward. Consequently, the boundary

between established facts and speculative rumors blurs, and the credibility of authorities comes into question.

Example 2 is a humorous play on the question of when restrictions will be lifted. The journalist is seeking a specific time frame, but the expert's responses are intentionally vague. The expert's answers of "10," "9," and "8" create a sense of anticipation, leading the journalist to ask about progressively shorter time intervals. The punch line arrives when the expert responds with a countdown from 7 to 1, followed by "lifted." The contrast between the journalist's inquiry about a precise timeline and the expert's evasive responses satirizes official discourses that tend to be vague, equivocal, and lack transparency.

Example 3 describes the aftermath of a lockdown once it has been lifted. The streets are empty because three groups of people, which apparently encompass everyone, are otherwise occupied: those who have COVID, those who are waiting to find out whether they have COVID, and those busy taking care of COVID patients. The illustration contrasts past and present circumstances. While definitions of threats may shift over time, one thing is constant: individuals find themselves without decision-making power, obliged to follow directives from authorities. Even amid all the dramatic shifts in COVID policies, the fundamental logic of governance remained unaltered. Authorities insisted on unwavering compliance with orders from above, allowing minimal space for deliberation or adaptability.

These three jokes encapsulate distinct phases of the pandemic, providing glimpses into life during the Shanghai lockdown, the period preceding the easing of COVID restrictions, and the immediate aftermath of reopening. All three instances adhere to the tradition of *duanzi*, employing narrative devices like contrast and humor to comment on social realities. As Susan Stewart notes, "The humor is derived not from an inversion within the narrative itself, but from the frame that says that the joke is and is not a joke at the same time."⁵⁸ The mixture between the real and the fictional thus

58. Susan Stewart, *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 78.

present valuable snapshots of the era, functioning as expressions of cynicism that describe a reality that often defies logic. However, while they serve as comic relief, pandemic jokes offer little solace to those who have endured medical shortages, lost loved ones, grappled with financial instability, and faced food insecurity during these unprecedented times. While humor in this vein may satirize the state of affairs, it does not address the underlying factors that have led to the situations they lampoon.

Conclusion

This essay examines three transient scenes of “madness” that occurred during the pandemic, deciphering their inherent links to cynicism. In the literature of madness, pandemic experiences are incorporated into influential texts, blurring the lines between reality and fiction, and infusing nonsense into the commonplace to offer insight into the present. The collective generation of parodies of classic texts enables individuals to justify their acts and derive meaning from the absurd conditions of living in the present. In the context of group crawls on college campuses, the performative aspects of “madness” cast a hazy line between whimsical play and political involvement. Lastly, the laughter directed at the prevailing sense of “madness” serves as a protective shield for individuals to navigate the demanding transition into a post-pandemic era. Utilizing narrative techniques like contrast, irony, and humor, these jokes construct scenarios in which the demarcation between reality and speculation is subjected to debate.

Exploring these occurrences in everyday life deepens understanding of how “madness” is employed at various levels—textual, physical, and visual—as a response to the challenging circumstances of lockdowns. These actions defy the concept of a singular reality. Through these episodes, cynicism has proven to function as a hidden but provocative mode of dissent from officially sanctioned discourses about China’s zero-COVID policies.

The role of cynicism in the realm of social disobedience has sparked enduring debates. Some scholars have depicted cynicism as a manifestation of political disengagement, particularly within authoritarian regimes.⁵⁹ It has also been characterized as a gesture that appears to operate within a binary framework, suggesting closure and negation.⁶⁰ In comparison, Helen Small posits that cynicism serves as the “testing edge of dissent,” which introduces a critical dimension to discussions concerning public morality and shared values, carving out a space for more provocative forms of engagement in public discourse.⁶¹ This outlook involves challenging tacitly accepted conventions, providing a means for individuals to question the status quo and push the boundaries of societal norms.⁶²

Examining contemporary cultural production in China, especially in the domains of commercial cinema and avant-garde theater, reveals a fascinating interplay between seriousness and playfulness,⁶³ cynicism and idealism.⁶⁴ This delicate dance between opposing elements serves as a powerful tool for engaging in political and social commentary. The fluid dynamics at play here underscore the malleable nature of cynicism that transcends the confines of a rigid binary framework. It is within this adaptability that highlights the role of cynicism within the context of authoritarian regimes.

In this light, the three scenarios continue the tradition of cynicism within cultural production, offering a rich spectrum of cynical responses that blur the boundaries between reality and fiction, truths and rumors, and the realms of playfulness and political engagement. More importantly, these

59. Yurchak, “The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism.”

60. Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 35.

61. Helen Small, *The Function of Cynicism at the Present Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 2.

62. Small, *The Function of Cynicism at the Present Time*.

63. Yung-Hang Bruce Lai, “Neoliberal Subjectivities and Cynicism in China: Feng Xiaogang’s Dream-play Comedies,” *Archiv Orientalní* 90, no. 3 (2022): 473–501.

64. Hongjian Wang, “Theatre of ‘Disbelief’: Meng Jinghui’s Cynical Metatheatre in Contemporary China,” *Asian Theatre Journal* 37, no. 2 (2020): 376–97.

scenarios provide valuable insights into the myriad forms and creativity of everyday resistance⁶⁵ that emerge during extraordinary times. Cynicism, in its multifaceted nature, contributes to creating a space for dissent in a world where conformity frequently prevails. In doing so, it opens up new avenues for probing the boundaries of human resilience, adaptability, and creative agency in times of COVID.

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65. James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985).

Laughter in the Time of Coronavirus

Epidemic Humor and Satire in Chinese Women's Digital Diaries

HOWARD Y. F. CHOY

Abstract

This paper is a study of humorous and satirical image-texts found in eleven Chinese women's online diaries composed between 2020 and 2022 during the time of COVID-19, including three from Wuhan, one from Xi'an, two from Chongqing, one from Chengdu, one composed by a Shanghainese, and three by New Yorkers. The diarists' intersectional positionings as social worker, medical practitioner, interactive designer, unemployed grassroots organizer, overseas student, filmmaker, teacher, journalists, writers, and mothers from different cities in China and the United States inform their individual articulations of concerns about sociopolitical changes, pandemic situations, everyday life, as well as gender and class issues.

Epidemic humor and satire in these lockdown narratives will be introduced in light of multidisciplinary methods, including sociological studies, political philosophy, psychological theory, and literary criticism. These feminine expressions of comic feelings point to communal laughter as a strategy for survival, subversion, and nonviolent resistance against unprecedented state surveillance and interventions in everyday life. As Sinophone literature continues to go global together with the spread of the disease, the Chinese diaries tend to be more politically satiric, as seen in Fang Fang's *Wuhan Diary* and its English, German, and Japanese renditions, while the American-Chinese journals are rather humorous in terms of recording life, such as daily diet and necessities

during the quarantine. This is due to cultural and situational differences, yet they have all exhibited their feminine sensitivity and sensibilities and formed a structure of feeling representing popular responses to the official discourse among digital citizens in the time of coronavirus.

Keywords: COVID-19, humor, satire, digital diary, Chinese women

Laughter is irrefutable. The only adequate response to laughter is: laughter!
—Anton C. Zijderveld

Introduction

On December 4, 2022, China's National Health Commission announced an end to the strictest rules of its zero-COVID policy in response to nationwide protests after a deadly fire at a locked-down residence in Ürümqi 烏魯木齊, Xinjiang 新疆, in late November.¹ A cartoon was widely circulated on Tencent's (Tengxun 騰訊) super app WeChat (Weixin 微信, "micro-message"), celebrating the abrupt endgame of the three-year show of the "big white" (*da bai* 大白), a nickname borrowed from the health-care robot Baymax in Disney's 2014 animated movie *Big Hero 6* for Chinese COVID workers in PPE: "Three years, on your own from now on" (see figure 1).²

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1. Frances Mao, "China Abandons Key Parts of Zero-Covid Strategy After Protests," BBC News, December 7, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-63855508>.
2. The image was shared on WeChat "moments" by DS on December 7, 2022. The sources of all figures hereafter are from online diaries with the consent of those authors with whom I was able to contact.



Figure 1: December 2019 to December 2022.
 Source: WeChat “moments” by DS on 7 Dec. 2022

This is just one of a multitude of literary genres and media forms that indicate common discontent in China. Online diaries, jokes, webtoons, short videos, memes, deepfakes, and the recent “mad literature” (*fafeng wenxue* 發瘋文學) have all used humor and satire as safe entries into and exits from communist censorship.³ People complained that three years had been wasted in quarantine camps, sealed buildings, city lockdowns, closed borders, mobility restrictions, contact tracing, digital surveillance, and PCR tests instead of medical preparations such as mRNA vaccination and ICU and hospital expansions. While a few funny digital artworks were misleading about COVID-19 vaccines or functioned as patriotic political propaganda,

3. For an example of “mad literature,” see Shadiao Wenan 沙雕文案, “Sand Sculpture Copywriting,” Weibo, June 14, 2022, <https://m.weibo.cn/detail/4780376943762720>.

the digital public took pleasure in lightheartedness and biting humor to subvert authority by mocking the policymakers through the hyper-connections of liking, sharing, and commenting on their mobile phones at a time of depression and anxiety.⁴ With everyday entries, epidemic journals serve to alleviate daily stress in the face of absurd sociopolitical realities.

The literary genre is defined by literary scholars Batsheva Ben-Amos and Dan Ben-Amos in their introduction to *The Diary: The Epic of Everyday Life*: “Diary writing records time as a human experience; an entry’s length and brevity depend on emotions, not nature, fusing past memories with future expectations.”⁵ These emotions of memories and expectations should include not only grief and sorrow but also laughter and humor in hard times. Psychologist C. George Boeree found in emotions the “‘tone of existence’ and the very carrier of consciousness itself,” thus explaining “humor” as “the sudden awareness of an alternative construction of a distressful situation which dissipates (to some extent) that distress”; and the “alternative construction,” achieved by violation of social orders, generates a sense of safety in stressful situations: “Humor is the discovery of safety within fear, just like laughter, humor’s physical counterpoint, is relaxation within stress.”⁶

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4. For false-funny images, see Jack Goodman and Flora Carmichael, “Covid-19: What’s the Harm of ‘Funny’ Anti-vaccine Memes?” BBC, November 29, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/55101238>; for patriotic visual art, see Manya Koetse, “Digital Art or Visual Propaganda? China’s New Wave of Online Political Satire,” What’s on Weibo, June 19, 2021, <https://www.whatsonweibo.com/digital-art-or-visual-propaganda-chinas-new-wave-of-online-political-satire/>. In her introduction, Zhu observes that the Mao era has already “institutionalized laughter as a social practice and an ideological discourse.” See Ping, “Introduction: The Study of Laughter in the Mao Era,” in *Maoist Laughter*, ed. Ping Zhu, Zhuoyi Wang, and Jason McGrath (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019), 1. Zijderveld suggests that humor is subversive by “playing with meanings” that “are inverted, turned upside down, reversed, etc.” See Anton C. Zijderveld, “Trend Report: The Sociology of Humor and Laughter,” *Current Sociology* 31, no. 3 (December 1983): 6.
5. Batsheva Ben-Amos and Dan Ben-Amos, eds., *The Diary: The Epic of Everyday Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020), 2.
6. C. George Boeree, “Humor: A Phenomenological Sketch,” in *Perspectives: Theory and Phenomenology* (Shippensburg, PA: Shippensburg University, 1998), <http://webpace.ship.edu/cgboer/humor.html>. Zijderveld has pointed out Freud’s mechanism of laughter as a release of repressed aggression: “Like a dream, a joke tricks the censor and

In effect, laughter, defined by the Dutch sociologist Anton C. Zijderveld as “the language of humor,” is an existential and conscious expression for people to deal with the disturbing situation of the coronavirus.⁷ It has become an essential element in the everyday epic of the epidemic.

This article discusses verbal and visual jokes selected from eleven online diaries posted on six Chinese social media platforms—namely, Caixin 財新 news, the Matters website, *Meiri toutiao* 每日頭條 daily headlines, Sina Weibo 新浪微博 microblogging, WeChat instant messaging, and the Zhihu 知乎 forum. Written by women, these diaries are consistent with the female-led public criticism of COVID policies, as represented by the young White Paper Revolution (*bai zhi geming* 白紙革命) organizer Li Kangmeng 李康夢 and her female peers in Shanghai on November 24, 2022.⁸ Compared to the works of male writers, these Chinese women’s diaries tend to be less technical and more concerned about individual suffering. There are historical precedents to these gendered pandemic writings in China, such as Chi Zijian’s 遲子健 2010 novel *Snow and Raven* (*Baixue wuya* 白雪烏鴉), which is about the Manchurian Plague of 1910–11, but it is largely literary imagination.

The eleven online diaries are chosen among the mass data available on the Internet from 2020 to early 2023 and categorized thematically. They function as moments of telling truths against the official grand narratives and awakening those who are asleep such as those in Lu Xun’s 魯迅 “iron

transfers aggression from the dark regions of the unconscious to the light of the conscious” (Zijderveld, “Trent Report,” 40).

7. Zijderveld, 26.

8. The phenomenon that the Chinese diarists are exclusively women, that men are collectively mute, has been observed by several bloggers, for example, Danniel, “Home,” Weibo, November 1, 2022, https://weibo.com/1854862503?refer_flag=1001030103. Li Kangmeng was reportedly arrested four days later, and so were other protesters like Li Xiaoxiao 李笑笑 (real name Jing Xueqin 景雪琴) in Wuhan on November 28, 2022. See “China Must End Reprisals against Protestors, Investigate Urumqi Fire, Free Detainees,” Chinese Human Rights Defenders, December 2, 2022, <https://www.nchrd.org/2022/12/china-must-end-reprisals-against-protestors-investigate-urumqi-fire-free-detainees/>.

house.”⁹ Such tragicomic moments are communicated across social platforms by Chinese living around the world and are representative of a much larger body and variety of online diaries, which are created, translated, copied, and circulated among unknown numbers of global netizens. Sociologist Yang Guobin 楊國斌 has surveyed forty-six online lockdown diaries in Wuhan and found more women diarists than men.¹⁰ As important as the gender perspective is, this article focuses on the women diarists’ use of visual and verbal humor and offers a “surface reading” of the COVID image-texts embedded in the diaries. “Surface reading” refuses the conventional practice of “close reading” or “symptomatic reading” that strives to dig out the deep psychoanalysis and political meanings hidden in the writing; instead, it is “a practice of critical description” that looks for “what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts” by “attending to the text, or to one’s affective responses to it”—in short, it “lets ghosts be ghosts.”¹¹ These literary and visual surfaces bear witness to the complex truths always already laid bare.

With regard to recent humor studies concerning China, Zhu Ping 朱萍 has provided a historical context of laughter in socialist China, pointing out that “the art of laughter was carefully moderated and regulated for political ends,” particularly “proletarian revolutionary optimism” during the Mao period.¹² Furthermore, in his groundbreaking research on online literature, Michel Hockx studies the nature of the Internet that lends force to the dissemination of digital writing in post-socialist China since the 1990s, yet he mainly focuses on online fiction and poetry, giving only one emerging example of web-based diaries about diseases—that is, an AIDS sufferer’s

9. See Lu Xun’s preface to his *Nahan* 吶喊 [Outcry] (1923) and also his first short story “Kuangren riji” 狂人日記 [A madman’s diary] (1918), in *Lu Xun quanji* 魯迅全集 [Complete works of Lu Xun], 16 vols. (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1981)1: 419, 422–33.

10. For details, see Guobin Yang, *The Wuhan Lockdown* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 72.

11. See Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” *Representations* 108, no. 1 (Fall 2009): 9–11, 13.

12. Ping, “Introduction,” 3–4.

decade-long diary-style chronicle dated between 2001 and 2010.¹³ This article seeks to fill the scholarly gaps by looking at the important and interesting role played by technology in forming new diary communities across classes and countries in critiques of both communist and capitalist controls of COVID-19.

Meanwhile, literary and cultural historian Christopher Rea sees laughter as “a broad spectrum of attitudes and behaviors ranging from amusement to buffoonery to derision.”¹⁴ Humor and satire are the two major forms of laughter found in the selected diaries. Humor is relatively gentle, providing lighthearted relief for negative emotions, while satire typically contains biting social commentaries that are subversive. Thus, this article is divided into two main sections based on the kinds of laughter that one can derive from the selected diaries: a review of humor for daily health and an analysis of satire for sociopolitical subversion.

Humor for Daily Health

Humor is healthy, and humor about health during the plague is particularly important to sustain everyday life. On the one hand, according to the relief theory, it functions as a channel to release physiological tensions; on the other, based on the incongruity theory, it is a cognitive shift between different rational patterns.¹⁵ Zijderveld speculates about “humor’s most important function: it often works as a de-ideologizing and disillusioning force”¹⁶—especially during the epidemic when the authority brainwashes people into

13. Michael Hockx, *Internet Literature in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 54–58.

14. Christopher Rea, *The Age of Irreverence: A New History of Laughter in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 4.

15. See John C. Meyer, “Humor as a Double-Edged Sword: Four Functions of Humor in Communication,” *Communication Theory* 10, no. 3 (August 2000): 310–31, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2000.tb00194.x>.

16. Zijderveld, “Trend Report,” 58.

conformity and subservience. In the face of fear and death, humor can be a catharsis to release and dissolve ideology and illusion.

For our first example, feminist activist and social worker Guo Jing 郭晶 frequently employed humor in her diary to capture the absurdity of everyday life in a lockdown city. In one entry, she wrote, “Someone complained that they lost their appetite lately, later they discovered that their appetite is perfectly fine, the problem is just that the food they made at home was thoroughly unappetizing.”¹⁷ In another entry, Guo wrote about the sense of powerlessness and the need for environmental protection during the pandemic. The diarist shared a photograph of a supermarket customer covering his head with an extra plastic bag on top of his face mask (see figure 2).¹⁸ With small red lanterns and shelfful of grocery items around, the picture is colorful, conveying a happy mood of the Lunar New Year, yet the aged man contemplating at the center wears black, darkening the overall mood. The incongruity of the transparent plastic bag on his head adds a note of absurdity and makes the composition funny.

In the Western Hemisphere, also against the mood of “heavy-heartedness” (*youyu* 憂鬱) and “depression” (*yumen* 鬱悶), the diary of New York Lan-Lan 紐約藍藍 (nom de plume of Zhang Lan 張蘭, 1969–2020), an interactive designer and independent curator living in New York City, is filled with humor and humaneness. She likened by an acquaintance of hers to a “sedative”

17. Guo Jing, “Beipo xuyao bangzhu—Guo Jing de wuhan fengchen riji” 被迫需要幫助——郭晶的捂汗風塵日記 [Forced to be helped: Guo Jing’s diary of sweat and dust], *Matters*, February 19, 2020, <https://matters.news/@GuoJing/23777-被迫需要幫助-郭晶的捂汗風塵日記-2-16-2-19-bafyreigehvst5r3lynip2mqisorjnekchdhiijvplnl5d4fq-ceonbmnq54>. Note that *wuhan fengchen* (literally “sweat and dust”) is humorously homonymous to “Wuhan lockdown” (Wuhan *fengcheng* 武漢封城) for the sake of censorship circumvention.

18. Guo Jing, “Yu wuligan gongchu—Guo Jing de Wuhan fengcheng riji” 與無力感共處——郭晶的武漢封城日記 [Living in powerlessness: Guo Jing’s Wuhan lockdown diary], *Matters*, February 1, 2020, <https://matters.town/@GuoJing/20669-與無力感共處-郭晶的武漢封城日記-1-30-2-1-zdpuAmPeYGeQaDVmeMivXhntdE9LkDmb-F4ypFZ1YcGpqRcA9X>.



Figure 2: Corner store shopping during the pandemic.

Source: Guo Jing, “Yu wuligan gongchu—Guo Jing de Wuhan fengcheng riji” 與無力感共處——郭晶的武漢封城日記 [Living in Powerlessness: Guo Jing’s Wuhan Lockdown Diary], *Matters*, February 1, 2020, <https://matters.town/@GuoJing/20669-与无力感共处-郭晶的武汉封城日记-1-30-2-1-zdpuAmPeYGeQaDVmeMivXhntdE9LkDmbF4ypFZ1YcGpqRcA9X>.

(*anshenyao* 安神藥).¹⁹ Her writing was soothing, infused with amusing images. With COVID becoming a global crisis, the world was in despair. LanLan included in her blog a big Italian guy who maintained his social distance by putting on a yellow disc one meter in diameter (see figure 3):²⁰

19. Niuyue LanLan, “Yiqing zhong de Niuyueren” 疫情中的紐約人 [New Yorkers in the epidemic], *Niuyue LanLan de boke* 紐約藍藍的博克 [New York LanLan’s blog], *Caixin* 財新 [Financial news], March 8, 2020, <https://lanlan.blog.caixin.com>; acquaintance’s comment cited in Zhang Enjie 張恩杰, “Huaren nü zuojia Zhang Lan chehuo shenwang: Niuyue yiqing riji chengwei meiyou zaijian de gaobie” 華人女作家張蘭車禍身亡 紐約疫情日記成為沒有再見的告別 [Chinese woman writer Zhang Lan died in a traffic accident: New York epidemic diaries ended without a farewell], *Beijing qingnian bao* 北京青年報 (Beijing youth daily), March 31, 2020, http://epaper.ynet.com/html/2020-03/31/content_350798.htm?div=-1.

20. Niuyue LanLan, “Yiqing zhong de Niuyueren,” March 13, 2020, <https://lanlan.blog.caixin.com/archives/224813>.



Figure 3: Italian social distancing.

Source: Zhang Lan, “Yiqing zhong de Niuyueren,” *Niuyue LanLan* (blog), March 13, 2020, <https://lanlan.blog.caixin.com/archives/224813>.

When LanLan visited her daughter at Princeton University in mid-March 2020, they saw a student posting two huge farewell notes on the dormitory window as if it was doomsday: “Come by & say hi for the last time.”²¹ The college student intentionally used the scurrilous subculture of foul language, a common comic practice, to undermine the superstructure of the school administration that decided to shut down the campus.

Similarly, the COVID diary of Wang Ruochong 王若冲 (nom de plume Dai’an 黛安 or Diane), a New York University Tisch School of the Arts undergraduate student, was playful but revealed of anxiety among Chinese living overseas.²² Amid the anti-Chinese sentiment in the United

21. LanLan, March 14–15, 2020, <https://lanlan.blog.caixin.com/archives/224817>.

22. For a short video of Wang’s self-introduction, see Qian Dehu 錢德虎, “95 hou zuo-jia Wang Ruochong: Women shi zai jiaoliu zhong fendou de piao erdai” 95 後作家王



Figure 4: Campus windows on Princeton University.

Source: Niuyue LanLan, “Yiqing zhong de Niuyueren,” *Lan Lan* (blog), March 14–15, 2020, <https://lanlan.blog.caixin.com/archives/224817>.

States—such as labelling COVID-19 the “China virus” by Trump—Wang wrote the following wording on her mask when she went out grocery shopping (see figure 5).²³ The four white words on the black mask denote a droll declaration against discrimination, which is revived by the virus or, more precisely, in the name of the virus. The surgical mask now has value beyond its medical function, a “surplus value” beyond Karl Marx’s political-economic imagination.

若冲：我們是在焦慮中奮鬥的飄二代 [Post-95 writer Wang Ruochong: We are the drifting generation who struggles in anxieties], Hu xiu 虎嗅, September 25, 2017, <https://www.huxiu.com/article/214188.html>.

23. Wang Ruochong, “Niuyue yiqing riji—Zhongguo guer: Ruguo shengbing le, wo gai huiguo ma?” 中國孤兒：如果生病了，我該回國嗎？ [The Chinese orphan: Should I return home from abroad if i got sick?], WeChat, March 14, 2020, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/x3RCVjtFfOWSPG0pvJNBaG>.



Figure 5: “Not sick: self protection.”

Source: Wang Ruochong, “Niuyue yiqing riji—Zhongguo guer: Ruguo shengbing le, wo gai huiguo ma?” 中國孤兒：如果生病了，我該回國嗎？ [The Chinese orphan: Should I return home from abroad if i got sick?], WeChat, March 14, 2020, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/x3RCVjtFFOWSPG0pvJNBAg>.

Dou Wanru 竇婉茹, a graduate of the School of Economics at Fudan University living in New York City during the pandemic, was in the same quandary about wearing a mask or not. Being a Chinese American, “if I put it on, the white people would think that I got sick; if I don’t, the Chinese would think that I got sick. I’m sick anyway.” She explained the cultural difference in masking by using the following image that juxtaposes the images of Batman and Zorro in eye masks on the right with two ninjas in balaclavas (one black, one white) on the left (figure 6).²⁴

Back in China, lockdowns became the new normal. As Shanghai writer Zhu Yujie 祝羽捷 put it wryly, while life is short, being able to stay home is better than being taken away to massive isolation centers.²⁵ In “the Paradise

24. Dou Wanru, “Niuyue yiqing riji—Xiaodou: ‘Wo ma bu shi yonglai xisheng de, ni ma ye bu shi’” 小豆：「我媽不是用來犧牲的，你媽也不是」 [Little Bean: “My mom is not a *homo sacer*, nor your mom”], WeChat, March 26, 2020, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/A4E_9yATHIfc0mA2qB-83A.

25. Zhu Yujie, “Shanghai fengcheng riji” 上海封城日記 [Shanghai lockdown diary], Weibo, April 24, 2022, <https://m.weibo.cn/status/4761915576288532>; Zhu, May 8, 2022, <https://m.weibo.cn/status/4766817741178923>.



Figure 6: Move masks in the East and West.

Source: Dou Wanru, “Niuyue yiqing riji—Xiaodou: ‘Wo ma bu shi yonglai xisheng de, ni ma ye bu shi’” 小豆:「我媽不是用來犧牲的，你媽也不是」 [Little Bean: “My mom is not a *homo sacer*, nor your mom”], WeChat, March 26, 2020, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/A4E_9yATHlfc0mA2qB-83A.

of Adventurers” in Shanghai (i.e., the two-month lockdown from March 28 to June 1, 2022), life was no longer spent in terms of workdays and weekends but testing and non-testing days.²⁶ Zhu joked that the “negative” (*yin* 陰, literally “dark” as opposed to *yang* 陽, “light” or “positive”) nucleic acid testing results were a mysterious Dark Learning (*xuanxue* 玄學).²⁷

Through humor, the above image-texts broadly cover the basic aspects of daily life, translate medical pressures into comic tensions, and reconstruct our understanding of the “new normal.” From the mundane (e.g., face masks, hand wash, toilet paper, food supplies, cooking skills) to the everyday new normal (e.g., social distancing, school shutdowns and online classes, working from home, and viral tests) to racial discrimination, the everyday epidemic experiences during pandemic lockdowns are vividly recorded in

26. Zhu, May 6, 2022, <https://m.weibo.cn/status/4766252973162711>.

27. Zhu, May 8, 2022. The term *xuanxue*, also translated as “mysterious learning,” originally refers to the Neo-Daoist philosophy in early medieval China.

entertaining stories, witty comments, (anti-)authoritative postings, colorful/less photos, laughable pictures, bizarre images, and comic panels. These assorted forms of humor have made the ludicrous life livable for the diarists and their readers in the three years of difficulty.

Satire for Sociopolitical Subversion

While some scholars categorize the style of satire as one type of humor, literary historian Gilbert Highet defines it distinctively in the introduction to his *The Anatomy of Satire* as “free, easy, and direct,” presenting not harmony but “the urgency and immediacy of actual life”; accordingly, satire is the mode of literature that has “the minimum of convention, the maximum of reality,” “eschewing stale clichés and dead conventions.”²⁸ Indeed, it was in such a free, unconventional spirit to account life that Samuel Pepys’s (1633–1703) journal relayed the bubonic plague of London from 1665 to 1666 and established the long satirical tradition for English diary-writing. Highet further classifies three main interwoven patterns of satire—namely, monologues, parodies, and narratives.²⁹ Since diaries are personal, monologues are most commonly seen in journals, such as the ones put forth by Fang Fang and Ai Xiaoming in their blogs below. Yet we shall also see Dou Wanru’s witty parodies of political figures and literary laughter in buzzwords. Finally, there are satirical stories narrated by independent reporter Jiang Xue 江雪 and student writer Wang Ruochong, whether true or fictional.

28. See Moniek Buijzen and Patti M. Valkenburg, “Developing a Typology of Humor in Audiovisual Media,” *Media Psychology* 6, no. 2 (2004): 147–67, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1207/s1532785xmep0602_2; Gilbert Highet, *The Anatomy of Satire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962), 3.

29. Highet refines the three “patterns of satire as parody, non-parodic fiction (dramatic or narrative), and non-parodic monologue” and speculates that narrative is the most difficult one, because it seems “easiest for the author to get wrong, hardest for the reader to understand and to judge.” See Highet, *The Anatomy of Satire*, 13–14.

During the coronavirus pandemic, as Pan Ji 潘霽, Kevin Han, and Wei Ran 魏然 have examined from the perspective of health communication, reading online satire was not merely “to kill time during the quarantine” but may have also influenced netizens’ psychological well-being, provided social support, and transferred knowledge to different degrees; yet their survey is less concerned about “political resistance” than “stress reduction.”³⁰ Nevertheless, when it comes to political humor, relaxation and resistance can be complementary to each other.³¹

Under vicious attacks from the Chinese ultraleftists against her critical diary that urged for accountability, Wuhan 武漢 writer Fang Fang 方方 likened them to mad dogs that one had better quarantine oneself to avoid their crazy barks and bites.³² This is reminiscent of the cannibalistic canines in Lu Xun’s 1918 modernist masterpiece “A Madman’s Diary” (“Kuangren riji” 狂人日記), in which the protagonist (Madman) hides in his room to avoid the barking of the Zhao family dog, which threatens to devour him. The protagonist’s call to “save the children” (*jiujiu haizi* 救救孩子) is only considered by others to be insane. Across the Pacific Ocean, American readers would be amused by the conspiracy theory that Fang Fang states satirically: “When people passed blame, it was often the politicians who blamed the scientists, who, in turn, blamed the politicians.

30. Ji Pan, Gang (Kevin) Han, and Ran Wei, “Duanzi as Networked Practice: How Online Satire Shapes Psychological Well-Being, Social Support, and Issue Knowledge for Chinese with Different Social Capital during COVID-19 Outbreaks,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 18 (Sept. 2021): 1, 2, 6, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18189783>. Earlier, Yang Guobin and Jiang Min also argued that political satire as a networked practice is rather ritual than resistant. See Yang and Jiang, “The Networked Practice of Online Political Satire in China: Between Ritual and Resistance,” *International Communication Gazette* 77, no. 3 (Apr. 2015): 215–31, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1748048514568757>.

31. For a study of contemporary Chinese political humor, see Howard Y. F. Choy, “Laughable Leaders: A Study of Political Jokes in Mainland China,” in *Not Just a Laughing Matter: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Political Humor in China*, ed. King-fai Tam 譚景輝 and Sharon R. Wesoky (Singapore: Springer, 2018), 97–115.

32. Fang Fang, *Wuhan Diary: Dispatches from a Quarantined City*, trans. Michael Berry (New York: HarperCollins, 2020), entry dated February 19, 2020.

But now things are getting interesting; now they are placing all the responsibility on the United States.”³³ In an ironic tone, characteristic of satire and parody, the statement reflected the geopolitical tensions between the People’s Republic of China and the United States of America amid the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁴

Ai Xiaoming 艾曉明, a friend of Fang Fang and an indie documentary filmmaker, was so satirical and critical in her “Wuhan Diary” (“Wuhan riji” 武漢日記) that her Internet account was banned on March 25, 2020.³⁵ In an entry beginning with the facetious face mask photo below (figure 7), she diagnosed those in the position of power as suffering a “good news syndrome” (*hao xiaoxi zonghezhen* 好消息綜合症) and failed to acknowledge the elephant in the room.³⁶

Fascinating as this looks, Ai later expressed her frustration with heightened censorship by separating the disyllabic Chinese word *riji* (“diary”) dirtily into *ri ji* or, if I may coin an English word as its literal translation, “damnary.”³⁷ Taken apart and read in the Northern Chinese dialect, the first character *ri* can be an offensive word. Such is the cynicism that British anthropologist Hans Steinmüller describes as “an attitude and a form which,

33. Fang, *Wuhan Diary*, March 23, 2020.

34. Hans Steinmüller defines irony as “the characteristic of all tropes of indirection, such as satire, parody, mockery and sarcasm.” See Steinmüller, “The State of Irony in China,” *Critique of Anthropology* 31, no. 1 (2011): 25.

35. See Ai Xiaoming, “Shijian de nixingzhe—Mantan fengcheng riji ji qi yi yi xushi” 時間的逆行者——漫談封城日記及其異議敘事 [Retrograder of the time: On my lockdown diary and its dissident narratives], *Matters*, March 29–April 1, 2020, <https://matters.town/@tanguowawa/36701-时间的逆行者-漫谈封城日记及其异议叙事-bafyreiewh23wmcge2p4xatzd4kksokv5m4fs3slk4k7eexozop74cayllhq>.

36. Ai Xiaoming, “Haishi bai ge nian ba, Wuhan you nan, ni yao anhao!” 還是拜個年吧，武漢有難，你要安好！ [Happy New Year, Wuhan is in crisis, wish you all the best!], *Matters*, January 24, 2020, <https://matters.news/@tanguowawa/19736-还是拜个年吧-武汉有难-你要安好-zdpuAwif67UXxjvnA5rjzgrvQFxfFiUn3gzzPSomtRL4b38C>.

37. Ai Xiaoming, “Fengcheng riji: Nimen daodi xiang kan shenme?” 封城日記：你們到底想看什麼？ [Lockdown diary: What on Earth do you want to see?], *Matters*, March 8, 2020, <https://matters.news/@tanguowawa/封城日記-你們到底想看什麼-bafyreibmwms4sizrjgi3r4ez4flenaqtjcjph3eoshw2sjsjrdj2i4c6xhm>.



Figure 7: “Hang out.”

Source: Ai Xiaoming, “Haishi bai ge nian ba, Wuhan you nan, ni yao anhao!” 還是拜個年吧，武漢有難，你要安好! [Happy New Year, Wuhan is in crisis, wish you all the best!], Matters, January 24, 2020, <https://matters.news/@tianguowawa/19736-还是拜个年吧-武汉有难-你要安好-zdpuAwi-f67UXxjvnA5rjzgRvQFxfiUn3gzzPSomtRL4b38C>.

by outwardly claiming absolute belief, implies absolute denial.”³⁸ Ai denied the official “good news” and refused to eulogize crackpot policymakers.

While Ai reinvented the meaning of *riji*, an unemployed resident in another major Sichuan city, Chongqing 重慶, witnessed yet one more new phrase that creatively evolved from “lockdown” (*fengcheng* 封城), “static” (*jingtai* 靜態), and “silence” (*jingmo* 靜默) to “temporary management and control” (*linsbi guankong* 臨時管控) in just three years: “synergistic prevention and control of the entire central urban area” (*zhongxin chengqu quanyu xietong fangkong* 中心城區全域協同防控).³⁹ The number of characters,

38. Steinmüller, “The State of Irony in China,” 25.

39. T5oeXa, “Chongqing fangyi ri ji (di qi tian)” 重慶防疫日記（第7天） [Chongqing

multiplied five times from two to ten, has proliferated like the virus, but they all refer to the same policy. Similar to these ever-expanding empty signifiers, a local service map dated November 18, 2022, has aggravated a feeling of trypanophobia in the COVID worker, with its red and yellow clusters of high-risk COVID-stricken areas (see figure 8).⁴⁰ With the bloody color and the prolonged wording, both the red dots and the coined terms would only aggravate panic among people.

Facing the forced containment of her community in Chongqing, a Zhihu forum user was rather cynical, as seen in the following text box (figure 9), in which the municipality, the locality, the street, and the estate all claim that the restraint is pursued voluntarily by the next lower level; finally, the homeowners admit it sarcastically, “Oh yeah yeah! The iron sheets downstairs are all welded together by ourselves”.⁴¹ Here the title “spontaneous silence” (*zifa jingmo* 自發靜默) and the repeated phrase “self-containment” (*zixing fengkong* 自行封控) all appear as official nonsense. Laurence Coderre, in her study of Chinese “cross-talk” (*xiangsheng* 相聲), defined “nonsense” as “the ultimate metalanguage” that “undermines the ideological status of action.”⁴² Thus the enforced action of containment is undercut by the last laugh line: “Oh yeah yeah yeah!”

containment diary (day 7)], *Zhihu*, November 6, 2022, https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/584040421?utm_psn=1594327971329953793&utm_id=0. For a report of the endless neologism during the epidemic in China, see Rong Xiaoping 榮筱箐, “Cong ‘dongtai qingling’ dao ‘ru shi xiaosha’, ni neng kandong yiqing cihui ma?” 從「動態清零」到「入室消殺」你能看懂疫情詞彙嗎? [From “dynamic zero” to “indoor disinfection”: Could you understand the pandemic words?], *New York Times*, Chinese ed., May 12, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/zh-hans/2022/05/12/world/asia/pandemic-words.html>.

40. Xingxing Yueliang Fanmajiji 星星月亮販賣機, “Chongqing yiqing xianzai zenmeyang a?” 重慶疫情現在怎麼樣啊? [How’s the epidemic in Chongqing now?], *Zhihu*, November 17–19, 2022, https://www.zhihu.com/question/565598792/answer/2756639756?utm_id=0.
41. T5oeXa, “Chongqing fangyi riji (di san tian)” 重慶防疫日記 (第3天) [Chongqing containment diary (day 3)], *Zhihu*, November 12, 2022, https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/582884168?utm_psn=1594327510308900864&utm_id=0.
42. Coderre, “Ma Ji’s ‘Ode to Friendship’ and the Failures of Revolutionary Language,” in *Maoist Laughter*, ed. Zhu, Wang, and McGrath, 192, 195.



Figure 8: Chongqing containment service map.

Source: Xingxing Yueliang Fanmaiiji 星星月亮販賣機, “Chongqing yiqing xianzai zenmeyang a?” 重慶疫情現在怎麼樣啊？ [How's the epidemic in Chongqing now?], Zhihu, November 7–19, 2022, https://www.zhihu.com/question/565598792/answer/2756639756?utm_id=0.

#重庆市市民自发静默7天#

市解释：是各个区自行封控的

区解释：是各个街道自行封控的

街道解释：是各个小区自行封控的

物业解释：业主不想出门自行摆烂

业主：啊对对对！楼下铁皮都是我们自己去焊死的

知乎 @灵风煮雨

Figure 9: Chongqing citizens' spontaneous silence for seven days.
 Source: T5oeXa, "Chongqing fangyi riji (di san tian)" 重慶防疫日記
 (第3天) [Chongqing containment diary (day three)], Zhihu,
 November 12, 2022, https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/582884168?utm_psn=1594327510308900864&utm_id=0.

The only adequate response to nonsense is nonsense. As investigative journalist Jiang Xue has summarized it satirically, the past three years in China were “the fat years” (*shengshi* 盛世) when people endured the endless epidemic and hardhanded policy day after day.⁴³ One year after her polemical Xi'an 西安 diary, on New Year's Day 2023, she reported the angry youths in Beijing confronting the police at night. Amid their call for freedom of speech and opposition to film Internet censorship, a student suddenly shouts out: “I want dine-in!”—immediately provoking mirth: “I want hot

43. Jiang Xue, “Jiang Xue Xi'an riji: Chang'an shi ri—Wo de fengcheng shi ri zhi” 江雪西安日記：長安十日——我的封城十日誌 [Jiang Xue's Xi'an diary: The ten days of Chang'an—My lockdown Decameron], *Meiri toutiao* [Daily headlines], January 6, 2022, <https://mrnews.cc/220106/7.html>. Cf. Steinmüller's discussion of Chan Koon-chung's 陳冠中 political satire *Shengshi* [The fat years] (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2009) as one of the “ironic misrepresentations of the ‘best of all possible worlds,’” in “The State of Irony in China,” 35–36.

pot!” “I want McDonald’s!”⁴⁴ Nonsensical as it sounded, the food cultures were utilized by the hungry and angry people to express their demand to resume normal life and basic rights. The deprivation of both conventional Chinese culinary and Western fast food implies that they were reduced to less than the “bare life” (*zoê*) of *homo sacer*, not to mention the “qualified life” (*bios*) of the citizen.⁴⁵ Expressed repeatedly in the nonsensical “I want . . .,” such anger can be found in what Boeree calls “higher humor” that involves reconstruction of the situation: “Anger is a response to fear that musters our energies and directs them toward changing the world to fit our expectations of it.”⁴⁶ With the opposition to lifting its zero-COVID policy, China has finally entered into the post-pandemic stage. Now the questions are: Has the world been changed as expected? And have the youths got what they want?

Being outside of China without the pressure of strict censorship, Dou Wanru appeared to be more direct in her satires on pandemic politics. She pointed out that toilet paper was the scatological winner of the outbreak, only second to China, the country that always professes to be number one in the world. Such kinds of vulgar comments have been identified by George Orwell as “a kind of subversiveness.”⁴⁷ She also used bathroom tissue to praise Andrew Cuomo, the then Democratic governor of New York State (2011–21) for his great anti-epidemic efforts: “I’m so touched that I want to give him my toilet paper as a *khada*”; and, on the contrary, continued to caution her readers against the disinformation about COVID-19 prevention

44. Jiang Xue, “2022 jizhu qingnian dailai de guangliang” 記住青年帶來的光亮 [2002: Remember the light brought by the youths], NGOCN, January 1, 2023, <https://ngocn2.org/article/2023-01-01-new-year-the-youth/>.

45. For the concept of the *homo sacer* and the distinction between *zoê* and *bios*, see Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

46. Boeree, “Humor.”

47. George Orwell, “Funny, But Not Vulgar,” in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, vol. 3: *As I Please, 1943–1945*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 285.



Figure 10: “Protect Yourself & Others from Coronavirus.”

Source: Dou Wanru, “Niuyue yiqing riji: Yue shi konghuang, yue you xiwang” 越是恐慌，越有希望 [More panic, more hopeful], Caixin, April 1, 2020, <http://douwanru.blog.caixin.com/archives/225201#more>.

presented by Donald Trump, the forty-fifth president of the United States from 2017 to 2021: “Protect yourself & others from coronavirus: 1) wash hands often, 2) avoid touching the face, 3) cough into the sleeve, 4) don’t listen to Trump.”⁴⁸ Since Trump advised people to treat COVID with Dettol, Dou borrowed in her diary the words attributed to Hillary Clinton from

48. Dou, “Niuyue yiqing riji: Yue shi konghuang, yue you xiwang” 越是恐慌，越有希望 [More panic, more hopeful], Caixin, April 1, 2020, <http://douwanru.blog.caixin.com/archives/225201#more>.

Twitter: “Please don’t poison yourself because Donald Trump thinks it could be a good idea.”⁴⁹

Dou’s diary has spun satire into intermedial entertainment for her Sino-phone readers. Her satire also targets Chinese domestic politics by mocking the criticism and censorship against Dr. Li Wenliang 李文亮 on Chinese Internet. Her satiric strategy was to ridicule the hot weather in Beijing, alerting that should one complain about it, one might be accused of “handing a knife” (*di dao* 遞刀) to global warming or, had it not been reported on the official mouthpiece *People’s Daily*, must “neither spread nor take heed of the rumor” (*bu chuan yao, bu xin yao* 不傳謠, 不信謠).⁵⁰ Here, the phrase “handing a knife” (to foreign enemies) is derived from the Chinese leftists’ accusation of Fang Fang, who agreed to her diary being translated and published by Westerners, and the expression “neither spread nor take heed of the rumor” refers to the Wuhan police warning of Dr. Li not to disseminate his hospital colleagues’ discovery of the novel coronavirus in January 2020. Playing between rumor and humor, Dou infused these catchphrases with the incongruous phenomenon of climate change and made them sound preposterous.

The last image of this study comes from Wang Ruochong, who received it from her father in mainland China via WeChat when they talked about the unwelcome return of overseas students during the New York City outbreak (see figure 11):⁵¹

49. Dou Wanru, “Niuyue yiqing riji: Chuanpu zhe ge ‘feng wang’, Shashibiya hui zenme xie?” 川普這個「瘋王」，莎士比亞會怎麼寫？ [How would Shakespeare write Trump, the “insane king”?], April 25, 2020, <http://douwanru.blog.caixin.com/archives/227134>.

50. Dou Wanru, “Niuyue yiqing riji: Jintian Beijing youdian re, Niuyue youdian leng” 今天北京有點熱，紐約有點冷 [Today Beijing is a bit hot, while New York is a bit cold], Caixin, April 11, 2020, <http://douwanru.blog.caixin.com/archives/226152>. See also Howard Y. F. Choy’s review of Fang Fang, *Wuhan Diary: Dispatches from a Quarantined City*, trans. Michael Berry (Columbus, OH: Modern Chinese Literature and Culture Resource Center, 2020), https://u.osu.edu/mclc/book-reviews/choy-wuhan/#_ftn2.

51. Wang Ruochong, “Niuyue yiqing riji—Liuxuesheng zale? Weisha xianzai huilai? Fangjia le? Huilai bi’nan le? Hai daizhe bingdu?” 「留學生咋了？為啥現在回來？放假了？回來避難了？還帶著病毒？」 [“Overseas student, so what? Why come back now? For



Figure 11: “Don’t bad-mouth shit in the face of flies.”

Source: Wang Ruochong, “Niuyue yiqing riji—Liuxuesheng zale?

Weisha xianzai huilai? Fangjia le? Huilai bi’nan le? Hai daizhe bingdu?”

「留學生咋了？為啥現在回來？放假了？回來避難了？還帶著病毒？」

[Overseas student, so what? Why come back now? For vacation? For a shelter? And with the virus?], WeChat, March 16, 2020, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MjM5Mjc5OTE5NA==&mid=2455686159&idx=1&sn=b0b9ba367bb51ad66c121625b2479d16&chksm=b108643a867fed2c5b30892efd1671345836be1725124df7d623749ae84174b8ebc2062da274&scene=126&sessionid=1683947032#rd.

It is a fable about a bee smelling something stinky in a garden, under the title “Don’t Bad-Mouth Shit in the Face of Flies” (*buyao dui cangying shuo shi de huaihua* 不要對蒼蠅說屎的壞話) on the backdrop of a dog’s face, meaning that it is unwise and useless to criticize one’s country or, in fact, communist leadership in front of blind patriots.

The word *satire*, as its Latin root *satura* suggests, originates from a sort of “salad” dish so “full” of mixed fruits.⁵² Here it appears as a medley of stinging satires on containment, extolment, neologism, nonsense, censorship, and patriotism presented in the array of sci-fi style, crude wordplay, map design, text boxes, news reports, Twitter citations, and COVID catchwords.

vacation? For a shelter? And with the virus?], WeChat, March 16, 2020, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MjM5Mjc5OTE5NA==&mid=2455686159&idx=1&sn=b0b9ba367bb51ad66c121625b2479d16&chksm=b108643a867fed2c5b30892efd1671345836be1725124df7d623749ae84174b8ebc2062da274&scene=126&sessionid=1683947032#rd.

52. See Hightet, *The Anatomy of Satire*, 240.

In the current context of COVID politics, satire is provocatively employed to criticize and challenge the unreasonable. With its subversive tone, personal laughter bears social outcry.

Conclusion

Humor and satire are psychological as well as political. To maintain mental health and social communication, the eleven witty women pulled through everyday isolation by sharing laughter with their online readers as therapy of the mind and exchange of ideas in the cruel course of COVID. The COVID laughter, together with tears, shaped the gender-specific genre that, as Dai Jinhua 戴錦華 argues in her study of thirteen Chinese female writers, is “women’s writing” (*nüxing xiezuo* 女性寫作) beyond the conventional narrow sense of “women’s literature” (*nüxing wenxue* 女性文學).⁵³ From this “genealogy of Chinese feminisms,” according to Zhu Ping and Hui Faye Xiao 蕭慧, emerged “the publication of younger writers’ works [which] marked the rising new trend of ‘private writing’ (*si xiezuo* 私寫作) in the 1990s,” followed by the current generation living “in heavily censored real-life and virtual public spaces” under the authoritarian state.⁵⁴

Now with their “private writings,” the eleven diarists’ intersectional positionings as social worker, medical worker, interactive designer, unemployed grassroots organizer, overseas student, filmmaker, journalist, writers, and

53. The example that Dai Jinhua borrowed to broaden the genre was the Jewish autobiographer Anne Frank’s posthumous *The Diary of a Young Girl* (1947) in comparison with Wang Anyi’s 王安憶 coming-of-age fiction. See Dai, *Shedu zhi zhou: Xin shiqi Zhongguo nüxing xiezuo yu nüxing wenhua* 涉渡之舟：新時期中國女性寫作與女性文化 [A boat crossing the ocean: New-period Chinese women’s literature and culture] (Xi’an: Shaanxi renmin jiaoyu chubanshe, 2002), rev. ed. (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2007), 16, 181–82.

54. Zhu Ping and Hui Faye Xiao, “Feminisms with Chinese Characteristics: An Introduction,” in *Feminisms with Chinese Characteristics*, ed. Zhu and Xiao (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2021), 13, 21. Lin Bai 林白 and Chen Ran 陳染 are given as two examples of “private writing.”

mothers from different major cities in China and the United States inform their individual articulations of concerns about sociopolitical changes, epidemic situations, everyday life, as well as gender and class issues. As Sino-phone literature continues to go global with the spread of the deadly disease, the mainland Chinese diaries tend to be more politically satiric as seen, for example, in Fang Fang's *Wuhan Diary* and its English, German, and Japanese renditions, while the American–Chinese journals are rather humorous in terms of recording life, such as daily diet and necessities during the quarantine. This is largely due to both cultural and situational differences, yet they have all exhibited their feminine sensitivity and sensibilities and formed a structure of feeling representing popular responses to the official discourse among digital citizens in the time of coronavirus.⁵⁵

In the time of the coronavirus, when persistent biometric surveillance has become a surreal reality, epidemic humor and satire are deployed, with tears of joy, as sociopolitical criticism.⁵⁶ Some of these writings and images, from the “big white” to the containment service map, reveal that China has developed from a traditional authoritarian state toward a technocratic totalitarian superpower in the name of holy health. Living in what the Italian political philosopher Giorgio Agamben calls a “state of exception” for three years, it is the art of laughter, according to Zijderfeld, that makes us “suddenly realize that life has dimensions which we never knew or felt before, simply because we thought them ‘normal,’ ‘natural,’ or just trivial.”⁵⁷ In fact, the appeals and solidarity of using humor and satire to cope with and contest

55. For the concept of “structure of feeling,” see Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961).

56. For a critique of the long-term political and cultural impacts of biometric surveillance, see Yuval Noah Harari, “The World After Coronavirus,” *Financial Times*, March 20, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/19d90308-6858-11ea-a3c9-1fe6fedcca75>.

57. Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Zijderfeld, “Trend Report,” 4. For Agamben's commentaries on the 2020 health emergency, see his *Where Are We Now? The Epidemic as Politics*, trans. V. Dani (Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

state power over *homo sacer* are universal.⁵⁸ After all, the ritual of opening one's mouth should not be only for PCR tests but also for breathing and laughing, and laughing should never be blocked by face masks. COVID is inevitably infectious, and so is laughter.

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58. Another illustrated example is a bilingual vlog (aka video log or video blog) made by a Hong Kong teacher to record her home-quarantine life, in which she expressed her discontent with the local government that did nothing to prevent the pandemic from spreading to the Special Administrative Region, mocking the incompetent administrators in the fashionable Internet word "Buddha-like" (*foxi* 佛系). See Yi tuan dale jie de maoxian 一團打了結的毛線, "Vlog of 86-Day Travel at Home under COVID-19: For the World & Those Who Have Been Restless Like Me," YouTube, April 20, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MR3iyL-uNbc>.

Political In Between

Streaming Stand-Up Comedy and Feminist Reckoning in Contemporary Mainland China

SHAOYU TANG

Abstract

China's strict censorship not only depoliticizes stand-up comedy but creates obstacles for feminist activities. With an experimental approach that compares comedy shows online and offline, this paper asks in which ways comedy and feminism can gesture the political critique and resistance around public culture. Based on seven-month participant observation in comedy clubs in mainland China, I analyze comments and criticism toward women stand-up comedians and offer textual analyses of comedians' performances in a popular online variety show, *Roast & Rock*. Beginning with an issue that a woman professional comedian's performances received laughter and applause offline but criticisms online, I reveal the twisted joking and laughing relationships in women's stand-up comedy and in turn argue that the debates over "what is the proper women's voice in public culture," or what I call *feminist reckoning*, have become politicized feminist expression that is performed and embodied in-between online streaming and live club comedies. Revealing the (re)politicization of stand-up comedy, I envision possibilities that make feminist media practices visible in mainland China's public culture.

Keywords: stand-up comedy, political expression, feminist reckoning, Zuiti

I've found that many girls in their early twenties are very anxious. They get a feeling that age thirty is coming. Not like me, who is saying farewell to age thirty [audience laughter (All laughter shown in this paper comes from audiences)]. I am thirty-one years old now, and I've found that girls are afraid of admitting their real age after thirty. If others ask, "How old are you," the answer is always the same: "Guess!" [laughter]. Oh, God! Can you imagine how demanding it is to guess how old a girl is? I need to analyze your skin elasticity, smile folds, and cervical stripes. After figuring out the result, I will quietly minus five [audience laughter] and gingerly ask if it is twenty-seven [laughter]. The interlocutor will be satisfied and say, "A-Ha. I am already thirty-two!" [Loud laughter and applause]. And you have to follow up: "Really? Cannot recognize it at all!" [Laughter].¹

These are the opening lines performed by Xiaolu, a renowned and professional female Mandarin-language stand-up comedian.² The first time I watched this show was in June 2022 when I was participating in an offline open-mic session in a small café in Dalian, China. There were about thirty audience members and another seven performers. The ratio of women to men audiences that night was about 2:1, as is often the case in most open mics I visited around mainland China. Xiaolu's five-minute act criticizes the anxiety that women in China in their very early life experience, the inevitability of aging, by parodying a scenario in which one protagonist sophisticatedly delights the woman interlocutor by wittingly estimating her age. In this way, the persona Xiaolu enacted not only identifies the cultural taboo against identifying a woman's age but navigates it and contests the ridicule of such cultural norms. To some extent, her punch lines address a feminist resistance to a compelling social expectation that women should be forever

1. When referring to women, Xiaolu uses *nü haizi*, which literally means "female children." I translate it as "girl" to indicate that she is not directly saying *nüren* ("woman") in the show.

2. In this essay, when I say "female," I mean people who identify as female but were not necessarily born with female anatomy.

young, beautiful, and childish. Her thirty-one-year-old body becomes heroic when she questions in the next few lines, “I think that is wrong! Why should we feel shame about aging?” As a woman, Xiaolu’s uproarious and penetrating performance releases audiences’ anxieties but meanwhile stresses women’s unseen quandaries and, in turn, opens space for criticism and reflection. Her performance received a great response of laughter and applause.

However, months later, I witnessed the same act being harshly criticized and extensively discussed online. Xiaolu performed in the first round of a stand-up comedy competition’s online variety show, *Roast & Rock* (season 5), hosted by China’s most influential comedy company Xiaoguo.³ She has eight years of professional performing experience yet was unexpectedly knocked out by an amateur performer in the first round. What puzzles me is that although her live performance in the open-mic session received incredible laughter and applause, the same act being streamed online was subject to controversies. Meanwhile, despite the performance speaking very much to the male gaze and patriarchal forces that oppress women, it nevertheless has been criticized by a bunch of “women voices” online.⁴ The online debate was heated about whether Xiaolu’s performance is capable of representing women’s oppressed conditions and their resistance in a male-dominated Chinese society.

Both of Xiaolu’s only two performances in the competition were condemned by some Chinese netizens. Given her first show mocks women for their “unnecessary” anxieties of being investigated about age and their “childish” and “blind” belief in celebrity advertisements for body lotion, her second show engages with the unavoidable makeup duty of Chinese women.

3. The company’s full name is Shanghai Xiaoguo Culture Media Co., Ltd. The variety show is a flagship competition of stand-up comedy in mainland China. Since its third season, many comedians have made a name for themselves. In this spirit, its fifth season in 2022 is seen by both public audiences and professional comics as the only magnificent gathering of professionals.

4. Because of online anonymity, I cannot identify whether those who criticize Xiaolu are men or women (maybe both), but most of them claim to speak on behalf of women. For example, they say, “As a woman . . .”

As she said right after the performance, through making jokes about how bewildering it is that women have no choice but to put on their makeup every day, she strives to express that “women should have enough freedom to decide whether doing makeup or not.” Ironically, all these efforts at giving a voice to Chinese women’s struggles did not satisfy some intended beneficiaries, at least in the digital world. For example, one comment on social media says, “I believe her ultimate goal is good, but her ways of expression are troublesome, which always stands her on the opposite side.” Another netizen posts, “As a woman, Xiaolu’s lines make me feel disconnected. She is indeed expressing for us, yet at the same time laughing at us.” Some even accuse her of performing the male gaze on women’s anxieties. In short, these online comments censured Xiaolu for “offending” women audiences with her “father-style” (*die wei*) scoffing at the absurdities that women are compelled to approach in mainland China.

Why are Xiaolu and her performances, though recognized as having positive purposes, challenged by “women” online viewers? Why do some audiences laugh offline yet others criticize the same show online? An observational bias here is that I can only “hear” the collective laughter in a club without noticing who was not laughing or clapping hands. Similarly, I can barely “hear” laughter from netizens’ bedrooms, kitchens, and dining rooms—wherever they watch the show through laptops or smartphones—but “see” and “read” online comments and criticism. However, such observational bias inspires me to take the comparison of online and offline comedy as a central analytical approach.

Laughter is immediate and sometimes spontaneous when people sit crowdedly in small clubs. To a certain extent, the open-mic audiences are entertained. However, the changing of space, temporality, and relationality of comedy performance transforms the original reception of this show. Consuming comedy as text and public culture, online audiences tend to be more critical and stricter as the performance is streamed on their smartphones, pads, laptops, and televisions. Hence, while audiences’ offline reactions present voices of joyfulness, online reactions to some extent foreground the

humorlessness of comedy.⁵ In other words, the gap between club performance and online streaming entails a conversation in public culture between the amused and the offended, which provokes public negotiations about what are “politically correct” women’s jokes. The question, therefore, has turned into why some audiences feel amused while others are offended, which draws the analysis back to anthropological discussions about joking and laughing relationships. What changes when joking and laughing relationships are digitized and physically stretched? In this paper, I argue that such a gap between live and online comedic performances opens space for the collective performative expression of Chinese women, what I call *feminist reckoning*, which marks a new form of feminist resistance in China’s public culture.

The idea is mainly built upon anthropologist Jessica Winegar’s conceptualization of “reckoning” as a descriptive framework within which unfolds the agentive and processual processes of delineating appropriate cultural ideas. Since reckoning “captures people’s sense of having to deal with (or discover) things that appear to have already been set,”⁶ it is useful to epitomize Chinese women’s ongoing engagement with a variety of social forces and discourses regarding the authenticity of Chinese feminism. In other words, “reckoning” not only stresses the interminable conceptualization of Chinese feminism but identifies the inherent agency of women in negotiating with patriarchal structures about gender equality. It is such practices of feminist reckoning that generate and present resistance toward state hegemony and authoritarian sovereignty that are based upon patriarchal structures in mainland China.

This article reflects on how female Chinese stand-up comedians provoke and practice feminist reckoning around public culture. It starts with a contextual discussion of comedy and humor in relation to feminism and

5. Lauren Berlant, “Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece),” *Critical Inquiry* 43 (Winter 2017): 305–40.

6. Jessica Winegar, *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 6.

censorship in China, which is followed by an explanation of methodology. It then conceptualizes the online buzzword *zuiti*, or “mouth substitute,” with anthropologist James Scott’s theory of “hidden transcript” and identifies the relationship between stand-up comedy and ordinary citizens in mainland China. Based on that, this article further examines the twisted laughing relationship in Xiaolu’s comedy shows and the online debates over feminist voices she invoked. It elaborates on the practices of feminist reckoning with both my own field experience and textual analysis of pieces of comedic shows from Yang Li, another female stand-up comedian. Finally, this article concludes that feminist reckoning, observed in this essay as provoked by the gap between live comedy shows and online streaming, helps express women’s resistant voices in Chinese public culture where state censorship and patriarchal forces depoliticize and restrict feminist voices and activities.

Comedy, Feminism, and Censorship

Comedy, humor, and laughter are often expected to potentially transform and remake the social structures and cultural norms they stemmed from. They serve as minoritarian critique of hegemonic structures and thereby resist existing authorities.⁷ However, comedy and humor also reinforce hegemonic oppression over ordinary people in the realms of gender, race, and religion.⁸ As Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai conclude, “Comedy has

7. Lanita Jacobs, “‘The Arab Is the New Nigger’: African American Comics Confront the Irony and Tragedy of 9/11,” in *A Decade of Dark Humor: How Comedy, Irony, and Satire Have Shaped Post-9/11 America*, ed. Ted Gornelios and Viveca Greene (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2011), 47–56. Also see Marwan Kraidy, *The Naked Blogger of Cairo: Creative Insurgency in the Arab World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

8. Raúl Pérez, “Learning to Make Racism Funny in the ‘Color-Blind’ Era: Stand-Up Comedy Students, Performance Strategies, and the (Re)production of Racist Jokes in Public,” *Discourse & Society* 24, no. 4 (2013): 478–503; Raúl Pérez, “Racist Humor: Then and

issues” because it not only delineates distinctions but, more significantly, groups people together with joyful disturbance in which feelings of unruliness resonate.⁹

In China, comedy and humor are deeply involved in contesting and configuring political discourses and ideologies. Since Mao’s era, comedy and humor have been used effectively by the state in regulating subject feelings and facilitating propaganda, on the one hand, while being deployed, on the other hand, by public intellectuals to creatively formulate subjectivities.¹⁰ In the same vein, before 2012, the satiric skits on the annual Spring Festival Gala on China Central Television, by enacting figures of “country bumpkins” whose victory over the state is shared and enjoyed by audiences, have established a comedic platform where “the populace and the state can meet, contest, negotiate and compromise.”¹¹ However, such a platform was eliminated after 2012, which signals “the new stage in China’s postsocialist condition.”¹² The retreat of comedy’s political potential reflects one of the central concerns of an “empire of tedium” that “where in the past there was wriggle room a straitjacket now awaits.”¹³ That is, comedy has issues but not in contemporary China. However, I argue that approaches such as textual analysis and audience studies are not sufficient in comedy studies. Taking an anthropological stance, I offer a reading of female stand-up comedians’ performances as a comedy complex that

Now,” *Sociology Compass* 10 (2016): 928–38; Jessica Winegar, “The Power of Nonsense: Humour in Egypt’s Counter/Revolution,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 48, no. 1 (2021): 44–58.

9. Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai, “Comedy Has Issues,” *Critical Inquiry* 43 (Winter 2017): 233–49.

10. Ping Zhu, Zhuoyi Wang, and Jason McGrath, eds., *Maoist Laughter* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019).

11. Hongjian Wang, “From Court Fools to Stage Puppets: Country Bumpkins in the Skits on CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala, 1983–2022,” *China Quarterly* 250 (2022): 557.

12. Wang, “From Court Fools,” 569.

13. Greame Barmé, “Empire of Tedium,” *China Heritage*, accessed November 4, 2022, <https://chinaheritage.net/xi-jinpings-empire-of-tedium/>.

comprehends comedian-audience relationships, digital media, feminist activities, and state regulations.

My investigation of comedy's political potential is in the context of China's strict censorship and the constraints it imposed on women's expression and feminist resistance. Feminist activities that penetrate the patriarchal convention and stress women's rights and justice have been overly obstructed and suppressed by state regulations over the past decade. Feminist activists and public events have been policed.¹⁴ In 2015, the Chinese government arrested five young feminist activists on the charge of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble (*xunxin zishi zui*)."¹⁵ The detention of five activists has been seen as epitomizing the party-state's growing authoritarian control and intolerance toward feminist protests and movements, as well as a turning point of China's feminist practices.¹⁵ Feminist media practices have become critical since coercive policing limits public space for in-person feminist activities.¹⁶

Feminist scholars have observed and documented ways for (social) media and digital platforms to become major fields for women's expression and feminist practice in mainland China. Sociologists Jun Li and Xiaoqin Li, for example, underline that media can be strategically used to draw public attention to feminist activities and to access political resources.¹⁷ They report that through addressing feminist practices around public discussions,

14. For example, documentary director Nanfu Wang documented how a group of feminist activists are subjugated and policed because of their public protest. See Wang, dir., *Hooligan Sparrow* (New York: Little Horse Crossing the River, 2016).

15. Zheng Wang, "Detention of the Feminist Five in China," *Feminist Studies* 41, no. 2 (2015): 476–82; Jia Tan, "Digital Masquerading: Feminist Media Activism in China," *Crime Media Culture* 13, no. 2 (2017): 171–86; Sara Liao, "Feminism without Guarantees: Reflections on Teaching and Researching Feminist Activism in China," *Asian Journal of Women Studies* 26, no. 2 (2020): 259–67.

16. Xiao Han, "Searching for an Online Space for Feminism? The Chinese Feminist Group Gender Watch Women's Voice and Its Changing Approaches to Online Misogyny," *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 4 (2018): 734–49.

17. Jun Li and Xiaoqin Li, "Media as a Core Political Resource: The Young Feminist Movements in China," *Chinese Journal of Communication* 10, no. 1 (2017): 54–71.

the media make visible women's voices and legitimize feminist movements. Witnessing the emergence of digital and social media, recent scholars have identified the subversive power of online feminist movements such as #MeToo, a global online movement that challenges gender inequality and sexual violence. The #MeToo movement stimulates "intersectional digital feminism" that enables Chinese women to actively speak in public and participate in gender politics.¹⁸ However, though the #MeToo movement and its followers in China creatively moved feminist practices online, they still face two obstacles: the state censorship and surveillance over feminist practices and the public backlash against feminism.¹⁹

These two major limitations can be seen in a violent event that happened on June 10, 2022, in Tangshan, Hebei Province. In a small barbecue restaurant, nine drunk men brutally and ruthlessly beat and trampled four women who resisted their intentional sexual harassment. The closed-circuit television recording quickly spread on social media, which invoked a wave of nationwide anger toward not only these barbarous men but also the horrific gender violence and gangster culture and the state's failure to protect its (women) citizens. Some social media articles highlighted that the violence reflects how being female in China is dangerous and horrible. Yet they were quickly identified as exhibiting "Chinese pastoral feminism" and the public was asked to be "rational, neutral, and objective."²⁰ Chinese Internet witnessed an heated debate overnight over whether the Tangshan incident was a gender issue or simply a matter of public security. However, three days after

18. Siyuan Yin and Yu Sun, "Intersectional Digital Feminism: Assessing the Participation Politics and Impact of the MeToo Movement in China," *Feminist Media Studies* 21, no. 7 (2021): 1176–92.

19. Yin and Sun, "Intersectional Digital Feminism," 1187–89; also see, for example, Qiqi Huang, "Anti-Feminism: Four Strategies for the Demonisation and Depoliticisation of Feminism on Chinese Social Media," *Feminist Media Studies* 23, no. 7 (2022), 1–15, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14680777.2022.2129412>.

20. Chinese pastoral feminism, or *tianyuan nüquan*, is a stigmatization of feminist activism. "Rational, neutral, and objective" are together called *lizhongke* (*lixing, zhongli, keguan*) in mainland China. Such terms valorize efficient, reasonable, and well-structured rationality while at the same time disdain being sentimental, irrational, reckless, and hysterical.

the incident, almost all online articles highlighting gender issues were censored and deleted. The fact clearly shows the hostile public attitude toward Chinese feminism and the state's conservative regulation over gender topics and feminist activities.

Likewise, censorship is a critical concern for stand-up comedians. When I started to learn stand-up comedy, a semi-professional comedian suggested an online video introduction.²¹ The video was made by another professional stand-up comedian who runs a senior club in a major eastern city in China. It is informative and useful for beginners, not only because of the techniques and skills it teaches but also because it provides sincere and useful suggestions for people who aim to become professionals. One of his prior pieces of advice is “to start cleanly.” That is, as the video maker stresses, “All performers should prepare their lines carefully to avoid being censored.” The unbearable obscenities and lines that go against state censorship should be avoided. Accordingly, in major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, all lines should be submitted to the government office for checking, and the comics must follow what they submitted when performing, even in the improv host part (the hosts must prepare questions and predict audiences' responses). For other cities, it is said that only commercial shows are required to be censored, and open-mic sessions are randomly checked.²² Another note is that online shows and offline performances are censored by different bureaus, and thus the content of live shows is freer than online shows.²³ The video maker finally concludes his way of understanding censorship: “Delete

21. I choose not to provide the link and the video makers' accurate information to anonymize them.

22. As this paper was under review, a political issue happened to China's stand-up comedy industry, which resulted in the suspension/cancellation of *Rock & Roast 6* in 2023 and the decline of the Xiaoguo company. Since then, as far as I know, almost all cities have required strict censorship for both commercial performances and open-mic sessions. Yet there are still gray spaces and exceptions.

23. Online shows are censored by the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA), which is at the national level; offline shows are censored by the Municipal Administration of Culture and Tourism (MACT), which is city level.

whatever you suspect will be censored.” He then listed rules he knew, such as no mocking of governmental officials, no distortion of traditional Chinese stories or history, and no homosexual jokes.²⁴ Particularly, he stressed that comics must not provoke the antagonistic relationship between men and women, nor could they talk in a general voice. For example, one can complain that his girlfriend is silly but cannot say, for example, “You know, women always do silly things.”²⁵

Feminist media scholars have discussed various approaches that activists use to navigate through censorship in China. For example, media scholar Jia Tan reveals how feminists practiced and posed “digital masquerading” on social media to avoid Internet censorship.²⁶ Ling Han and Yue Liu developed the idea of “#metoo activism without [the] #Metoo hashtag” to theorize the contribution of celebrities’ sex scandals under public debates to the visibility of feminist discussions such as gender inequalities.²⁷ In this paper, by comparatively examining women stand-up comedians’ live and online acts, I join these feminist media scholars in developing a more comprehensive understanding of “the politics of visibility” of everyday feminist resistance in contemporary China.²⁸ To make it clear, I experimentally locate my research at the intersection of comedy studies and feminist media studies. I ask in which ways that comedy and feminism, both of which are under strict blanket censorship and surveillance in contemporary China, can gesture the political critique and resistance around public culture.

24. Homosexual jokes are allowed in some cities and most open-mic sessions, but officially the topic and key words are censored.

25. The real offline situations were not that severe by my observation in multiple cities, yet this list of rules reveals how stand-up comedy, a form of performance of personal expression, is under control of the state.

26. Tan, “Digital Masquerading,” 176–77.

27. Ling Han and Yue Liu, “#metoo Activism without the #MeToo Hashtag: Online Debates over Entertainment Celebrities Sex Scandals in China,” *Feminist Media Studies* (2023): 1–18, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14680777.2023.2219857>.

28. Fan Yang, “Rethinking China’s Internet Censorship: The Practice of Recoding and the Politics of Visibility,” *new media & society* 18, no. 7 (2016): 1364–81.

Methodology

Comedy is not mere text, cultural product, or comedian-audience interactions. It is also about where and when audiences watch the show, who engages in producing the lines, and how jokes, laughter, and criticism are mediated. Therefore, I combine ethnographic investigation and textual/media analysis in this research to examine women's stand-up comedies as a comedy complex. Since June 2022, I mainly conducted participant observations in comedy clubs in Dalian and Shenzhen. I spent about three months in total at each site, with several visits to other clubs in adjacent cities. I not only participated in commercial shows and open-mic sessions but also performed by myself. After shows, I often talked to professional and amateur comics, as well as audiences, and discussed questions such as "Why do you think the joke is funny?," "How can I improve the joke?," and "What jokes do you want to write?" I also formally interviewed thirteen comedians, four of whom are women. I participated in several online workshops for beginners to revise their lines, known as "script reading workshops" (*du gao hui*). All online events I participated in and collected data from acknowledged "a researcher's presence."

In addition to ethnographic data, I offer textual analysis of both online stand-up comedy and social media posts. Except for a few lines I borrowed to serve as examples from other comedians I know as friends (with their permission), most comedic texts in this paper came from the variety show *Rock & Roast* (seasons 4 and 5). Posts and comments on social media were collected from China's popular social media platforms such as Weibo and Xiaohongshu (the RED).²⁹ When collecting social media posts, I avoided

29. The RED, Xiaohongshu, is seen as a popular social media platform that attracts numerous women users. Many comedians and clubs are using the Red Book to attract potential audiences. Also see a discussion of how the RED exerts impact on the representation of femininity: YuanHang Liu and Xinjian Li, "'Pale, Young, and Slim' Girls on Red: A Study of Young Femininities on Social Media in Post-Socialist China," *Feminist Media Studies* (2023): 1–16, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14680777.2023.226830?needAccess=true>.

identifying any personal information and having private conversations with those accounts. Instead, I focus on the content of these posts.

Zuiti (“Mouth Substitute”): Enacting Hidden Transcripts Online

“These comedies are trivial jokes! Why should we take them such seriously?” many Chinese netizens complained online. A sophomore college student who is also a dedicated fan of stand-up comedy told me that she never seeks to be educated when watching stand-up shows. Indeed, people normally watch stand-up shows for fun and laugh unintentionally. However, stand-up comedy has become more significant and powerful in contemporary China within a depoliticized public culture. In this section, I examine a buzzword that emerged in China’s digital world called *zuiti*, or “mouth substitute,” and demonstrate the central role stand-up comedy plays in online encounters of the dominant and the subordinate.

In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, James Scott offers a story of Mrs. Poyser, a character in George Elliot’s *Adam Bede*, who bravely spoke to the elderly Squire Donnithorne with her “hidden transcripts.”³⁰ By staging her hidden transcripts in front of Donnithorne, which is not a normal interaction between tenants and squires, Mrs. Poyser broke consent and social norms and hence triumphed temporarily in this very short encounter. Such hidden transcripts, though they were shared within the local community of tenants, had no chance of being expressed, even among intimate relationships. Therefore, “judging from how rapidly the story traveled and the unalloyed joy with which it was received and retold, the rest of the community also felt Mrs. Poyser had spoken for them as

30. James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 6.

well.”³¹ Other tenants are empowered because Mrs. Poyser uses her own mouth to speak about what they want to say but dare not. To use that Chinese buzzword, Mrs. Poyser becomes her neighbors’ *zuiti*.

As an online buzzword, *zuiti* has been constantly conceptualized by netizens, especially young people. It is not only a speaking out of the unsayable but a smart “speech act” with which people grapple with their enemies.³² For instance, a netizen can find an online *zuiti* to say, “I hate my boss, he is horrible.” He/she can also find another *zuiti* countering their boss through mocking: “I see my boss as my grandson only to whose stupidity I show all my patience and love.”³³ Online *zuiti* provide people with a digital body substitute. It serves as an embodied scapegoat for those who intend to avoid penalties for what they say. The employee cannot directly complain in public, nor can they tease the boss with mockery. Yet they win temporarily in the digital world by finding a *zuiti* to counter the stressful reality.

Zuiti also help address resistance to the state’s public transcripts. It stresses the agentive choice people make to give others authority to speak for them. China’s state propaganda and grand narratives often overshadow individual voices. Ordinary citizens’ expressions of subjective feelings and thoughts, as well as moaning and mourning, are overshadowed by the central and sonorous announcement of a socialist triumph of overcoming struggles and difficulties and uniting all dissidents. Besides being represented, personal voices are also silenced in contemporary China, as is the case when reading anthropologist Jie Yang’s work about social aphasia (*shiyuzheng*), that individuals lose their rights to express themselves and as a result lose their identities of self.³⁴ In this spirit, *zuiti* serves as a substitute for individual expressions that otherwise are enfolded in the state’s positive speeches.

31. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 7.

32. See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962).

33. Idea borrowed from stand-up comedian Yang Mengen from *Roast & Rock*.

34. Jie Yang, “‘Bureaucratic Shiyuzheng’: Silence, Affect, and the Politics of Voice in China,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 11, no. 3 (2021): 972–85.

Stand-up comedy by nature provides *zuiti* for Chinese audiences.³⁵ The first lesson I learned in a stand-up comedy workshop is to find a negative feeling of mine. The instructor asked us to fill in the blanks of the sentence: Regarding ____, what makes me feel ____ is that _____. The first blank requests a topic that most audiences can understand. The second blank is expected to be filled with one of the four feelings—namely, demanding, awkward, fearful, and silly (*Nan*, *Guai*, *Pa*, and *Chun*). The third blank is about a real experience that happened to the comic. For example, one wrote: “Regarding colleagues, what makes me feel silly is that young men around their twenties often say ‘When I was young.’” This is this comedian’s own experience. Meanwhile, many Chinese people encounter similar situations in their own lives. Therefore, it has the potential to become a punch line in performance: “You know, I am so annoyed with those ‘boys’ around their twenties who keep saying, ‘When I was young.’ Damn, you fucking idiot, was merely a germ when you were young! [Laughter].” People who suffered from having to pretend to be polite to those young men boasting about their past will then name this comedian as their *zuiti* since they speak for their uncomfortableness. Meanwhile, the obscenities also punch these men back with comedic expressions. Without this *zuiti*, they would never vent their anguish and dirty words out in public spheres.

Many posts on social media regarding stand-up shows praise the comics as their *zuiti*. Streaming stand-up shows online facilitates this, in that netizens could easily make screenshots of the punch lines and spread them on social media as their own voices. As a result, these lines of comics’ debunking, mocking, and disdaining social inequalities, structural violence, and cultural authorities become contagious in public culture. Such contagion embodies people’s resistance within stand-up shows that help enact hidden

35. Here, I am especially thinking of online shows. For live shows, audiences pay for tickets and expect to be entertained. Yet online shows are often screenshotted and reposted by netizens to express their ideas. However, I am not saying that in-club comedies cannot serve as *zuiti* (actually, I did hear audiences talk about it). Nevertheless, this is also a difference between live and online acts.

transcripts online. By finding an alternative, digital, and comedic body, Chinese netizens “speak” what is silenced and “practice” what is restricted, and thereby reconfigure their selves and subjectivities in a digitized encounter with the state’s public transcripts. However, in Xiaolu’s case, online stand-up shows have also highlighted the twisted joking and laughing relationships, thus inducing controversies.

Twisted Laughing Relationships: “Laughing at” and “Laughing With”

Laughing relationships bring external perspectives to the roles of joking and being joked. Anthropologist Susan Seizer’s ethnography of the special drama in Tamil villages furthers a Freudian paradigm of dirty jokes in which a woman is the object of the joke while men are joke-tellers and consumers.³⁶ She found that women in rural India can enjoy comedy with dirty jokes only when the male buffoons and musicians on stage enact the joking relationship between two men—one makes jokes at women, and the other laughs at these jokes. In this way, women, as the object of these jokes on stage, enjoy the jokes as external spectators. So far as they laugh at the comedy, they laugh with men who laugh at women themselves.

Scholars have elaborated on the significance of distinguishing between “laughing at” and “laughing with” in comedy and humor studies. To be conscious of the nuance of laughing relationships is to be sensitive to power and structures, as well as cultural boundaries and (both comedians’ and audiences’) identities, in stand-up comedy.³⁷ By using different voices and speaking in various styles, the comedians make the audiences laugh *at* their stories

36. Susan Seizer, *Stigmas of the Tamil Stage: An Ethnography of Special Drama Artists in South India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

37. S. Katherine Cooper, “What’s So Funny? Audiences of Women’s Stand-Up Comedy and Layered Referential Viewing: Exploring Identity and Power,” *Communication Review* 22, no. 2 (2019): 91–116.

or laugh *with* them to laugh at others' absurdities, and sometimes even the audiences themselves.³⁸ The nuance is, by "laughing at" the stories, the audiences together identify something or somebody as funny and laughable; by "laughing with" comedians, the audiences stand with comedians' stage self. They laugh at things based on their own values while sharing with or are subject to the stage persona's values when laughing with the comedians.

For example, the twin comedians together performed at the same online variety show Xiaolu participated in and talked about women's clothing struggles:

A: Recently, I've found that, for example, when I went out to do the COVID-19 PCR test, I always forget to put my keys in my pocket.

B: Because—[pause]—I have no pocket. Have you guys recognized that women's clothes—[pause]—have NO POCKETS! [Camera shot at women in the audience: "Yes!"]

A: I checked all my summer clothes. I found that even if there is a pocket, it is a fake one.

B: They stitch it on.

A: Or they draw one for me [laughter].

B: It seems like women cannot approach pockets.

A: Why? Women will not stain pockets.

B: Exactly! Pockets are not ancestral tombs [laughter and applause].

...

A: We intentionally researched why women's clothes cannot have pockets.

B: Because pockets will break the curves of women.

A: But men think that being curvaceous means being appealing.

B: Having curves means having fluid mechanics.

A: Having fluid mechanics means being attractive.

38. Jeremy Beckett, "Laughing with, Laughing at, among Torres Strait Islanders." *Anthropological Forum* 18, no. 3 (2008): 295–302. Also see John Carty and Yasmine Musharbash, "You've Got to be Joking: Asserting the Analytical Value of Humor and Laughter in Contemporary Anthropology," *Anthropological Forum* 18, no. 3 (2008): 209–17.

B: Therefore, when women go out and eat midnight snacks, their bodies will attract dirty things.

A: For example, smoke, dust, and some men's hands [screaming, laughter, and applause].

Audiences first “laughed at” a funny exaggeration of fake pockets on women's clothes. They then “laughed with” two comedians twice about women's struggles in Chinese society. First, women are restricted from sweeping ancestral tombs because females (in Chinese, *yin*) are seen as contaminations for patriarchal sacredness. Second, women are subject to danger from male sexual harassment and violence. The show uses “midnight snacks” and “men's hands” to refer to the Tangshan incident (mentioned earlier). Neither the absurdity of hypothesizing the reason why women cannot have pockets nor wittingly misunderstanding curvaceousness as physical attractiveness is funny enough on its own. Audiences may not laugh that hard if performer A in the last sentence lists, for example, “smoke, dust, and men's *eyeballs*.” They scream, laugh, and applaud to stand with female performers for their courage to talk about this censored and suppressed issue. Even male audiences laugh with these women performers because the tension between ordinary citizens and the government's authoritarian censorship has been released in comedic expressions.

The twin stand-up comedians countered both the male gaze and the state authority, and thus audiences laughed with them. Yet this might not be the condition of Xiaolu. Her performance speaks in an agender voice about the anxieties of women's aging, rather than with a strong female identity. She dressed in quasibusiness casual, with short hair, a brown suit, and trousers. The variety show also endeavored to make her a superior figure by listing her titles for audiences: “The first generation of professional stand-up comedians in mainland China, Chinese ‘Ali Wong,’ Big Sister to other young competitors (Sister Lu), and a Confident candidate for the final champion.” She is a woman on stage. While her screen image also represents a kind of “masculinity,” such as the robust, successful, and confident woman—her

“masculine” but female body speaks in a sort of agender voice and thus enacts the Freudian man-man joking relationship—to which woman is the object—as a twisted woman/man-woman/man joking relationship. Indeed, her performance penetrates women’s anxieties about aging. Yet who is parodying and mocking an anxious woman? Who is the target of the joke? Who is the audience? Although Xiaolu’s female body and expression challenge a conventional patriarchal joking relationship, which excepts the downtrodden woman, her performance creates a complicated comedic situation. Nonfemale audiences can both laugh at her jokes and laugh with a smart and strong woman. However, female audiences are troubled by Xiaolu’s lines since the jokes directly laugh at women themselves. Neither do they want to laugh with the female figure Xiaolu embodied, despite her representing female public expression. Therefore, they reject admitting to or entering Xiaolu’s joking relationship and identify her performance as “father-style.” One comment on the RED articulates why Xiaolu’s own female figure matters:

Xiaolu said her main point is that she hopes women can choose not to put on make-up. Yet her jokes did not show that. The lines are all about women’s make-up practices under the male gaze. If it was a man saying like this, then we can understand it as anti-anxiety about one’s appearance. I can only feel that Xiaolu’s opinion comes from a female perspective, but the final show was not for women at all.

Xiaolu’s skillful and professional performances twisted the laughing relationships in stand-up comedy. It is funny and insightful as a sophisticated observational comedy, and thus people laugh at the jokes and laugh with a sharp, confident woman. However, it is also offensive in that Xiaolu embodies a Freudian paradigm of joking relationships between men in her female body, as well as in her public expressions on behalf of women. Streaming comedy online amplifies the contrasting reactions to female comedic expressions. The intersections of humorlessness and joyfulness of comedies, as well

as voices from the offended and the amused, spiral from the twisted laughing relationships and generate a new form of expression in the gap between live performances and online shows. It is worth mentioning here that even as *zuiti* stand-up comedians could help with expressing the unsayable in public culture, they are still under state censorship and surveillance. That is, the digital mouths are also constrained from being directly political.

Feminist Reckoning and the Politics of Visibility

Under the title “Xiaolu says,” people on WeChat who are buying tickets for Xiaolu’s offline comedy special *Nüer Hong* (“Girl’s red”) see the sentence: “Clustered by laughter, those shameful topics, reticent traditional norms, and embarrassments that silence men and tear women, all dance openly and uprightly on the stage of comedy.” In this comedy special, Xiaolu talks about the shamefulness of the menstruation she has experienced as a woman. She also implicitly responded in a video blog interview to the online vitriol toward her acts after being knocked out of the online competition:

All punchlines I created speak for myself. I think something is awful and disgusting: My female body encounters a lot of suffering. Sometimes I feel I lost my dignity, and thus I want to talk about this. I am an ordinary person and I speak for myself. It would be my honor if you have the same experience and think I am speaking for you. That’s great. But if you don’t, it just means you did not suffer from this, then it is even better.³⁹

She does not speak for women—rather, she speaks only for herself as a woman. However, her disclaimer provokes a rethinking of the representation

39. Kimura Takushu, “小鹿：你能做的只有事情本身，其他是浪的问题 | 某某与我” [Xiaolu: All you can do is the thing itself, the rest is a matter of waves], *xiaoguo gongc-hang*, October 14, 2022, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/Ro1XCRISUeQzKJEvu5MFA>.

of feminism in public culture. Why is a woman's voice not the voice of women? The debate between laughing audiences and offended viewers exposes these questions in what I call *feminist reckoning* in contemporary China.

The connotations of Chinese feminism are contentious, not only for outsiders but for those who see themselves as feminists. The Chinese translation of the word *feminism* entails two main dimensions of practicing feminism—namely, “for gender equality” (*nüxingzhuyi*) or “for women's rights” (*nüquanzhuyi*).⁴⁰ The former is seen as relatively neutral while the latter often refers to activists. Though in academia, it is argued that *nüquanzhuyi* is included in *nüxingzhuyi*, I find my interlocutors often used the two translations interchangeably.⁴¹ When being asked if those female comedians I examined in this paper are *nüxingzhuyi*, for example, some of my female interlocutors automatically changed the term to *nüquanzhuyi* in their answers and vice versa. A female beginner of stand-up comedy who has a master's degree in gender studies told me that she feels the two translations are almost the same; however, in the “Chinese feminist community,” people dislike those who use the translation *nüxingzhuyi* instead of *nüquanzhuyi*.⁴² Besides the internally undefined understanding, disparaging terms such as “feminist whores” and “Chinese pastoral feminism” are also used to depict feminists as selfish, irresponsible, paranoid, and deviant women who protest and resist only to avoid fulfilling their social responsibilities.⁴³ However, such contentiousness of Chinese feminism invokes a powerful “reckoning” that challenges the dominant men's culture.

40. Mizuyo Sudo and Michael G. Hill, “Concepts of Women's Rights in Modern China,” *Gender & History* 18, no. 3 (2006): 472–89.

41. See Jinhua Dai, *After the Post-Cold War: The Future of Chinese History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

42. She uses the word *nüquanshequn* (女权社群).

43. Angela Xiao Wu and Yige Dong, “What Is Made-In-China Feminism(s)? Gender Discontent and Class Friction in Post-Socialist China,” *Critical Asian Studies* 51, no. 4 (2019): 471–92.

In a stand-up comedy club's WeChat group (fifteen members), I witnessed an online debate over "whether women's rights [*nü quan*] should be reduced as a part of human rights [*ren quan*]." The discussion started with a meme image sent by a woman comedian (W1) picturing a Chinese wife doing housework despite getting COVID-19 while the husband weakly lies in bed and cries to God.

W1: Women's lives are unimportant and cheap.

W2: A glance at women's domestic status. That is why the rate of marriage is decreasing.

M1: I feel like this meme is intentionally inciting antagonizing relationships between men and women. I've never seen such situations from [young] couples around me, except for those elder generations.

W1: I often see girls posting on online forums. The point is, they not only are unaware of the issue but do not allow others to persuade them. [They discussed how to consume jokes that contrast personal values.]

W2: Xiaolu's show about makeup duties makes me feel disgusting. [Here W2 also discussed another sketch comedy in another variety show.]

W2: Many married women are explaining the unequal distribution of "housework and parenting duties" as "both my husband and child cannot live without me; I am so important!"

W1: That is what I saw on online forums.

W2: After getting married, I often travel out on my own for my work, both short- and long-term trips. The feminist man [*nüquan nan*, what she calls her husband] has no complaint, but my mother asks, "How about [her husband's nickname]'s meals?" How could I grapple with her?

M4: Why grappling? Just tell her the truth. Isn't it an ordinary "caring?"

W2: Of course not! She thought it is the wife's duty to cook and assumed that I am not doing [this] well. Because that is what she does at home.

W1: Haha, I have no interest in discussing such topics. All in all, they are the same. I think the couple should live in ways that make them happy.

M4: Why call it "wife's duty [*qizhi*]"? The word is too harsh! Just responsibilities! Both wife and husband have their responsibilities, right? "You

travel out, then have you made sure of your family?”—I think that is what your mother meant. In other words, if your husband travels out, I believe his mother will also ask about you [his wife].

W2: No, at least my mother will not.

W1: [emoji/onlook]

M4: Society should not make distinctions of male/female rights. There should only be “human rights,” about each of us having [equal] rights to be a human.

W2: People who silence others always say that. Please read *Misogyny* [by Chizuko Ueno, favored by many Chinese women].

M4: Just discuss. When we respect a person, it should not be due to his/her gender/sex but activities, right?

W2: If you are right, then there is no BLM [Black Lives Matter]. Whose lives do not matter?

W2: I am only contesting the point that “we should not distinguish male/female rights”

M1: Damn! I know there must be a quarrel!

The topic of the group discussion changed from whether this satiric meme properly jokes at contemporary gender inequality, how comedies and humor should be consumed and enjoyed, to whether people should stress women’s rights instead of generally talking about human rights. The group members’ attitudes and opinions, which are complicated, changing, and sometimes (self-)contrasting, are not only about memes, humor, and comedy but also Chinese women’s living conditions and, tacitly, Chinese feminism and its representations in public culture. Everyone agrees that personal values are not prioritized when consuming humor and jokes. However, women members are annoyed with and sympathetic to the in-family gender inequalities the meme reflects. Meanwhile, men in this chat group suspected the intention behind the meme: Does it intend to incite men-women opposition? In other words, though all group members agree that “jokes are merely jokes,” none of them really takes the satiric meme as trivial entertainment. The

same comes to stand-up comedy: another woman comedian (W2) tolerates many well-written male comics' jokes that debunk their wives or girlfriends, which contrasts her own values, yet she feels Xiaolu's online performances are disgusting.

How and what should a *knowing* woman do is discussed. I say *knowing* because women in this chat group are distinguishing themselves from those "unconscious" women in online forums. Albeit W2 dismisses Xiaolu's comedies as misogynistic and thus disgusting, her attitude toward other misogynistic novels and art pieces (most of which are made by male creators) is relatively mild and lenient. Although W1 is aware of the patriarchal exploitations of women in families, she claims that she is reluctant to participate in negotiating the "proper and equal relationship between couples." Although W2 had relatively moderate attitudes toward a patriarchal social condition, she angrily countered a male group member's blind reduction of women's rights to human rights.

The group founder's uncomfortableness and embarrassment—"Damn, I know there must be a quarrel!"—brings me back to the censored feminist voices in the Tangshan incident. Whether or not the incident is a gender issue doesn't seem politically crucial—yet the online debate deeply challenges the privilege of men. It is too powerful to be overlooked by the patriarchal authority and thus is censored. Likewise, a group discussion about women's conditions and rights scares and embarrasses men who strive to hide their structural privilege and retain being "objective and rational," even though there is not always consensus about what women should say and how women should act. The online debate, discussion on humor, and the "quarrel" seen by men—all what I call *feminist reckoning*—becomes powerful and undeniable female expression that makes visible feminist resistance in public culture.

As an ethnographer and ordinary urban Chinese man, I have encountered similar quarrels and debates, online and offline, between men and women, and among women and feminists in the past few years. Male comedians often complain to me about female comedians'

“privilege” of “freely abusing men” on stage. “Many women comedians are unconsciously drawn to feminist topics—are such hostile attitudes [to men] real? Then why do you keep a boyfriend?” What are or are not feminist topics? Is “misandry” totally opposite to “having a boyfriend?” These questions from male comedians may not be questions for women. Indeed, the authenticity and essentialness of Chinese feminism are subject to ongoing negotiations and debates. However, rather than adopting opposite stances—namely, the radical feminists versus aloof women—public debates provide Chinese women with a variety of opinions and practices to formulate a spectrum on which each problem they encounter in the real world is deliberated and resolved.⁴⁴ It is on this spectrum that Chinese feminisms are presented in the plural to subvert “systematic oppressions that often exercise their power by creating, maintaining, and consolidating binary structures.”⁴⁵ That is, Chinese feminisms are reckoned by women in everyday encounters with patriarchal forces, gender inequalities, and misogynistic voices.

Such “reckoning” is embodied and performed in Yang Li’s stand-up shows. Yang Li sets up her stage persona as a woman of ordinary appearance and a desire for love from straight men. Concurrently, she humorously talks about her difficulties finding a “normal and ordinary” male lover. Her performance stabs at the arrogance of men in a patriarchal society:

Nothing changed since last year. I am still single [laughter]. I have been single for such a long time! You know, I think performing stand-up comedy just worsened my life [laughter]. I cannot understand why I have been single for such a long time. I think many boys have misunderstood

44. Yinhe Li, *Nüxing Zhuyi* 女性主义 [Feminism] (Ji' nan: Shandong Renmin Chubanshe, 2005).

45. Ping Zhu and Hui Faye Xiao, “Feminisms with Chinese Characteristics: An Introduction,” in *Feminisms with Chinese Characteristics*, ed. Ping Zhu and Hui Faye Xiao (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2021), 2.

me. They thought my punch lines made me very aggressive and always want to attack them. They may suspect that I hate men. No. Rather, I attack you guys only because I love you guys [laughter]. It is true! I love you so much. [Camera shot to two male audience members, laughing cheerfully.] I love you so much that I cannot be hard-hearted to pick up only one of you to date [laughter]. Wonderful beings, men. I have to make a choice?! [laughter]. Men not only are brilliant but are also quite mysterious. You can never figure out what he is thinking in his little and cute head [rustling laughter]. That is: Why is he so ordinary but looks so confident? [Camera shot at female audience members, laughter and applause.]

The public packed the last line into the buzzword *puxinnan* (“ordinary but confident man”), which made Yang Li a nationwide representative of feminist comedians. Meanwhile, she has been harshly criticized by male netizens for being overly offensive. However, in her performances, she does not refuse to fall in love with straight men. Neither does she directly protest for gender equality. She even positions herself lower than men by portraying herself as a poor single woman who desires but fails to even take a sip of a romantic relationship. In her other piece, Yang Li tells a story of her hangover. She “complains” that the male friend who sent her home just left without doing anything further. Clearly, she is implying her expectation of having romantic/sexual affairs with him. Audiences laughed.

All her storytelling depicts Yang Li as an ordinary woman who desires to be loved by a man and even tries to flirt with men. The self-portrayal of a woman failing to attract a man seems to be objectifying women again in a heterosexual power relationship. However, her lines also address a manifesto, as feminists often do, that as an ordinary woman, she has the freedom to choose to love, to judge and criticize men, and to refuse to make any compromises to the patriarchal forces. Her seemingly frivolous flirting with men in the hangover joke occasionally echoes the slogan of the 2012 performing

art feminism protest: “I [women] can be provocative, but you cannot harass me.”⁴⁶ As a result, even Yang Li does not identify herself as a feminist, but the performativity of reckoned women’s voices marks a potential feminist resistance in her acts.

None of the women comedians mentioned in this paper directly claim that they are feminists (*nüquanzhuyizhe*). Yet the Chinese Internet has witnessed feminist discussions regarding their performances. While these comics insist that they are merely telling personal stories, they subtly engage in the ongoing negotiation about the proper feminist voice in public culture. Such essentialization of feminist expression embodies the dynamic process of *feminist reckoning*. Through reckoning, women in contemporary China navigate through the patriarchal cultural traditions, changing political conditions, new media and censorship, and complicated feminist discourses to figure out forceful and penetrative ways for self-expression and resistance in public culture. They enable women in contemporary China to imagine, articulate, and determine the ideal lifestyle they want by making the essential and proper public female voices inherently undefined and unsettled.⁴⁷

Conclusion

Past “celebratory” scholarship claims that comedy has transformative political forces. However, in contemporary China, its emancipatory, Bakhtinian spirit of the loosening of social control and structural violence suffers from the growing authoritarian forces that have advanced the state’s regulation of popular cultural productions. The promotion of the digital Internet intensifies both creative resistance in popular culture and government surveillance

46. “Wo keyi sao, ni buneng rao” (我可以骚，你不能扰), in the feminist protest against Shanghai Metro Company.

47. Elizabeth W. Won, *Embodied Reckonings: “Comfort Women,” Performance, and Transpacific Redress* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018).

and censorship. In other words, the social and political conditions for the interplay of politics and humor are not as optimistic as foreseen.⁴⁸ It is therefore important to reexamine the interconnections of comedy and cultural politics in contemporary China, particularly in the digital arena. A better understanding of how comedy is politicized and depoliticized contributes to examining interactions between ordinary citizens and the governing forces in public culture.

On the one hand, the nation-state is dedicated to obstructing feminist activities, as well as downplaying public debates over gender issues. On the other hand, feminism invokes powerful quarrels and debates among ordinary citizens in everyday lives and private spheres. Rhetorically and textually, such quarrels refer less to the political resistance toward social-cultural patriarchal forces than to men-women interactions and lifestyles (for example, husband-wife, father-daughter, and mother-son). However, in assessing the performative as feminist reckoning, these discussions and debates highlight and foreground gender inequality and women's quandaries in public culture. In this spirit, female stand-up comics' performances, moving back and forth between offline and online, offer to politicize everyday discussions regarding gender-related power dynamics as expressive resistance. Such rhetoric and practice resist not only patriarchal forces endorsed by the nation-state, as reflected in gender debates around the Tangshan incident, but more significantly state hegemony and authoritarian sovereignty that censor and control feminist protests and gender politics.

As such, this paper observes a new form of female expression in public culture—feminist reckoning—that is generated and embodied in the comedy complex consisting of women comedians, digital media, and audiences' cathartic expressions of praise and discontent. The complicity

48. For example, see Xue-Liang Ding, "Freedom and Political Humour: Their Social Meaning in Contemporary China," in *Humour in Chinese Life and Culture: Resistance and Control in Modern Times*, ed. Jessica Milner Davis and Jocelyn Chey (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), 231–53.

of stand-up comedy and Chinese feminism illuminates women's agentic countering of state regulation and the censorship of popular culture and gender-related public discussions. The politicization of comedy and humor marks women's hidden transcripts contesting gender inequality and male dominance in public culture, where public transcripts from the state create obstacles for feminist expressions and resistance. In other words, though it is not difficult for the Chinese government to strictly censor, replace, or downplay feminist resistance and gender-related public debates, audiences' uncontrollable and unruly preference and criticisms (because it is often apolitical, random, and trivial) toward female stand-up comedy makes feminist resistance a visible fact. How could people's comments on stand-up comedy be censored or controlled? In this paper, I point out that stand-up comedy is not merely objective text or context but a presence of the ongoing negotiations among comics, audiences, and state regulators regarding what is laughable, what should be discussed, and how the present can be narrated. In this way, I contend that political expression/action not only derives from comedy or humor per se but also stems from the gap between the performance online and offline. In people's laughter and vitriol—online, offline, and in-between—we might continue to discern the playful irreverence in a country of imperative consensus.

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The Power of Citation

Feminist Counter-Appropriation of State Discourses in Post-Reform China

JINGXUE ZHANG AND CHARLIE YI ZHANG

Abstract

This article presents a comprehensive examination of the new discursive strategy devised and deployed by Chinese pan-feminist communities in response to the pervasive state intrusion, which we call *feminist counter-appropriation*. These tactics entail adoption and strategic adaptation of the state-sanctioned discourses by feminist netizens to tell their own stories while shielding them from severe punitive measures. Our analysis discerns two types of counter-appropriation practices: deliberate counter-appropriation that involves parodic and satirical redeployment of the party-state's stigmatizing framing of feminism, and promotional counter-appropriation that uncritically embraces the sanitized version of feminism following the statist and nationalist logic yet creates room for discussion of gender-related and other forms of social inequalities. While acknowledging inherent limitations and susceptibility to manipulation by conservative forces, we argue that these counter-appropriation practices demonstrate the resilience of civil societies in navigating censorship and oppression to subvert the oppressive intentions of party bureaucrats, expose inherent flaws of the official languages, and challenge the entrenched gender inequalities in post-reform China.

Keywords: Chinese pan-feminist communities, counter-appropriation, discursive strategies, parody and satire, state discourses

In late January 2022, as numerous Chinese people were eagerly awaiting the celebration of the Lunar New Year and the first Winter Olympics to be held in China, a disconcerting incident unfolded in Feng County, Xuzhou, resulting in a dampened sense of excitement and enthusiasm across the country. A video, uploaded by a vlogger on Douyin (the Chinese counterpart of TikTok), quickly became viral and attracted substantial attention from social media users, both within and beyond China. As the video showed, a woman, scantily clad and fastened by a heavy metal chain around her neck to the wall, was enduring the frigid temperature within a dilapidated hut and dehumanizing mistreatments.¹ Previous videos shared by the same vlogger indicated that the woman was a mother of eight children and, for that matter, had been chosen to participate in a state-sponsored philanthropic initiative. Allegedly responding to the state's appeal for assistance, the vlogger arrived at the scene and was shocked by the dire circumstances. After providing the woman with a warm coat, he left promptly.

The searing outrage and delusion spawned by the woeful story of the mother in Xuzhou overshadowed the state-sponsored aurora of Eileen Gu, a US-born female athlete of mixed Chinese heritage who won two gold medals in the Winter Olympics representing China instead of the United States. The devastating contrast between their destinies exposed the contrived “feminist” narrative surrounding female athletes like Gu, which has been fabricated and disseminated by the regime to construct a forward-looking and progressive image of China. Indeed, this manufactured notion of feminism has been at the core of the statist narrative that centers on the promotion of women's rights since the United Nations (UN) conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995.²

1. Shuyue Chen, “The Woman Who Gave Birth to Eight Children, and People Said She Was Crazy: The Fengxian Incident and a Public Reckoning with Woman Trafficking” [*shingle bage haizi de nvren, renmen shuo tafengle: fengxian shijian he yichang dui guai-mai funv de qingsuan*], Initium Media, February 15, 2022, <https://theinitium.com/article/20220201-mainland-xuzhou-detained-mother/>.

2. Zhong Wang, “Detention of the Feminist Five in China,” *Feminist Studies* 41, no. 2 (2015): 476.

Given its exceptional visibility, the case about the woman in Xuzhou was subject to less severe censorship in comparison to other public incidents. However, instead of interpreting this as a concession by the Chinese state regarding its omnipresent censorship machinery, it should be understood as an evolved surveillance strategy, given that online debates surrounding the chained mother were meticulously modulated to mitigate potential repercussions. Conversations that framed the case in ways to emphasize the unique nature of the woman's predicament or focused on criticizing the local government were less likely to be censored. Conversely, any mention of broader structural issues that extend beyond the state-defined parameters, such as human trafficking, police misconduct, and the adverse consequences of the preceding one-child policy, would be promptly removed.³ This calculated censorship mechanism spurs the public to develop more adaptable discursive tactics to evade pervasive surveillance when articulating alternative, dissenting perspectives.

Scholarly research has kept track of the utilization of diverse discursive strategies by Chinese netizens, including the employment of memes, puns, and emojis,⁴ among others, as covert means to evade censorship and circulate "illicit" information beyond the scope of state surveillance.⁵ Nevertheless,

3. Such as the demands of a thorough investigation of official misconduct or the interrogations of China's human trafficking, which inevitably links to the imbalanced sex ratio and the state's previous one-child policy. See, for example, Xie Minghua, "What I Know about Trafficking Women in Feng County" [*wo suo liaojie de fengxian guaimai funv*], *China Digital Times*, February 4, 2022.

4. Bingchun Meng "From Steamed Bun to Grass Mud Horse: E Gao as Alternative Political Discourse on the Chinese Internet," *Global Media and Communication* 7, no. 1 (2011): 33–51; Kecheng Fang, "Turning a Communist Party Leader into an Internet Meme: The Political and Apolitical Aspects of China's Toad Worship Culture," *Information, Communication & Society* 23, no. 1 (2018): 38–58; Weiming Ye and Luming Zhao, "'I Know It's Sensitive': Internet Censorship, Recoding, and the Sensitive Word Culture in China," *Discourse, Context & Media* 51 (February 2023): 1–10.

5. Lijun Tang and Syamantak Bhattacharya, "Power and Resistance: A Case Study of Satire on the Internet," *Sociological Research Online* 16, no. 2 (2011): 10–18; Ashley Esarey and Xiao Qiang, "Political Expression in the Chinese Blogosphere: Below the Radar." *Asian Survey* 48, no. 5 (2008): 752–72; Ashley Esarey and Xiao Qiang, "Digital Communication and Political Change in China" *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2011);

the increasingly sophisticated censorship systems and heightened risks of retributive consequences have diminished the efficacy of such expressions,⁶ calling for more adaptable and creative approaches to push back the state's control while providing a relatively safer outlet for dissent. Counter-appropriation, we argue, presents one such option, wherein Internet users repurpose or adopt discursive forms originally formulated for specific contexts and employ them in entirely different situations. Such discursive practices enable them to imbue these linguistic constructs with tangible agency, thereby effecting subtle yet significant changes while minimizing the risk of direct reprisal from the state.

The discursive exchanges between the party-state and the public, as evidenced by the counter-appropriation practices of Chinese pan-feminist netizens, provide a prism to explore and comprehend the evolving dynamics of gender and politics in the era of networked communication and China's rise as an assertive power. As Petrus Liu posits, the incorporation of Chinese women and sexual minorities as vulnerable surplus populations to facilitate cross-border circulation of capital reproduction has played a pivotal role, not only in China's recent ascendance within the world trading system but also in the consolidation of neoliberal relationships on a global scale.⁷ There is, however, a lack of discussion from feminist and queer perspectives on

Guobin Yang and Min Jiang, "The Networked Practice of Online Political Satire in China: Between Ritual and Resistance," *International Communication Gazette* 77, no. 3 (2015): 215–31; Siu-yau Lee, "Surviving Online Censorship in China: Three Satirical Tactics and Their Impact," *China Quarterly* 228 (December 2016): 1061–80; Xiaoping Wu, "Discursive Strategies of Resistance on Weibo: A Case Study of the 2015 Tianjin Explosions in China," *Discourse, Context & Media* 26 (December 2018): 64–73.

6. King-wa Fu, Chung-hong Chan, and Michael Chau, "Assessing Censorship on Microblogs in China: Discriminatory Keyword Analysis and Impact Evaluation of the 'Real Name Registration' Policy," *IEEE Internet Computing* 17, no. 3 (2013): 42–50; Hailong Liu, *Propaganda: Ideas, Discourses and Its Legitimization* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019); Yun Tai, and King-wa Fu, "Specificity, Conflict, and Focal Point: A Systematic Investigation into Social Media Censorship in China," *Journal of Communication* 70, no. 6 (2020): 842–67.

7. Petrus Liu *The Specter of Materialism: Queer Theory and Marxism in the Age of the Beijing Consensus* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023).

these structural changes and material realities. The linguistic turn in critical theories of Western academia “has reached a dead end,” to borrow from Nicholas Rose, and has not been able to explain the political economy of gender politics in a non-West setting.⁸ We might need to bring forth a shift toward a rhetoric of materiality for changes. In response to this imperative, Liu utilizes Judith Butler, a foundational figure in the linguistic turn, as an illustrative case to elucidate the underexplored intellectual connection between queer studies and Marxism. He sees Butler’s intellectual evolution from the notion of gender performativity to ethical alterity as a crucial juncture in queer studies that aligns more closely with Marxism regarding the impersonal logic of value extraction.

In her book *Bodies That Matter*, Butler responds to critiques of a voluntaristic interpretation of gender performativity proposed in her earlier book, *Gender Trouble*.⁹ She rejects the notion of gender as a volitional act and instead constructs an ethical framework positing that the possession of a gendered and sexed body constitutes a fundamental vulnerability that can potentially serve as a foundation for political communities. Liu argues that this recognition of the formative social dimension of the body lays the groundwork for a shared critique of the voluntarist subject, highlighting the convergence of Marx’s labor theory of value and Butler’s conception of gender. This conversation between queer theory and Marxism proves crucial for Liu to develop a new account of “the particular way China entered the world of global capital” and “a more analytically precise vocabulary (and politics) for deciphering the matrix of gendered life and political economy.”¹⁰

Taking cues from Petrus Liu’s work, this article incorporates the notion of “citation of the law” substantiated by Butler in *Bodies That*

8. Nikolas Rose, “The Human Sciences in a Biological Age,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 30, no. 1 (2013): 4.

9. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

10. Petrus Liu, *The Specter of Materialism*, 5.

Matter to critically engage the counter-appropriation strategies developed and employed by Chinese pan-feminist groups and explore the efficacy of these tactics in unsettling the dominant state apparatus that has been significantly augmented to address the challenges arising from China's decades-long practices of economic liberalization.¹¹ In *Gender Trouble*, Butler elucidates the sociolinguistic construction and performative nature of gender and sex, highlighting their reification through repetitive bodily practices. Informed by Butler's work, feminist and queer scholars have developed incisive understandings of the symbolic aspects of gender and sex to unsettle essentialist notions that have historically subjected women to heteropatriarchal and masculinist norms. However, this approach has also attracted criticism regarding its practical efficacy in effecting tangible material changes. In response, Butler contests the presumption that regards gender and sex as transcendent rules existing independently before their assumption, positing instead that citation functions as the very mechanism through which these concepts are produced and articulated as a symbolic order of law. This order compels "a citation of its law that reiterates and consolidates the ruse of its own force," and the "process of sedimentation or what we might call materialization will be a kind of citationality, the acquisition of being through the citing of power, a citing that establishes an originary complicity with power in the formation of the 'I.'"¹² As citational practices are always embedded in specific sociohistorical and material conditions, each enactment of citationality produces nuanced and minor differences in the established chain of the symbolic order, giving rise to slippages and ruptures within the law of gender and sex that create conditions for grounded and nuanced changes. In line with Butler's insights, we draw upon examples from Chinese social media to demonstrate how repurposing or even uncritical adoption of sociohistorically situated narratives about feminism to tell divergent stories becomes a viable strategy for

11. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 14.

12. Butler, 15.

social change as other options of resistance become increasingly restricted in contemporary China.

Our analysis situates the counter-appropriation tactics used by pan-feminist netizens within broader sociohistorical frameworks to foreground its significance on both political and theoretical levels. The article starts with an overview of how the term *feminism* is viewed in Chinese media. Tracing the evolving narrative patterns of feminism and their embedded meanings from the Maoist era to the reform era, and then to the post-reform era, we identify two strands of citational practices—what we call *counter-appropriation*—developed and employed by Chinese pan-feminist communities¹³ as a response to tightening social control. While discussions of other topics about social justice, such as labor rights and political liberty, are stringently censored and rendered practically unfeasible on Chinese media platforms, feminism and gender equality have emerged as perhaps the sole topic deemed acceptable by the state. Yet as demonstrated later in this article, these topics must be sanitized and reframed to align with broader agendas of the Chinese authorities, often taking the form of state feminism or individualistic feminism, or sometimes a combination of both. The first approach, *deliberate counter-appropriation*, proves an efficacious strategy that allows social media users to redeploy the state's stigmatization of feminism in parodic and satirical ways to expose the fallacy of its hypocrisy and fallacy. By contrast, uncritical adoption of sanitized feminism that has been appropriated by the state, or *promotional counter-appropriation*, albeit lacking ostensible parodic intentions, amplifies the discursive space for deliberations concerning women's

13. As illustrated by Wu and Dong, the realm of contemporary Chinese feminism is characterized by intricate divisions and internal conflicts, as various factions hold divergent perspectives and engage in critical dialogue, particularly regarding contentious issues (such as the acceptance of lean-in feminism and the attitudes toward entering heterosexual marriage). Resultantly, we will use the phrase *pan-feminist communities* in this paper as a means to demonstrate the collective discursive strategies employed by contemporary Chinese feminist groups, despite their nuanced differences in certain positions. See Angela Xiao Wu and Yige Dong, "What Is Made-in-China Feminism(s)? Gender Discontent and Class Friction in Post-Socialist China," *Critical Asian Studies* 51, no. 4 (2019): 471–92.

rights and gender-related issues and creates opportunities for discussions of other structural matters. As our analysis shows, these counter-appropriation practices, intentional or not, provide safeguarded and useful means to disrupt the monitoring mechanisms of the state and counteract the resurgence of denunciations (*jubao*) observed during Xi Jinping's reign.

Feminism in Chinese Media

Feminism has remained a “shady” term in the eyes of China's censorship authorities. On one hand, within the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) ideological and propaganda framework, the term *feminism* historically carried negative connotations due to its perceived association with Western bourgeois ideologies that are deemed corrupt and antagonistic.¹⁴ The significance of “women's work” (*funv gongzuo*) was also overshadowed by the party's primary focus on class struggle.¹⁵ On the other hand, the party asserts its role in promoting women's liberation as a significant accomplishment to legitimize its position in power. Through a hierarchical organization, the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) that operates under its leadership, the CCP has retained dominance over policies pertaining to “women's work” during both the Maoist era and the early stages of the reform period. This paradoxical situation has resulted in contingent yet severely constrained space for public discussions surrounding feminism and women's issues.

With the emergence of the Internet and social media in the new millennium, discussions surrounding feminism and gender equality gained significant traction and visibility. These topics became widely disseminated and gradually recognized by the public, emerging as one of the few subjects

14. Zheng Wang, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment: Oral and Textual Histories* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999).

15. Zheng Wang, “‘State Feminism’? Gender and Socialist State Formation in Maoist China,” *Feminist Studies* 31, no. 3 (2005): 519–51; Gail Hershatter, *Women and China's Revolutions* (Lanham and London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

deemed acceptable for discussion while other issues pertaining to social justice became virtually unfeasible to address within Chinese social media. The younger generations of Chinese pan-feminist communities actively harness social media platforms for activism. Grassroots feminists have developed efficacious avenues to challenge the conventional top-down paradigm and engage in vibrant dialogues with the public and mainstream media.¹⁶ Yet the feminist community encountered a severe setback in 2015, triggered by the arrest of the Feminist Five and the subsequent controversy that reverberated globally.¹⁷ This incident had a profound impact on the approach of the Chinese party-state toward feminism beyond the scope it sets. Confronted with mounting domestic outrage, the government sought to justify its actions by accusing the activists of being influenced by “foreign political forces” intent on undermining China’s socialist ideology.¹⁸ This event marked a substantial transformation wherein the state resorted to orchestrated and coordinated measures to ostracize and subdue the feminist movement in China.

The characterization of feminism as a product of “foreign political forces” and the implicit suggestion of subversion against the CCP’s ruling is part of the broader shift aimed at thwarting any form of activism or organization that challenges the authority of the party-state, aligning with the core agenda of the Xi administration, which seeks to revert to a totalitarian ruling style amid boiling and recurring social crises. By attributing feminism to external influences, the government seeks to undermine the legitimacy of feminist activism, portraying it as a threat to the established social order and the so-called socialist values to legitimize its repressive measures against feminist activists. The newly adopted stigmatizing narrative concerning

16. Hou 2012; Wei Zhang and Cheris Kramarae, “‘SlutWalk’ on Connected Screens: Multiple Framings of a Social Media Discussion,” *Journal of Pragmatics* 73 (November 2014): 66–81.

17. Zheng Wang, “Detention of the Feminist Five in China.”

18. Zheng Wang, “What Is ‘Foreign Political Power?’” [*hewei ‘guowai zhengzhi shili’*]. *Chinese Feminism* (blog), April 2, 2015, <https://chinesefeminism.org/2020/07/10/%e4%bd%95%e4%b8%ba%e5%9b%bd%e5%a4%96%e6%94%bf%e6%b2%bb%e5%8a%bf%e5%8a%9b/>.

feminism swiftly resulted in a crackdown on feminist organizations and individuals, subjecting prominent activists to heightened surveillance, social exclusion, and harassment by the Chinese authorities.¹⁹

The impact of the stigmatization of feminism reverberates beyond its immediate effects, permeating the feminist movement and instilling an atmosphere of apprehension and self-censorship. Individual activists and organizations find themselves vulnerable to being branded as “foreign forces” or threats to national security, generating a chilling impact to dampen open expression and impede the progress of feminist activism in China. In the subsequent sections, we use examples from social media to closely engage the two distinct trajectories observed within Chinese pan-feminist communities, exploring how they appropriate and recycle a variety of statist discourses, including the state-organized stigmatization of feminism and the sanitized forms of individualistic and nationalist feminism as examples of citational practices to foster awareness and facilitate debates regarding gender and sexual issues.

Counter-Appropriation as a Form of Deliberation: Political Satire as Resistance

As the case of the chained woman discussed at the beginning makes clear, the Chinese state has substantially upgraded its censorship machinery and developed more strategized and fine-tuned techniques to foster and advance discursive formations in ways that align better with its shifting agenda. Considering this challenging situation, parody and satire possess a subversive potency, serving as significant avenues for creative resistance to challenge prevailing nationalist discourses and establish an alternative space for engaging in debates over social issues beyond the limitations of conventional media platforms. They prove to be more effective in capturing the attention of a broader audience, facilitating the production and dissemination

19. Leta Hong Fincher, *Betraying Big Brother: The Feminist Awakening in China* (London and New York: Verso, 2018).

of information vital to fostering engaged social debates.²⁰ In countries like China, characterized by an entrenched authoritarian ruling system that has extended its reach to unprecedented levels, political satire has become an integral element and defining characteristic of its online culture where freedom of speech has been significantly curtailed to the extent that any direct criticism of political leaders carries severe repercussions.²¹ The effectiveness of satire lies in its ability to circumvent censorship mechanisms²² and its potential to kindle interconnected parodic expressions that could culminate in the formation of online movements subjecting those in positions of power to public ridicule and scrutiny.²³ Chinese netizens thus widely employ political satires and parodies, particularly when broaching sensitive political topics.²⁴ Like other “sensitive” subject matter, topics pertaining to feminism and gender equality that historically received conditional endorsement from the state are currently experiencing heightened scrutiny.

Remarkably, Chinese pan-feminist communities have tactically adopted parody and satire in response to the mounting pressure. In April 2022, the official Weibo account of China’s Communist Youth League Central Committee (CYLC) ignited reverberating controversy and outrage within these communities through a post condemning what it termed “extreme feminism” (*jiduan nvquan*) as a pernicious “cancer on the internet” (*wangluo duli*) that necessitated collaborative efforts to eradicate.²⁵ The post asserted

20. Sangeet Kumar and Kirk Combe, “Political Parody and Satire as Subversive Speech in the Global Digital Sphere,” *International Communication Gazette* 77, no. 3 (2015): 211–14.

21. Yang and Jiang, “The Networked Practice of Online Political Satire in China.”

22. Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

23. Tang and Bhattacharya, “Power and Resistance”; Lee, “Surviving Online Censorship in China.”

24. Wu, “Discursive Strategies of Resistance on Weibo”; Regina Wai-man Chung and King-wa Fu, “Tweets and Memories: Chinese Censors Come after Me. Forbidden Voices of the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre on Sina Weibo, 2012–2018,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 31, no. 134 (2022): 319–34.

25. Communist Youth League Central Committee, “Extreme Feminism Has Become an Internet Cancer” [*jiduan nvquan yicheng wangluo duli*], Weibo, April 22, 2012, <https://weibo.com/3937348351/4757566724249051>.

that the account had shared a series of images documenting significant events from the party's revolutionary history but was "unjustly accused of 'willfully ignoring women'" due to the absence of prominent female figures. Furthermore, the post alleged that the CYLC account editor had endured personal attacks and cyber violence from these "extreme feminists" that had crossed a "red line." This accusation was based solely on five selected comments and reposts, among thousands of other reactions, purportedly as evidence that "extreme feminism is increasingly rampant, with its toxicity growing more severe."²⁶ One of these comments simply stated that "there are no women in the first six pictures. Why did you choose images that failed to equally represent women, who also contributed to the nation's development?"²⁷ Another comment questioned the legitimacy of prioritizing "men" before "women" in the phrase "the equality between men and women" (*nannv pingdeng*), which is included in China's Constitution and has consistently served as the dominant official discourse when addressing gender-related matters. This post not only highlights CYLC's—and, by extension, the party's—resistance to criticism from pan-feminist communities and their reluctance to engage in constructive dialogues concerning gender representation, but also lays bare the systematic deployment of sovereign power to suppress dissent.

Instead of engaging in direct confrontation, many pan-feminist netizens responded to the state-backed posts in a strategic manner. In addition to formal critiques that questioned the legitimacy of the term *extreme feminism* and CYLC's reluctance to acknowledge its own mistake, the discursive strategy of counter-appropriation was deliberately employed. Netizens cited quotes from revered party figures such as Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai to bolster their arguments for gender equality and women's liberation while also provocatively questioning whether the CYLC editor would dare to label Mao and Zhou as proponents of "extreme feminism." This tactful approach

26. Communist Youth League Central Committee, "Extreme Feminism Has Become an Internet Cancer."

27. Communist Youth League Central Committee.

exemplifies the netizens’ creative resistance within the context of the state-orchestrated stigmatization of feminism and feminist movement that gained momentum in the latter half of the 2010s. By selectively invoking historical figures who are officially credited with the establishment of the People’s Republic of China and held in high regard as esteemed leaders of the party, they not only managed to navigate potential censorship and suppression by the authorities but also safeguarded their feminist arguments from potential political backlash, such as being categorized as “foreign forces.”

As depicted in figure 1, an excerpt from Mao’s writings was shared by a Weibo user, highlighting his call for women’s political participation and his strong critique of the Confucian ideology of “virtuous mothers and good

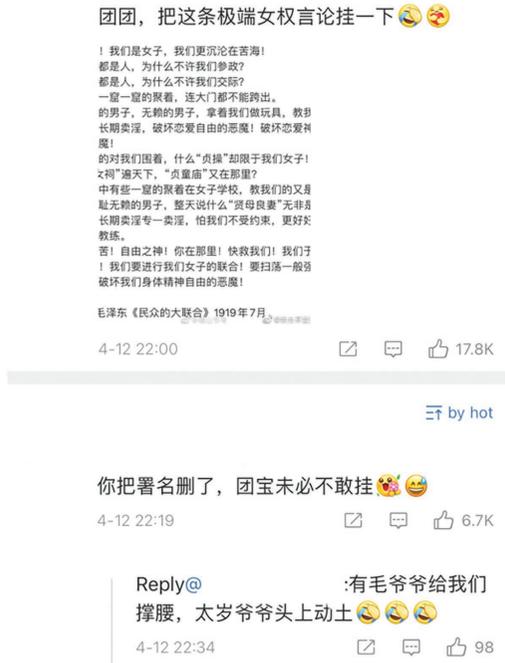


Figure 1: CYLC’s comment section.
 Source: Author’s own screenshot archive.

wives” (*xianqi liangmu*), which he referred to as “long-term prostitution.”²⁸ The user sarcastically urged “*tuantuan*” (the nickname of CYLC used by Chinese netizens) to pin up this comment from an “extreme feminist” (for public shaming), accompanied by laughing and heart-hugging emojis. In a comparably ironic tone, another user suggested that CYLC might actually agree with the feminist message if the signature were removed and the comment attributed to a different author. Responding in a similar vein, yet another user proposed that the CYLC account might consider pinning up the article as an example of “extreme feminism” due to its stance in support of women’s rights, if the name of Mao was removed. In a follow-up comment, the first user responded, asserting, “We have Chairman Mao’s support. (Who would dare to) ‘dig the soil on the head of Tai Sui?’” referring to a well-known Chinese idiom that describes a risky or audacious move that could potentially bring bad luck or trouble. Apparently, these users deliberately employed Mao’s statements as a politically safe means to push back the official discourse stigmatizing feminism and express their support for feminist ideas.

Correspondingly, a separate user (see figure 2) shared a concise remark attributed to Mao that critiques the traditional gender roles and norms in the feudal Chinese society, portraying them as symbols of women’s subjugation and bondage. Mao’s statement encourages women to establish a revolutionary army to liberate themselves from these gender-based limitations and to strive for their rights and equal status. In a provocative manner, this user challenged the CYLC Weibo account editor to consider the implications of this passage, further underscoring the inherent inconsistency of CYLC’s opposition to feminist ideas, as they align with the formal advocacy of the party’s founding fathers.

As stated previously, one of the major strategies adopted by the party-state in its recently organized marginalization of feminist communities involves insinuating their association with foreign political forces, aiming to “foment confrontation between men and women” (*tiaoqi nannv duili*) and disrupt the stability and harmony of Chinese society at large. This approach

28. Communist Youth League Central Committee.



Figure 2: CYLC’s comment section.
 Source: Author’s own screenshot archive.

follows a comparable pattern to the targeting of “class enemies” during the Cultural Revolution, Deng’s campaign against “spiritual pollution,” and the CCP’s long-standing portrayal of foreign hostile forces (often associated with capitalism) as antagonists to its socialist objectives.²⁹ The assertion of feminism’s connection to foreign forces carries substantial political implications within the current political and historical context of China.

Scholars have shown that the chilling effect of continuous online censorship is more salient when individuals are confronted with extensive censorship of the general public.³⁰ This effect is particularly evident in the suppression faced by high-profile #MeToo movement activists.³¹ As is shown

29. Hailong Liu, *Propaganda: Ideas, Discourses and Its Legitimization*.
 30. Yuner Zhu and King-wa Fu, “Speaking up or Staying Silent? Examining the Influences of Censorship and Behavioral Contagion on Opinion (Non-) Expression in China,” *New Media & Society* 23, no. 12 (2021): 3634–55.
 31. Jing Zeng, “You Say #MeToo, I Say #MiTu: China’s Online Campaigns Against Sexual Abuse,” in *#MeToo and the Politics of Social Change*, ed. Bianca Fileborn and Rachel

here, Chinese pan-feminist netizens have devised new strategies to counter-appropriate the statist discourses used by the authorities, such as the labeling of feminism as “fomenting confrontation” and “men-hating,” to mock their misogynistic remarks and patriarchal prejudice.

As illustrated in figure 3, a user adeptly appropriated the state’s logic of accusing feminism of inciting confrontation and turned it against CYLC’s public shaming of so-called extreme feminism. The user remarked, “Who is fomenting confrontation between men and women? Oh, it’s the CYLC. Hand-picking three comments out of ten thousand to specifically criticize.” Another user responded in a sarcastic tone, stating, “*This* CYLC has repeatedly expressed misogynistic and hostile views that promote gender antagonism!”³² Given that there is only one CYLC in the Chinese context, apparently these critiques are directed specifically at this party-led organization. These discursive exchanges underscore the disillusionment and dissatisfaction within Chinese pan-feminist communities toward CYLC’s persistent practices of stoking antagonistic views to foster a culture of gender hostility. The strategic employment of the language used by the state and the sarcastic reversal of its accusations serve as potent tools to expose the hypocrisy and sexism embedded within CYLC’s narrative. By deftly leveraging these tactics, Chinese pan-feminist communities not only navigate the pervasive censorship that has become increasingly menacing through the implementation of real-name registration requirements but also subvert the party-state’s efforts to stigmatize and subdue feminist voices.

The lack of responses to or acknowledgment of these deliberated inquiries from the official CYLC account and other media outlets, followed by their subsequent decision to deactivate the comment section on the

Loney-Howes (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 71–83, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15213-0_5; Siyuan Yin and Yu Sun, “Intersectional Digital Feminism: Assessing the Participation Politics and Impact of the MeToo Movement in China,” *Feminist Media Studies* 21, no. 7 (October 3, 2021): 1176–92, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1837908>; Jing Xiong and Dušica Ristivojević, “#MeToo in China: How Do the Voiceless Rise Up in an Authoritarian State?,” *Politics & Gender* 17, no. 3 (September 2021): 490–99, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15213-0_5.

32. Emphasis added by the authors.

是谁挑起男女对立？哦，共青团哦😏上万个评论精选出来三条，专门发个批评，好大的格局

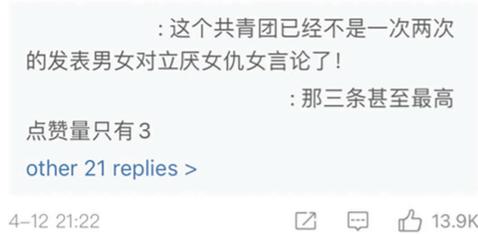


Figure 3: CYLC's comment section.

Source: Author's own screenshot archive.

pertinent Weibo post and maintain a deliberate reticence on the matter, serves as a self-evident indicator of the effectiveness of the parodic counter-appropriation strategy employed by Chinese pan-feminist communities. The Chinese authorities and affiliated media, bound by their own established narrative frameworks, find it politically advantageous to evade engagement with these acts of strategic counter-appropriation by Chinese pan-feminist communities in order to avoid the possibility of an excessively obvious weakening of credibility caused by the inherent self-contradiction arising from the tension between their misogynistic ruling agenda and their phony claim to support gender equality. In the following section, we explore the second form of counter-appropriation that is oftentimes unintentional and thus requires different approaches from the authorities to address it.

Counter-Appropriation as Promotional Engagement: From State Feminism to Pink Feminism

Following the conclusion of the Beijing Winter Olympics, the state-driven nationalist fervor centered on Eileen Gu experienced a subsequent decline in influence. Nevertheless, the appropriative integration of women's issues

and gender equality has remained a fundamental component of official discourses since the establishment of the People's Republic of China. The concept of "state feminism," initially developed in contexts of Scandinavian countries and subsequently of Western postindustrial democracies, refers to a form of feminism that is led or sponsored by the government, with the aim of promoting gender equality within the existing political and economic system.³³ Incorporating feminist agendas within the state apparatus, however, carries the risk of downplaying structural critiques of the patriarchal state, diminishing the transformative capacity of feminist movements, and reducing the changes they stimulate to symbolic gestures or superficial reforms.³⁴ It is important to contextualize this within the broader sociopolitical backdrop of the late twentieth century in postindustrial nations, which witnessed the ascendancy of neoliberalism. Characterized by its fervent advocacy for personal liberty, entrepreneurial freedom, robust private property rights, and unbridled market dynamics, neoliberalism seeks to transpose liberal sociopolitical tenets onto all societal spheres.³⁵ In essence, neoliberalism extends the social and political principles associated with liberalism to all aspects of social life, treating every façade of human society as a source of profit-making, encompassing even feminism. The rise of neoliberal feminism emphasizing personal choices and responsibilities and championing stable nuclear family structures has ultimately weakened feminism's transformative potential to bring down the heteropatriarchal system.³⁶ In this regard, some scholars argue that the term *state feminism* should be reexamined in the context of these changes—as with the rapid expansion of marketization logic, current

33. Johanna Kantola and Judith Squires, "From State Feminism to Market Feminism?" *International Political Science Review* 33, no. 4 (2012): 382–400.

34. Stetson, Dorothy McBride, and Amy G. Mazur, "Introduction," in *Comparative State Feminism*, ed. Dorothy E. McBride, Amy G. Mazur, and Dorothy MacBride Stetson (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995), 1–21; J. Outshoorn and J. Kantola, *Changing State Feminism* (New York: Springer, 2007).

35. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

36. Catherine Rottenberg, "The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism," *Cultural Studies* 28, no. 3 (2014): 418–37.

“feminist engagements with public policy agendas are increasingly mediated via private-sector organizations according to the logic of the market.”³⁷

Pivoting to the Chinese context, the research conducted by the feminist scholar-activist Wang Zheng on the phenomenon of state feminism provides a nuanced perspective by delving into the agency of feminists operating within the CCP during the Mao era.³⁸ She argues against perceiving state feminism as a unilateral imposition of women’s liberation by the state and suggests it should be seen instead as a strategic approach that occasionally mobilizes the inconspicuous efforts of feminists to navigate the patriarchal structure of the party. By shedding new light on the intricate dynamics within the state apparatus and its implications for feminist activism, Wang posits that state feminism in the Chinese context should be comprehended as a remarkable methodology of flexibility and pliancy rather than a top-down imposition by the overpowering state.³⁹ Concurrently, as the party’s ideological scaffold evolves from socialism toward a market-centric orientation with both characteristics of socialism and (neo)liberalism, its gendered discourses undergo recalibration as well.⁴⁰ This transition, replete with neoliberal inflections emphasizing individualistic and meritocratic achievements, positions Chinese state feminism in a liminal, yet instructive, juxtaposition with its Western counterparts.

Particularly telling of the confluence of state-driven feminism with individualistic nuances are the congratulatory remarks made by China Central Television (CCTV) News on International Women’s Day from 2021 to 2023. Through a series of prerecorded videos, the premiere mouthpiece of the Chinese state duly acknowledges the contributions made by Chinese women in their roles as mothers, daughters, and wives with respect and

37. Kantola and Squires, “From State Feminism to Market Feminism?” 383.

38. Zheng Wang, “‘State Feminism?’”; Zheng Wang, *Finding Women in the State: A Socialist Feminist Revolution in the People’s Republic of China, 1949-1964* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017)

39. Zheng Wang, “‘State Feminism?’”; Zheng Wang, *Finding Women in the State*.

40. David A. Palmer and Fabian Winiger, “Neo-Socialist Governmentality: Managing Freedom in the People’s Republic of China,” *Economy and Society* 48, no. 4 (2019): 554–78.

admiration.⁴¹ Additionally, women are celebrated as resolute individuals capable of pursuing their aspirations and effecting positive change across various industries and sectors.⁴² The remarks emphasize the importance of transcending societal definitions that may impede women's potential.⁴³ While these messages might be viewed as a positive portrayal of Chinese women in state media, the underlying narrative structure is anchored in a thinly veiled, individualistic interpretation of empowerment that exalts personal success stories without critically engaging with the issues of social barriers and systemic inequalities. These gendered and sexualized structural divisions, as Liu shows, are consistently reproduced and perpetuated by the party-state to harness and exploit women's biopolitical values for the purpose of engineering China's economic marketization under an unchallenged authoritarian grip.⁴⁴ The aftermath of this state-led narrative crafting is not confined to media outlets alone. The individualistic tone of feminism in China mirrors its marketizing transition, drawing parallels with Western neoliberal feminism. However, China's feminism is rooted in its unique historical, political, and structural roots, where gender disparities and market dynamics intersect within a fraught post-socialist backdrop, which is further intensified by the heightened ideological control during Xi's leadership.⁴⁵

A significant portion of Chinese pan-feminist communities, perhaps unintentionally, aligns with the state's recently revamped narrative. This discursive pattern merges socialist-nationalist themes with individualistic, market-driven tones and lacks self-evident satirical touches, serving as an

41. CCTV News, “[#They are mothers, wives, daughters and themselves#],” Weibo, March 8, 2023, <https://weibo.com/2656274875/4877035513578376>.

42. CCTV News, “[Salute to the power of women!],” Weibo, March 7, 2023, <https://weibo.com/2656274875/4876950445755441>; CCTV News, “#Women's Day Blessings#,” Weibo, March 7, 2022, <https://weibo.com/2656274875/4744638760485388>; CCTV News, “#most beautiful her#,” Weibo, March 8, 2021, <https://weibo.com/2656274875/4612611439594707>.

43. <https://weibo.com/2656274875/4744781399591730>

44. Petrus Liu, *The Specter of Materialism*.

45. Wu and Dong, “What Is Made-in-China Feminism(s)?”

indication that many in the pan-feminist community may have internalized the state-sponsored sanitized version of feminism. The year of 2020 is seen by many netizens and media professionals as the “Year of Feminist Awakening,” as discussions pertaining to gender equality experienced a remarkable upsurge, reaching a far broader spectrum of audiences than before.⁴⁶ This shift might also be attributed to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, along with the Chinese government’s mishandling of the crisis that sparked widespread criticism across various online platforms.⁴⁷

Among the various issues discussed by the pan-feminist communities, the scarcity of sanitary pads faced by female health-care workers, comprising two-thirds of the overall workforce who made enormous sacrifices to provide medical assistance to heavily impacted regions, emerged as a prominent subject. Numerous donation initiatives were launched subsequently by diverse groups and individuals, aiming to provide support for frontline female health-care workers. Among them, Liang Yu’s campaign, titled Sisters’ Action for Peaceful Pandemic Resistance (*jiemei anxin zhanyi xingdong*), attracted the broadest public attention, partially due to Liang’s accusation of ACWF’s appropriation of her campaign (see figure 4), which triggered significant public outrage and generated considerable attention.

After the pandemic situation improved, Liang established her own philanthropic team and initiated the Menstrual Safety Action. This project

46. Feika, “Douban Feminism, a ‘Feminism with Chinese Characteristics’ Takes Shape in the Seam” [*Douban Nüquan, Jiafeng Zhong Xingcheng de ‘Zhongguo Tese Nüquan’*], Initium Media, March 8, 2021, <https://theinitium.com/article/20210308-opinion-china-douban-feminism-awakens-or-failure/>.

47. Jiacheng Liu, “From Social Drama to Political Performance: China’s Multi-Front Combat with the Covid-19 Epidemic,” *Critical Asian Studies* 52, no. 4 (2020): 473–93; Yingnian Tao, “Who Should Apologise: Expressing Criticism of Public Figures on Chinese Social Media in Times of COVID-19?” *Discourse & Society* 32, no. 5 (2021): 622–38; Chenchen Zhang, “Contested Disaster Nationalism in the Digital Age: Emotional Registers and Geopolitical Imaginaries in COVID-19 Narratives on Chinese Social Media,” *Review of International Studies* 48, no. 2 (2022): 219–42; Jingxue Zhang, Minhui Yang, and Zhen Sui, “Virtual Care Facing the COVID-19 Outbreak in China,” *International Journal of Care and Caring* 6, no. 1–2 (2022): 275–81.

By embracing the party-state's discourse on gender equality and demonstrating unwavering loyalty, Liang received coverage from various state-owned media outlets.⁴⁹ She epitomizes the “equality between men and women,” the state feminism that the party seeks to cultivate and use for cultivating a “forward-thinking and progressive” image on the global stage. Resultantly, she rapidly rose to prominence as one of the most renowned pan-feminist influencers on Weibo, currently amassing nearly one million followers. Liang's take of gender issues closely resonates with the official narrative's embrace of the principles of individual-oriented feminism, including self-empowerment and self-centered narratives. In an interview about the “menstrual dilemma” faced by teenage girls in rural China for lack of access to sanitary pads, Liang attributed the problem to the profiteering motivation of sanitary pad companies and blames local schools for resistance against menstrual hygiene campaigns.⁵⁰ Apparently, she shunned away from the difficult conversation concerning China's structural issues of the urban-rural divide and underdevelopment in rural areas that could otherwise point at the party-state for its disregard for systemic failures in ensuring gender equality on the ground.

Liang's case is not isolated but rather reflects the prevailing anti-Western feminist, sociopolitical climate in China. She represents a new trend in state feminism as it converges, at times, with “pink feminism.” Originally derived from the label “little pink” (*xiao fenhong*), coined by male liberal-leaning Internet influencers to identify female nationalists—usually with a negative connotation—this term broadly encompasses individuals, particularly

2021, <https://pinerpiner.medium.com/%E7%BB%8F%E8%A1%80%E6%9F%93%E7%BA%A2%E6%97%97-%E8%AF%84%E6%A2%81%E9%92%B0%E5%85%A5%E5%85%9A%E4%BA%8B%E4%BB%B6-14d0b22fb2e0>.

49. Yilun Cheng, “‘Sister’ Liang Yu: Speaking up for Women Is a Natural Thing to Do” [*jiemei’ liangyu: wei nuxing fasheng, shi yijian ziranerran de shi*], *Guangzhou Daily*, January 7, 2021, <https://huacheng.gz-cmc.com/pages/2021/01/07/79e1ab000b1948129e-aeb1242b75fedc.html>.

50. Yuelun Wang, “Looking Back on Women's Day: Has the ‘Menstrual Dilemma’ Been Solved?” [*funvjie huitouwang, ‘yuejing kunjing’ jie jue le ma?*], *Sohu News*, 2022, https://www.sohu.com/a/528272468_120392098.

women, who advocate nationalist feminism.⁵¹ The rise of pink feminism in the late 2010s is a result of Xi's stringent control over civil society, the rise of state and popular cyber nationalism in China, and Internet cleanup campaigns, which have silenced diverse feminist voices and prompted Chinese pan-feminist communities to adopt different strategies to make their voices heard. Some of them have allied with pink feminism for different reasons: as a narrative strategy to create more spaces for feminist discussion⁵² and a response to the chilling effect resulting from the party's intensified control over civil society during the post-COVID era, or acceptance of state feminism, or as a combination of all.⁵³

The party-state relentlessly exercises its power to distinguish between "real" feminism, which conforms to the sanitized ideological framework of gender equality, thereby obscuring the underlying structural inequalities through an emphasis on individualistic and entrepreneurial pursuits, and the "extreme" feminism that criticizes systematic gender inequalities rooted in heteronormality and cisheteropatriarchy. Consequently, pink feminism emerged as a new form of sanctioned feminism and is permitted with some leniency and tolerance within the incrementally narrowing space for public discussions. Promotional engagement with feminism, compared to the deliberate strategies discussed earlier, is not that "counter," as it can both conform to and confront state discourses. Given that civil societies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are under close scrutiny by the Chinese authorities, individuals and organizations must repeatedly map out

51. Kecheng Fang and Maria Repnikova, "Demystifying 'Little Pink': The Creation and Evolution of a Gendered Label for Nationalistic Activists in China," *New Media & Society* 20, no. 6 (2018): 2162–85.

52. Angelica S., "Disconnected from Activists: The 'Extremes' 'Pinkness' and 'Sinking' of China's Pan-Feminism [Yu Xingdongpai Duanceng, Zhongguo Tese Fan Nvquan de 'Jiduan' 'Fenhong' 'Xiachen']," *WHYNOT*, 2021, <https://www.wainao.me/wainao-reads/fea-Mar-06-cyberfeminism-in-china-03292021>.

53. Jelena Timotijevic, "Society's 'New Normal'? The Role of Discourse in Surveillance and Silencing of Dissent During and Post Covid-19," *Social Sciences & Humanities Open* (2020), <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3608576>.

and navigate the unspecified and ever-shifting boundaries that are deemed “permissible” in the eyes of censors. Stuck in the jigsaw of (self)censorship and agential practices, this counter stance, more often than not, is not about resistance but assistance, not about challenging but cooperation.

Liang Yu’s philanthropic organization serves as a prime example of promotional counter-appropriation. It is precisely because of her appropriation of the officially sanctioned discourses and of her adoption of the mainstream framework to define her social activism that Liang’s organization could continue to operate and survive despite the growingly grim restrictions and draconian control. Additionally, by pledging allegiance to the CCP and demonstrating her nonthreatening nature and cooperation with the state, she has achieved remarkable success with her philanthropic endeavors. The *Beijing News*, a party-controlled newspaper, extensively reported on Liang’s efforts to promote the establishment of the “Sanitary Box Mutual Aid Box” at universities. This initiative, as the paper suggests, encourages college students who unexpectedly find themselves in need of menstrual supplies to support each other by taking a pad when necessary and replacing it afterward, and the ultimate goal of this project is to challenge the prevailing societal stigma surrounding menstruation in China.⁵⁴ While it is evident that Liang did not originate the idea and merely aided in promoting the campaign through her now highly influential Weibo account, she was credited as the “initiator” of the campaign in a subsequent article published in another official newspaper of the CCP.⁵⁵ The placement of mutual aid boxes of sanitary pads in colleges located in relatively well-developed areas in China is ostensibly a most politically insensitive undertaking related to gender inequalities that conforms to the rule set by the state. Moreover, Liang’s emphasis on students obtaining

54. Jun Wang, “Conversation with the Promoter of Sanitary Box in Colleges: Breaking down Menstrual Shame Helps Girls Build Self-Confidence” [*duihua gaoxiao weishengjin huzhuhe tuidongren: pochu yuejing xiuchi youzhuyi nvsheng jianli zixin*], *Beijing News*, October 27, 2020, <https://m.bjnews.com.cn/detail/160380023215481.html>.

55. Cheng, “‘Sister’ Liang Yu.”

consent from college authorities serves to further alleviate potential repercussions.⁵⁶ This proactive approach not only reduces the likelihood of conflicts but also allows college leadership to assume an active role in what appears to be a favorable decision. These factors contribute to the relative success achieved by Liang's program.

Of course, this approach to feminism is inherently flawed, posing a significant risk of diluting the transformative potential that feminism necessitates and ultimately reducing it to a mere rhetorical tool of the party-state. Despite these innate flaws, it is noteworthy that within the increasingly constrained space for direct dissent and criticism under Xi's reign, this unreflective approach shows promise for prospective discussions concerning the myriad challenges confronted by Chinese women. For instance, looking back three years ago during the height of the COVID outbreak, menstrual supplies were largely overlooked and considered nonessential in donations for frontline health-care workers, except for a few pan-feminist organizations and activists that recognized the importance of the items. However, after three years of reappropriation of the state-sanctioned form of feminism that has involved constant negotiation and heated public debates, aligning either unintentionally or deliberately with the framework approved by the party-state, the stigma around menstruation significantly decreased. Women's needs for menstruation supplies are no longer taboo and instead have started to be taken seriously and regarded as normal. Notably, following the devastating flood in Hebei in August 2023, there was a discernible rise in public attention toward fulfilling the menstrual hygiene needs of affected women, evidenced by substantially increased donation drives for sanitary pads.⁵⁷

56. Jun Wang, "Conversation with the Promoter of Sanitary Box in Colleges."

57. See, e.g., Qian Wang, "A Man from Zhuozhou Donates Sanitary Napkins after Evacuation and Receives Praise from Netizens: [I] Hope It Helps Affected Women" [*Zhuozhou Yi Nanzi Cheli Tuoxian Hou Juanzeng Weishengjin Huo Wangyou Dianzan: Xiwang Bangdao Shouzai Nuxing*], *Sohu News*, August 4, 2023, https://www.sohu.com/a/708930806_120914498; Metro Times, "#Male University Student

As demonstrated through various examples, the remarkable resilience of Chinese pan-feminist communities lies in their adoption of multiple counter-appropriation strategies. These strategies, whether deliberate or not, whether laced with strategic sarcasm or genuine belief, serve as a lifeline, preserving a fragile yet vital glimmer of hope that heterogenous, vigorous, and potentially emancipatory feminist activisms will develop in the future, especially in the face of the stringent political environment in post-reform China under Xi's reign. While these future discussions may still undergo sanitization and (self) censorship, they nevertheless work to preserve the tinder, which might appear subtle and invisible yet serves as a solid foundation upon which the next movement may emerge and spread.

Conclusion

In this article we have presented a comprehensive examination of the discursive tactics devised and deployed by Chinese pan-feminist communities in response to the pervasive state intrusion, which we term *counter-appropriation*. These tactics entail strategic adaptation of or promotional engagement with the state-sanctioned discourses by feminist netizens to tell their own stories while shielding them from severe punitive measures. The resilience in navigating censorship and oppression to subvert the oppressive intentions of the party bureaucrats, expose inherent flaws of the official languages, and subvert the entrenched gender inequalities and injustice that serve the state's long-term interests, as exemplified in the cases we present here, stands as a testament to the potency of collective resistance and the unwavering determination of feminist activism within the turbulent socio-political landscape.

Buys 100 Packs of Sanitary Pads to Support Zhuozhou#” [#nan daxuesheng goumai 100bao weishengjin zhiyuan zhuozhou#], Weibo, August 4, 2023, https://weibo.com/1389537561/Nd1PYp8zB?refer_flag=1001030103_.

However, it is essential to recognize that these counter-appropriation approaches are not devoid of limitations and may manifest in various conservative forms, such as nationalist, pink-washed, or elitist expressions, inadvertently reinforcing social control and perpetuating disparities. As our analysis foregrounds, the state wields omnipresent power to dictate the amplification and validation of specific voices while marginalizing collective grassroots movements that challenge entrenched cisheteropatriarchal structures in China. Simultaneously, Chinese authorities selectively endorse and elevate individuals who adopt nonthreatening stances and align with the sanitized “gender equality” narrative, thereby suppressing dissent and curbing the transformative potential of feminism. On this account, more engaged and context-specific analysis is imperative to develop robust understanding of these dynamics and lay the foundation for sustainable and transformative changes.

Book Reviews

Revised Research Methodology for the Age of Media Industries Speculation

Review of *Specworld: Folds, Faults, and Fractures in Embedded Creator Industries*
by John Thornton Caldwell, University
of California Press, 2023

ETHAN TUSSEY

Keywords: media industries, ethnography, methodology, YouTube, Influencers

John Thornton Caldwell's influence on media industry studies is foundational. His ethnographic "production cultures" methodology and its emphasis on analyzing industrial "deep texts," artifacts of production ephemera that allow researchers to point to larger truths about the industry, is so accessible and effective that it is a staple across film and media programs and scholarship.¹

Yet it seems decades of employing that model to detail industry myth-making, trade narrativizing, and creative rituals has left Caldwell dubious of the sunny self-theorizing his subjects provide. A decade ago, Jennifer Holt counseled media industries scholars about the tricky balancing act of academic-industry partnerships, but Caldwell seems fed up with the imbalance between corporate protections, competing agendas, and the pursuit of

1. John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

scholarship.² Undoubtedly, the recent upheavals across the media industries in terms of finance, labor agreements, safety, technology, and social justice have contributed to this jaundice-eyed reconsideration. Responding to Hollywood's convenient and ineffective reactions to social justice movements (i.e., #MeToo, #TimesUp, and #OscarsSoWhite) and Patrick Vonderau's call for a consideration of ethics in media industries studies,³ Caldwell has dedicated this book to providing a method for uncovering how the industry can simultaneously tout "outside-the-box creative myths" while "habitually scheming to hide, normalize and manage creative labor."⁴

Caldwell's approach has always been critical but this latest book calls for centering "deception, coercion, and extraction" as the most valued skills emerging from an interconnected media industry driven by speculation rather than the finite production, distribution, and exhibition of cultural products. Caldwell explains that the work of speculation—what he calls "specwork"—"provides the broad conditions that facilitate linkages and synergies between the malleable digital 'material' and technologies of TV production, on the one hand, and the current corporate management strategies aimed at developing a malleable and self-replicating IP, on the other (which ideally suits corporate reformatting, franchising, branding, transmedia)."⁵ Everyone from hobbyists, to fans, to actors, to industry veterans, to caterers is engaged in specwork, and thus Caldwell identifies it as the institutional logic that organizes the managerial frameworks across three labor regimes: Craftworld, Brandworld, and Specworld.

Craftworld is the most familiar, comprising a site of physical production like the movie set and populated by the key players one sees mentioned in

2. Jennifer Holt, "The Future of Media Industry Studies: Academic-Industry Collaboration," In *Media Res*, 2013, <https://mediacommons.org/imr/2013/05/20/need-title>.

3. Patrick Vonderau, "Ethics in Media Industries Research," in *The Routledge Companion to Media Industries*, ed. Paul McDonald (New York: Routledge, 2022), 518–26.

4. John Thornton Caldwell, *Specworld: Folds, Faults, and Fractures in Embedded Creator Industries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2023), 27.

5. Caldwell, *Specworld*, 61

the end credits of a film or television show. Brandworld concerns the executives in charge of licensing and managing intellectual property; these workers often operate counter to Craftworld by prioritizing outsourcing, speed, and cost-cutting to ensure quick profits that maximize the value of a brand. Specworld is populated by the creative workers using the scraps left over after Craftworld has made a product and after Brandworld has extracted the most global value from the intellectual property. Historically, Specworld was occupied by amateurs, but as more companies adopt the horizontal hierarchies of the tech world, the idea of giving away creative labor for free, “on spec,” has become standard practice for amateurs and professionals alike.

To observe this principle in action, Caldwell points scholars to below-the-line workers, as he has done in his previous scholarship. But rather than approach them for ethnographic analysis in order to learn the myths and rituals of their particular identities, Caldwell now encourages us to dive into the mud with them. Caldwell implores researchers to find fractures in tidy media industry narratives, contentious exchanges that can be found in online snark, labor disputes, failed mergers, and unsanctioned disclosures, contending that the more an object of study resembles a reality television reunion episode the more likely it is to reveal “the interfaces, fissures, and fault lines between embedded subsystems” and “provide the most productive sites for production culture research.”⁶ In emphasizing the utility of fractures, Caldwell joins J. D. Connor in citing major scandals, like the release of Sony executive emails on Wikileaks, as providing the rare material that is crucial for understanding the broader structural realities that shape creative decision-making.⁷

While the first three chapters outline the changes in the media industries and the corresponding methodological requirements for studying them, the remainder of the book provides a model for this “disembedding and fracture

6. Caldwell, 37–38.

7. J. D. Connor, “The Sony Hack: Data and Decision in the Contemporary Studio,” *Media Industries Journal* 2, no. 2 (2015).

research” through case studies, taxonomies, and a detailed conclusion that offers step-by-step research design instructions. The case studies examine “contact zones, partnering interactions, workshoping, and sense-making” in the YouTuber or influencer workforce. For years I have admired Alice Marwick’s work in *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age* for its ethnographic analysis of online influencers and the crushing realities of online labor.⁸ Whereas Marwick debunks the “doing what you love means not working a day in your life” myth of web 2.0, Caldwell emphasizes the dangerous, even futile, conditions that an entire generation of online aspirants face as they attempt to parlay online labor into stable employment in the entertainment industries.

Caldwell accomplishes this by demonstrating how “social pedagogies,” “industrial folding,” and “rifts and fractures” reveal that “the maker/influencer world in the YouTube ecosystem actually functions like a stock-market exchange for creative speculation work.”⁹ Chapter 4 shows how pedagogical workshops across high and low production fields promise to teach aspiring content creators how to become YouTube personalities or how to work in prestige film and television. What emerges are contradictory lessons that create an “aspirant crossover dilemma” that simultaneously offers a phenomenology of production, a normalized way of working that is felt bodily across media sectors. Chapter 5 describes efforts to “fold-in” threats to the status quo and justify the system via intraindustry “contact zones” like product demonstrations, film festivals, and artists talks. This programing for aspirants tends to implicitly endorse “stress aesthetics” that justify employment precarity and insist that “agitation, confrontation, and stress are not only the historical norm but also the very key to film and television’s artistic accomplishments.”¹⁰ Chapter 6 details the managerial skills that are taught in YouTuber boot camps and how-to videos regarding release

8. Alice E. Marwick, *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

9. Caldwell, *Specworld*, 255

10. Caldwell, 156

schedules, subscriber management, and sponsorships maintenance. Aspects of this managerial philosophy resemble the skill sets that governed television production in the broadcast era and thus make these efforts legible to and extractable for legacy media companies. Chapter 7 is especially novel, studying involuntary disclosures in moments of industrial fracturing that were particularly prevalent during the pandemic and the racial reckoning of 2020 and 2021. Caldwell provides a menu of potential stress points where researchers may find these fractures and how to research them to reveal industrial realities. Chapter 8 offers microfinancing as a widening rift in the online creative realm and the site of a likely online creator crisis similar to the stock market crash of the Great Recession.

Caldwell's work demonstrates that the grind of Specworld that burns out so many young creatives rarely gives way to the stability of the nostalgic Craftworld, because all industry workers are consistently engaged in the hustle demanded by speculation. *Specworld* is sure to enlighten students and invigorate exciting research, even while it bursts the bubble of young creative dreamers hoping to become the next celebrated auteur. Still, the sadder but wiser student that reads this book is going to benefit and be situated to best advocate for changing the entertainment industry.

Precarious Creativity and the State in New Era China

Review of *Chinese Creator Economies: Labor and Bilateral Creative Workers*

by Jian Lin, New York University Press, 2023

MICHAEL KEANE

Keywords: China, precarious creativity, media industries, creativity

Prior to the economic reforms of 1978, a cultural occupation in the People's Republic of China meant a job for life. By the early 1990s, working outside the state sector was a choice one could make. The emerging private sector allowed more autonomy, but this came with greater job insecurity.

In *Chinese Creator Economies*, Jian Lin offers a deep dive into the precarious creative lives of Chinese, mostly young people, as well as “foreigners” who choose to work in China or visit regularly. According to Lin, the term “bilateral creative workers” describes the paradoxical experiences of workers who must navigate between the vagaries of Chinese state policy and the existential uncertainties of creative labor. The latter idea has been discussed widely in Western literature with relation to the term *precarity*: it is arguably a subgenre of academic publishing now. Lin adds another layer to this literature in documenting authoritarian governance of cultural labor where the aspiration to produce creative work that is personally satisfying must avoid upsetting cultural authorities. This constitutes a delicate balancing act.

Lin adopts a critical media industry approach combined with a political economy of cultural production. Engaging with a wide variety of global critical literature, he historically contextualizes a number of developments: the cultural and creative industries, the creative class, and platform society. Lin further drills into cosmopolitan identity in the face of authoritarian governance of cultural production. It is Lin's fieldwork, however, that support the book's fine-grained critical insights. Lin provides an ethnographic account of creative workers within state-owned cultural enterprises, independent filmmakers, international creative workers in Beijing, and the digital creative class on social media platforms.

The book is organized into an introduction and six chapters. In the introduction, Lin evokes the description "schizophrenic" with relation to how the state apparatus regulates creative expression while encouraging economic success; this theme comes up in later chapters too. For me, schizophrenia resonates with Beijing in particular, where tensions between the state, business, and the art world are most evident.

The first chapter, "Understanding China's Cultural Industries," provides an account of how the cultural industries, together with the internationalizing discourse of creative industries, moved onto the development radar in China. This led to hundreds of designated cultural industry parks and preferential policies for cultural exports. The discussion then turns to the emergence of the discourse of digital creativity in state planning documents. In the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan, digital creativity aligned with the so-called Digital China initiative. The discussion critically engages with the challenges that individual "Western style" creativity engendered, especially during the first decade of the new century among officials in the Ministry of Culture.

The second chapter, "Being Creative for the State," further takes up the idea of creative autonomy through a study of both state-owned cultural enterprises (SOCE) and private media companies. The fieldwork identified workers in the TV, film, and new media industries, and Lin conducted ten in-depth interviews with employees in the state-owned sector. The account of the four-level CCTV grading system is an original contribution to

knowledge. The question of self-realization among state enterprises is central to the discussion: How does one achieve work satisfaction under hierarchical constraints? The constraints on creative autonomy are offset, however, by the benefits of belonging to a state enterprise; for instance, having access to residency permits and the availability of career-building networks.

Chapter 3 investigates independent cinema in China from the perspective of creative autonomy. Lin conducted fifteen semi-structured interviews with independent Chinese film workers and engaged in ethnographic observation of the New Wave Experimental Film Group. Informants attest that having successful screenings at international film festivals provides cultural capital that can be converted into opportunities to work with the domestic film industries, which in turn can lead to local recognition and economic returns. However, while independent film is gaining domestic audiences, this is offset by the limited level of criticality that such filmmakers can engage in, essentially enabling a “depoliticized art cinema.” Lin’s informants say that survival in an uncertain environment means that independent filmmakers must compromise and adapt their artistic efforts and political initiatives.

Chapter 4, “Unbecoming Chinese Creatives,” investigates experiences of international creative professionals in Beijing. Lin skillfully draws fifteen vignettes, from painters to designers, photographers to designers, journalists, designers, translators, and editors. The chapter evoked memories of my own experience in China, the vicarious enjoyment of being a foreigner, which bestowed a certain mystique. Lin says: “Foreigners are wanted in China for their ‘creative know-how,’ language/cultural skills, and even simply their ‘foreignness.’”¹ He says that, at the time of writing, the international community in Chinese cultural sectors was dominated by white Westerners, East Asians, and people from the Chinese diaspora. White Westerners with bilingual capabilities were often sought out and offered roles. This desire for

1. Jian Lin, *Chinese Creator Economies: Labor and Bilateral Creative Workers* (New York: New York University Press, 2023), 117.

“white” foreign expertise has cooled somewhat in the New Era, as Chinese cultural luminaries take center stage. For diasporic Chinese, on the other hand, the opportunities are evident; for instance, in the case of David Wong, he saw the creative field in Beijing as more relaxed and less hierarchical than London, which further illustrates the theme of creative schizophrenia.

Chapter 5, “The Unlikely Creative Class,” concerns the emerging platform economy and the *wanghong* industry. *Wanghong* refers to the phenomenon of Internet influencer celebrity in China. Lin argues that the affordances of the platform economy enable grassroots *wanghong* producers to hone their digital entrepreneurship. At the same time, the state’s governance of the emergent *wanghong* industry is schizophrenic: both protective and restrictive. The Chinese authorities realized that the massive numbers of people going online, combined with enabling policies such as Internet+ and the “mass entrepreneurship innovation” program could stimulate “the innovative power of grassroots individuals.”² Of course, this was happening globally, and it was inevitable that China’s big tech companies would ride the wave. The chapter illustrates the algorithmic nature of content consumption and moderation with a walk-through of the interface for the Kuaishou social media platform. Lin points out that Kuaishou’s algorithmic system and immense database remain largely invisible to content producers. It is worth noting that Lin and his collaborators David Craig and Stuart Cunningham have delved deeper into the creator economy elsewhere.

The final chapter addresses “the future of bilateral creatives.” It could also have been entitled “The future of the cultural industries.” Jian Lin shows how the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted cultural sectors that required audiences and spectators and how it accelerated the digitalization of culture, which paved the way for AI-based solutions. The net effect is that the algorithmic governance of content leads to “safe creativities,” a term that might be exemplified by the flood of playful online videos that are staples of ByteDance and Kuaishou.

2. Lin, *Chinese Creator Economies*, 145.

Chinese Creator Economies is a major contribution to the field, and I congratulate the author for scholarly rigor. I do have a few misgivings. I am not sure why the book is entitled *Chinese Creator Economies*, as the concept of the creator economy is undefined and the term is not used in the book. There are multiple references to the creative economy, a policy discourse that dates from the time China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001 and to cultural and creative industries. A clear description of the evolution of this key term in the opening chapter would have been useful. Nevertheless, this is an insightful book, which will be of interest to all scholars of media and contemporary society.

CONTRIBUTORS

Haiqing Yu is professor of media and communication and Australian Research Council (ARC) Future Fellow at RMIT University. She is also a chief investigator of the ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society. Haiqing is a critical media studies scholar with expertise on Chinese digital media, technologies, and cultures and their sociopolitical impacts in China, Australia, and the Asian Pacific. Her current projects examine the social implications of China's social credit system, technological innovation, and digital transformation; China's digital presence in Australasia; and Chinese-language digital/social media in Australia.

Ying Zhu's work covers Sino-Hollywood relations, serial drama and streaming platforms, and youth digital culture. She has published four single-authored books, including *Hollywood in China: Behind the Scenes of the World's Largest Movie Market* (2022) and *Two Billion Eyes: The Story of China Central Television* (2013); six coedited books, including *Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics: China's Campaign for Hearts and Minds* (2019) and *Art, Politics and Commerce in Chinese Cinema* (2010); and nearly one hundred articles in major film- and media-related outlets, including academic journals such as the *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, the *Journal of Communication*, and *Screen*. She reviews manuscripts and evaluates research proposals for major publications and research foundations in Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, Switzerland, the United States, and the United Kingdom, and further serves on editorial boards of various publications. She has written for and been quoted and reviewed in major media outlets, including the *Atlantic*, the *Boston Globe*, *Financial Times*, *Foreign Policy*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *South China Morning*

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Post, the *New York Times*, the *New York Review of Books*, and the *Wall Street Journal*, as well as the BBC, CNN, and NPR.

Dr. **Junqi Peng** graduated from the Academy of Film, Hong Kong Baptist University. His research interests lie in the fields of youth culture studies, Chinese Internet studies, and creative industry studies. He is also a filmmaker based in Beijing.

Shaohua Guo is associate professor of Chinese at Carleton College. Her research interests focus on contemporary Chinese studies, digital media studies, and cultural studies. She is the author of *The Evolution of the Chinese Internet: Creative Visibility in the Digital Public* (Stanford University Press, 2021). Her articles have appeared in the *Journal of Asian Studies*; *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*; *Media, Culture and Society*; and *Communication and the Public*, among others.

Howard Y. F. Choy, Associate Professor at Hong Kong Baptist University, received his PhD in comparative literature and humanities from the University of Colorado. His research interests cover modern and contemporary Chinese culture and literature. He is the chief editor of the forthcoming Brill series *Hong Kong Culture and Literature* and *African and Asian Anthropocene: Studies in the Environmental Humanities*, coeditor of the *Routledge Companion to Yan Lianke* (2022) and *Liu Zaifu: Selected Critical Essays* (2021), editor of *Discourses of Disease: Writing Illness, the Mind and Body in Modern China* (2016), author of *Remapping the Past: Fictions of History in Deng's China, 1979–1997* (2008), and assistant author of *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Confucianism* (2005). He has also published a number of articles and translations in major scholarly journals, including *positions*, *American Journal of Chinese Studies*, and *Asian Theatre Journal*. Dr. Choy has also taught at Stanford University, the Georgia Institute of Technology, and Wittenberg University.

Shaoyu Tang is a PhD student in anthropology at the University of Southern California. His research interests are in performance, media, and popular culture in contemporary mainland China, with an ethnographic focus on the cultural politics of stand-up comedy.

Jingxue Zhang is a fourth-year PhD candidate in the Department of Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Kentucky. Her current dissertation examines the multifaceted lived experiences of Chinese migraton mothers who accompany their children abroad for study. She delves into the nuanced intersections of stratified reproduction, transnational migration, and affective intensities against the backdrop of neoliberal globalization and the professionalization of motherhood, but also situates this migratory choice within the broader political and socioeconomic contours of today's China.

Charlie Yi Zhang is an associate professor of gender and women's studies at the University of Kentucky. His research addresses the shifting neoliberal, neocolonial, and imperial relationships reshaped by the emerging New Cold War in the transpacific context through the lenses of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class and explores cross-border networks of resistance against these entangled forms of domination. He is the author of *Dreadful Desires: The Uses of Love in Neoliberal China* (Duke University Press, 2022).

Ethan Tussey is associate professor and director of the School of Film, Media, and Theatre at Georgia State University. His book, *The Procrastination Economy: The Big Business of Downtime* (NYU Press, 2018), details the economic and social value of mobile device use in the context of the workplace, the commute, the waiting room, and the living room. He has written journal articles and contributed book chapters on creative labor, sports television, sports gambling, connected viewing, and crowdfunding.

Contributors

Michael Keane is adjunct professor at Queensland University of Technology's Digital Media Research Centre. Professor Keane's key research interests are digital transformation in China, East Asian cultural and media policy, television in China, and creative industries and cultural export strategies in China and East Asia.