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The Politics of Online Wordplay: on the Ambivalences of Chinese Internet Discourse

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Abstract:

Chinese cyberspace is vibrant with new expressions created and disseminated by Internet users. Generally light in tone, terms such as 'Grass Mud Horse' and *diaosi* (literally meaning 'dick strings') have been argued to constitute a playful and satirical form of speech exemplifying grassroots netizens' carnivalesque resistance against the authoritarian party-state. Grounded in and informed by a historical review of the transformations of class and gender relations in China, my doctoral research goes beyond such a dichotomising framework by adopting a critical socio-linguistic perspective.

Through extensive original discourse analysis, focus groups and in-depth interviews with a cross-section of the Chinese urban and rural youth population, I sketch out two major ambivalences of online wordplay in Chinese cyberspace, finding that, on the one hand, it simultaneously recognises and disavows the living conditions of the truly underprivileged—migrant manual workers; and, on the other hand, that it both derides the lifestyles of the economically dominant and also displays a desire for middle-class lifestyles. Interviews further reveal that Chinese Internet discourse articulates tensions between the stance of urban young men in the lower-middle class and that of urban young women in the middle class. The former reveals men's anxieties and self-victimisation at what could be called the changing gender order. The latter emphasises women's autonomy and aspirations with regard to ideal masculinities.

I conclude that this latter stance is underpinned by an emerging ideology of 'consumerist feminism', which celebrates women's empowerment but limits this to the private realm and to personal consumption. Finally, the thesis also takes into account the co-option of Internet discourse by corporations and party media and the ways in which this shapes the changing connotations of online wordplay and its bearing on the wider social order and power struggles in contemporary China.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Topic

Known as 'internet hot phrases' (网络热词) in China, a kaleidoscope of new words—neologisms—are being created and disseminated by Internet users, while existing words are being imbued with new meanings. Not all online terms originated online, but stem from a variety of media resources, such as online forums, TV shows, celebrity interviews, and foreign media contents. Nonetheless, they become popular buzzwords primarily via online circulations. Meanwhile, Chinese Internet terms are by no means merely used in people's online interactions, but penetrate the offline world, especially among the younger generation in urban areas. One of the thesis's major interests, as the word 'discourse' (cf. Fairclough, 2001a) in the title indicates, lies in the social conditions of and power relations embedded in the creation, dissemination and changing connotations of certain Internet terms in contemporary China.

The last sentence might sound too earnest, given the generally light tone of Chinese online wordplay which is full of humour, satire and parody. But there exist numerous examples where we can see the material implications in the real world that result from, and in turn interact with, the online playfulness of young Chinese. For instance, the buzzwords 'Grass Mud Horse' (*caonima*) and 'River Crabs' (*hexie*) coined by Internet users to satirise the increasing online censorship by the government around 2009 (Meng, 2011) has been commoditised. Based on the figure of 'Grass Mud Horse', a variety of products, ranging from dolls, T-shirts to mugs, have enjoyed great popularity in China (Wang, 2012). Another scatological buzzword '*Diao Si*' (屌丝), which denotes 'pubic hair of men' and roughly connotes 'loser' in English, is embraced by hundreds of millions of Internet users who call themselves *diaosi* in both online and offline contexts (Szablewicz, 2014; Yang et al., 2015). The buzzword has led

to the *diaosi* genre becoming particularly popular in online serials, and eventually, a big screen movie. An interaction between online and offline China is most obviously reflected by the annual 'Double Eleven Consumption Festival' taking place on Nov. 11th. The date was initially named 'Singletons' Day' by some university students in the 1990s as a kind of self-mockery; it gradually became popular via online dissemination such that many bachelors hang out together on that day to have dinner, watch movies, etc. Since 2009, Chinese e-commerce companies, particularly Alibaba, have turned the day into an annual online consumption festival comparable to Black Friday in the West. What differentiates Double Eleven from Black Friday is the former's discursive construction that articulates consumerism, patriarchal capitalism with the rhetoric of nationalism (Meng and Huang, 2017). Advertisements of promotions, news about record-breaking trade volumes, jokes about preventing one's girlfriend or wife from 'relentlessly' shopping online, the government's hail of 'Double Eleven' as exemplifying China's soft power to the whole world, and even a gala organised by Alibaba; all these bombard Chinese people around Nov. 11th, making Double Eleven's initial meaning of 'Bachelor's Day' increasingly residual.

I will analyze some of these cases at length in later chapters. A quick sketch of them illustrates that online neologisms constitute floating signs, the connotations of which, are constantly re-shaped by various forces—commercial companies, the government and Internet users. The main research interest of the thesis hence lies neither in the 'unique' lexical or syntactic features of so-called 'Internet language' in China, nor the variety of origins from which online buzzwords or neologisms stem. These topics are surely of interest; and some early scholars have addressed them in detail (cf. Yuan, 2011; Ma and Chen, 2014). Rather, I adopt a socio-linguistic perspective (e.g. Bourdieu, 1991; Bakhtin et al., 1994; Tannen, 1994; Lin, 2015) that seeks to investigate the historical

contingencies and social implications[1] of the apparently light, cheerful wordplay on Chinese cyberspace. Meanwhile, I aim to shed light on various forms of agency enacted by different social groups in their embracing or disengaging from Chinese Internet discourse. By addressing these aspects, my thesis offers a rigorous and panoramic analysis of the politics of online wordplay in terms of its bearing on the social order and power struggles in contemporary China. It also provides a more critical and nuanced analytical framework for studying digital culture and online participation elsewhere.

1.2 Focus

My thesis opts to focus on those online buzzwords signifying gender and/or class order in contemporary China. While there exist debates in terms of the actual socio-economic system at play in contemporary China (cf. Harvey, 2005; Goodman, 2014; Lo, 2016; Pun, 2016; Wang, 2004), scholars generally agree that the country has gone through dramatic social transitions with its embracing of a market economy and capitalist practices since 1978. In the Mao era, China was characterised by a clear-cut urban and rural divide. Accounting for about one-fifth of the whole population, urban workers were largely employed in large-scale state-owned enterprises (SOEs), enjoying a variety of social welfare and job security[2] (Goodman, 2014). The remaining 80% of the rural population mostly did farming in production brigades and communes, being strictly prevented from migrating to cities. Chinese society at that period was relatively egalitarian, albeit with distinct urban-rural duality and status-defined stratifications (see more in chapter 3). Since the ecoomic reformss, intense class polarisation has arisen in China, as various classes are being made or remade, being privileged or marginalised (So, 2013). With China being integrated into the

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[1]See Sewell, 2005, for an excellent elaboration on synchronic and diachronic analyses of language (p. 359).

[2] But about one-third of the urban population were temporarily hired by the SOEs or worked in collective enterprises. They enjoyed much less social welfares than those permanent workers in state enterprises. The highly favoured state sectors had also become increasingly exclusive by the late 1970s (cf. Walder, 1984).

global capitalist market, the ruling Communist Party (CPC) has in effect changed its previous policy of privileging industrial workers. On the one hand, millions of 'old' urban workers were laid off in the 1990s with the reform of the SOEs. On the other hand, hundreds of millions of rural grown-ups have migrated to work in the cities, constituting an integral part of the de-skilled and 'cheap' manual labour in the job market. As will be elaborated in Chapter 3, the working-class and the peasantry for whom the CPC is supposed to serve as the vanguard have, as it were, become again the subalterns (Sun, 2015). The perceived value of manual labour now appears so low that young white-collar workers use the online term 'moving bricks' (*banzhuan*) in self-mockery to underline their perceived tedious work and low incomes (see chapter 6).

Alongside its dramatic social stratification, contemporary China has witnessed the emergence of a 'new sexual culture' (Evans, 1997). For urban grown-ups born after the 1980s, the androgynous dressing of women in the Mao era appears like an emblem of the imprisonment of human nature in socialist China (Croll, 1995; 2006). For young rural migrants, contemporary urban fashions also appear so smart that they often feel out-of-fashion with their rural styles (Du, 2017; Pun, 2003). Getting rid of the androgynous and 'backward' styles of dressing then equals 'setting free' one's desires; desires to consume goods, to make one appear beautiful and 'modern', and to enjoy sexualised bodies (Rofel, 2007). These desires are, on the one hand, represented by the seemingly limitless quantities of gendered advertising and fashion that foreground young women's beauty and sexual desirability, and have recently extended to men's bodies (Song and Hird, 2014). On the other hand, they are embodied by the transformation of gender practices in relation to pre-marital sex, marriage life and the LGBTQ communities.

However, the remaining patriarchal gender expectations, the continuing exercise of state authority (Evans & Strauss, 2011) and increasingly, the logic of capital

accumulation are all entangled—at times unifying or counteracting each other—in shaping or reinforcing certain gender practices. For example, women continue to be stigmatised if they opt to stay out of the institution of marriage and family, or adopt an active stance towards sex. Men are generally expected to secure a decent salary and buy a house or flat and a car before they marry, as opposed to women who are called upon to attend to appearance and family. In addition, gender practices and their representations are stratified among different social groups. For instance, the popular online BL (Boys Love) genre, which stemmed from Japanese literature, is produced and consumed mostly by urban young women. While some urban middle-class women retreat from work and embrace their conventional family roles (Zuo, 2016), migrant female workers partially negotiate their subordinate roles in the family structure of rural China via working in cities (Du, 2017).

The changing gender order (cf. Connell, 1987), class structure and their intersectionality in post-Mao China are interestingly signified by a variety of Internet terms that have gender and/or class connotations. From the term 'tall-rich-handsome' (*gaofushuai*) connoting the kind of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987) in contemporary China, to 'spendthrift chicks' (*baijia niangmen*) hailing women as the consumer-in-chief, to 'black wood ear' (*hei mu'er*) stigmatising women who have much sex with men before marriage, Chinese Internet discourse offers intriguing perspectives to analyse the significations of two central social relations—class and gender, as well as the ideology of consumerism (Yu, 2014) that permeates both sets of social relations. The intersectonality of class and gender, which is also cross-cut by the rural/urban divide in the Chinese context, are the focal points of my thesis. To a lesser degree, Chinese online wordplay also entails the themes of ethnicity and race.[3] Athough these are not the main foci of the thesis due to space limitations, I believe that

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[3] For example, the popular meme in 2016 'this is very Islamic' (这很清真).

the analytic framework of this thesis can inform future research on these themes.

Meanwhile, online buzzwords and their changing connotations not only signify but may also contribute to the gender and class order. The 'linguistic turn' that swept Western social sciences in the final third of the twentieth century adopts an 'epistemic metaphor' that society is like language (Sewell, 2005: 330). Although varying in the degree to which they acknowledge people's agency and historical contingency, concepts such as 'interpellation' (Althusser, 1971), 'the dialogic' (Bakhtin et al, 1994) and the 'social performatives' (Butler, 1997) all point to the essential role played by language—in its broadest sense that includes all words, signs and codes—in forming individuals' subjectivity. But just as William Sewell (2005: 362) points out, the language metaphor of the social world should be combined with the other epistemic metaphor of 'built environment'; the latter emphasises the material layouts that condition linguistic changes. Following this approach, the thesis pays close attention to the existing social structures from which Internet discourse arises, and the simultaneous co-optations (cf. Heath and Potter, 2006) of online terms by institutional forces. This analytical lens is useful for examining cooptation of internet discourse in the West and other places. In the context of Chinese media, the institutional forces can be regarded as a common but not completely stable complicity between the party-state and the market (Meng and Rantanen, 2015).

Having sketched out the topic of the thesis—online wordplay—and its focus—those terms connoting class and/or gender, I will now move towards the topics of the Chinese Internet and online wordplay in more detail to contextualise my research interest and to clarify my approach to these topics.

1.3 The Chinese Internet

Resonating with debates on 'Internet effects' in Western academia (cf. Banaji and Buckingham, 2013; Curran et al., 2012), the study of the Chinese Internet

was once caught in between two opposing positions. One position highlights the 'civic promise' of the digital technology which enables unprecedented connectivity and anonymity (e.g. Xiao 2011; Yang 2009; Lei 2011). In this line of thought, the Chinese Internet serves as 'a battleground' where 'netizens' (Internet-citizens) are technologically empowered to resist the domination of an authoritarian regime. Weibo, the Chinese version of Twitter, was even compared to the Western concept of 'public sphere' (See Herold, 2011 for a review). The other position, nonetheless, views Chinese cyberspace as highly policed by the party-state (Dong 2012; MacKinnon 2009; Morozov, 2011; Mou et al., 2011). It is thus nothing but an apolitical 'playground' permeated with 'shallow infotainment', consumerism and nationalism sustaining the status quo (Hyun and Kim 2015, Leibold, 2011).

As Yang Guobin (2014: 135) comments, falling under either of these dichotomies is 'appealing', but they actually serve as a way of essentialising, if not 'sensationalising', the Chinese Internet. The Internet and various digital platforms based on it are all shaped by the wider environment so that their influence is 'filtered through the structures and processes of the society' (Curran et al., 2012: 181). Before jumping to either of the dichotomies, it is essential to bear in mind *the wider environment* where the Chinese Internet is situated.

1.3.1 A quasi-separated cyberspace 'allowed' by the government

According to a set of official statistics, the number of China's internet users had reached 802 million by the end of June 2017, with more than 788 million people also using mobile phones to get online connections (CNNIC, 2018). While these numbers may not be reliable given an official emphasis on 'strengthening the country via networks' (*wangluoqiangguo*), they nonetheless suggest the rapid diffusion and wide penetration of the Internet in China.

Such a huge online population is yet 'quasi-separated' from the rest of the World Wide Web (Herold, 2011: 2). As all Chinese Internet users may realise, the

material facilities of the Internet in China are actually owned and controlled by the government. Private enterprises and individuals can only rent bandwidth from the three state-owned network providers—China Telecom, China Mobile and China Unicom. This is markedly different from the situation in Western countries. As David Kurt Herold (2011: 1-2) observes:

'While American and European governments have to legislate themselves the power to control the Internet, this is the *default position* for the Chinese government, and therefore constitutes one of the defining features of online China' (my emphasis).

In other words, the relative freedom in Chinese cyberspace as opposed to the stringent media control in general is 'granted to' Internet users by the central government or its agencies as if it is willing to allow a certain degree of leeway (Herold, 2011: 2). Such a delicate leeway to 'toy with power' (Mbembe, 1992) online constitutes one main reason why the Chinese Internet has been treated as a kind of Bakhtinian carnival by a number of scholars (e.g. Herold and Marolt, 2011; Meng, 2011,Yang and Jiang 2015). But as Herold points out, this does not mean that the Chinese government has relinquished control of the Internet. Rather, when it regards some online incident as (potentially) having too much offline impact, it has both the will and the ability to block certain content or websites, or simply to curtail the Internet connection in some areas. From the immediate Internet control in Xinjiang Province after the riots in 2009, to the disconnections of mainland China from Western websites, such as Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, Google, and recently Wikipedia,[4] to the ever-present censorship of 'sensitive' content, the party-state has been showing how

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[4]Several Chinese equivalents of major websites in the West are as follows: Baidu.com to Google, Youku.com to Youtube, Weibo.com to Twitter; the once counterpart of Facebook, renren.com, is dying. Instead, Chinese people are now using WeChat, which is similar to WhatsApp, yet with more social-media functions. In addition, Baidu also has Baike (Baike.baidu.com), which is similar to Wikipedia.

'capricious' (*renxing*) it can be in controlling the Internet, to use a quite popular online expression[5].

Since Xi Jinping took over the reins in 2012, the government's control of Chinese cyberspace has further tightened. Alongside Xi government's attempt to crack down on labour and feminist movements (both of which are discursively constructed as being funded by 'foreign powers'), it has also sent out signals with regard to exerting stronger control of those previously 'grey' zones online. For example, the aforementioned popularity of the 'Boys Love' genre is affected by the government's decreeing of 'The Review Regulations of Online Visual and Audio Content' (*wangluo shiting jiemu neirong shenhe tongze*). The Regulations classify homosexuality as a type of 'abnormal sexual relations' that is forbidden to touch upon in TV and online serials.

It should now be clear that a simplistic understanding of the Chinese Internet as a battleground between 'netizens' and the government or a catalyst to promote democratic values in the authoritarian regime is highly problematic. With a manifest tone of technological determinism, this kind of argument neglects the fact that the Chinese Internet has always been, to large extent, 'allowed' and strategically guided by the party-state. The development of the Chinese Internet, particularly the e-commerce industry, has been in fact part and parcel of China's economic development and marketisation.

Moreover, how can we discuss online participation without reflecting on which social groups are participating? The next section turns to deconstructing the notion of 'netizens' in the Chinese contex.

1.3.2 'Netizens' in the Chinese context

In his article on the notion of *wangmin* (网民)*, the equivalent of 'netizens' in Chinese, Wang Hongzhe (2016) observes that the notion is over-determined by

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[5]The expression literally means 'having money is so capricious'（*youqianjiushirenxing*）; it can be translated as 'having money is to do one's whims'.

an imposed dichotomisation between the official and the 'common' user (*minjian*). Prevailing in both liberal media and the study of the Chinese Internet, the notion of *wangmin* prioritises the political aspect of Internet users over the consumption aspect. As Wang (2016) puts it, the notion thus not only replaces the myth of capital with that of democracy, but also conceals the heterogeneity of Chinese cyberspace with regard to class composition and the diversity of Internet usage among different social groups.

In terms of gaming and entertainment, the Chinese Internet has been greatly influenced by other East Asian countries—particularly Japan, South Korea and Taiwan—and the US and the UK. Downloading or streaming foreign serials and TV shows with subtitles[6] has become an important part of young urbanites' daily life and the *otaku* lifestyle. As a term introduced stemming from Japn via Taiwan in the early 2000s, otaku, or *zhai* in Chinese, refers to spending most of one's time online at home. The term was initially oriented towards young men who are described as being fond of the ACGs ([Japanese] anime, comics and gaming) and sexualised female characters often appearing in the ACGs. Staying at home and facing computer screens all time, the stereotype of an *otaku* man is someone dressed in a casual, if not messy, way. He is also said to be socially awkward in front of women.

The *otaku* culture hence integrates elements of ACGs, objectification of female bodies, computerisation and parody. These basic components of the *otaku* culture, albeit now contested, continue to loom large in Chinese Internet discourse. The term 'otaku men' (*zhainan*) resonates with the composition of Chinese Internet users in the early 2000s who were mostly men aged between 18 and 24—namely born after 1980 (CNNIC, 2006: 14). The post-1980 generation appeared as the most active political subjects in Chinese cyberspace during the first decade of the new millennium (Wang, 2010). In 2003, a university student

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[6]Some Chinese youngsters form 'subtitle groups' to voluntarily translate foreign serials and TV shows into Chinese.

named Sun Zhigang died as a result of physical abuse that he suffered when being detained under China's custody and repatriation (C&R) system. A huge reaction arose, formed by media coverage of this incident, online discussions and legal lawyers' appealing for justice[7]. The government later abolished the C&R system. Many journalists and media scholars hence regarded the Sun Zhigang Incident as signifying the political strength of online public opinions for the first time. With new digital platforms—bulletin boards, blogs, microblogs—emerging one after another, a kaleidoscope of 'online incidents' (*wangluoshijian*) have also ensued one after another in Chinese cyberspace since 2003. In various online incidents, participants keep standing at and articulating a grassroots position, integrating their covert critiques of the power blocs into parodies based on games and films (cf. Meng, 2011; Wang, 2010).

But as Wang Hongzhe (2010) observes, the notion of a 'post-1980 generation' (80-*hou*) itself is a 'temporal metonymy' in post-Mao China. The term '80-*hou*' mainly refers to young urban grown-ups; in the 1990s, media frequently associated the term with another one—'little emperor' (*xiaohuangdi*). This association was to comment on a phenomenon that the post-1980 generation were collectively spoiled by their parents who tried every means to meet their only children's demands so that their children could excel in studying, and eventually move up the social ladder. Yet, this phenomenon had little to do with rural China since most parents started migrating to working in cities in the 1990s, leaving their children behind with grandparents (Sun, 2010; Du, 2017). A great number of rural youngsters drop out around or even earlier than junior middle school.

A chain of silencing with regard the Chinese rural population is rooted in the discourses of mainstream media (Sun, 2010, 2014) and media scholars. From '80-hou' to '*wangmin*' and to 'the grassroots', all these notions are in fact

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[7]See a news reportage via thttp://www.china.org.cn/english/NM-e/69317.htm

oriented towards post-1980 urban grown-ups (see more in chapters 3 and 5). Insisting on this point is not to dismiss the online wordplay oriented towards young urbanites. Rather, the thesis takes it seriously by reflecting on its political implications in a more comprehensive way. The next section turns to my reflections and the key points of my intervention.

1.3.3 Key points of intervention

The composition of Chinese Internet users is now much more diverse than it was in the first decade of the new millennium in terms of gender, class and age. The notion of *wangmin* (netizens) in the 2000s was not only oriented towards young urban grown-ups, but was also gendered. Unsurprisingly, we have often seen a patriarchal construction of online parodies before, particularly those related to gaming (Wallis, 2015). But now urban young women constitute another major group in Chinese cyberspace. This is indicated by both the aforementioned 'boys love' genre and a series of online buzzwords signifying ideal masculinities, such as 'warm man' (*nuannan*), 'domineering CEO' (*badao zongcai*) and 'little fresh meat' (*xiaoxianrou*). Urban you women also associate the lifestyle of '*otaku* men' with that of 'straight men' (*zhinan*). Sexist words and deeds can be criticised as showing the 'symptom' of 'straight-men cancer' (*zhinan ai*). One of this thesis's major concerns is thus addressing young urban women's contestations of and aspirations for masculinity and to explain their impacts on gender politics in contemporary China.

To avoid feeding into the chain of silencing the Chinese rural population, I take heed of mapping online wordplay onto the overall social structure in contemporary China. While the topic of my thesis—Chinese Internet discourse—is largely urban oriented, its social implications go beyond the urban realm. On the other hand, rural migrants have become an integral part of China's urban lives as such. On the one hand, as Wang (2010) puts it, the *80-hou* online culture has transformed from a 'non-mainstream' status to a 'new-mainstream'

one. Numerous online terms have been picked up by mainstream news coverage, films and TV serials the audiences of which also include rural migrants and peasants. Most importantly, the growth of ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) users in China since the late 2000s has been fastest among rural peasants and migrant workers (Qiu, 2013). Another major concern of the research is to understand how rural youths interpret online terms that have class and/or gender meanings. Uncovering the ways in which they interpret, identify with or disengage from certain online terms enables me to contest and de-naturalise those urban-oriented assumptions engrained in Chinese Internet discourse.

The thesis opts to focus on the younger generation. This choice is based on the fact that online culture in China by and large stems from the younger generation of Chinese population. As will be shown in chapter 5, most respondents—both urban white-collar workers and rural migrant workers—regard Chinese Internet discourse as part of a culture of youth. Strictly speaking, the respondents I interviewed who were born between 1980 and 1995 (see details in chapter 4) are not that young anymore. Situated in a period of liminality between studying, graduating, dating, working and marriage, this age group is arguably experiencing the gaps between their aspirations and reality, and inequalities embedded in social relations of class and gender. Chinese Internet discourse is thus likely to form a kind of common sense when they map their life and make sense of the social order. But this does not mean that the study of the Chinese Internet should exclude other social groups. With the growing usage of WeChat by post-1950 and post-1960 urban generations, it will be of great interest, for example, to see how those who grew up in the Mao era interpret online buzzwords that have arisen in post-Mao China. In addition, the gendered access to the Internet in rural China (cf. Wallis, 2015b) and the possible contribution of

digital technologies to further subordinating digital illiterates[8] need more attention from academia. During my fieldwork in a village of Shandong Province, I met two young women who had neither used the Internet nor cellphone in their lives. One of their husbands commented that women 'are not in the position of using these things'.

Last but not least are the roles played by the state and the market. With the kaleidoscope of online buzzwords becoming increasingly eye-catching over the years, annual reviews of online buzzwords came into being in 2008. The annual lists were first created by bloggers, later on picked up by major portals and websites. At present, official voices have also dabbled in and published lists with more 'social values' by excluding widespread scatological buzzwords. This process again testifies to Wang's (2010) observation that, with its strategic co-optation by the market and the state, some aspects of online culture have become increasingly mainstream in contemporary China. Another concern of the thesis is then to present the ways in which the two institutional forces may respectively re-shape the directionality of Chinese Internet discourse.

Having so far highlighted the dynamics of Chinese cyberspace as well as its heterogeneity that tends to be concealed by the notion of 'netizens', I now move to another key aspect of online participation in the Chinese context: playful and everyday politics.

1.4 Playful Everyday Politics

On acknowledging the extent to which the relative freedom of Chinese cyberspace is granted by the party-state and its increasing control of the Internet at present, one may adopt a rather pessimistic view and regard the Chinese Internet as a place destitute of political engagements. Numerous scholars point out that, without an obvious intention of subversion, the vast majority of

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[8]In this regard, Ken Loach's film *I, Daniel Blake* offers an inspiring example.

mainland Chinese regard the Internet as a space for socialising, gaming and shopping (Herold, 2011; Jackson et al., 2008; Lindtner and Szablewicz, 2011; Nordin & Richaud, 2014; Yu, 2014). Such an apparent permeation of entertainment has led to critiques of the Chinese cyberspace as a 'raucous place' full of self-censorship, 'shallow infotainment', 'pernicious misinformation', and 'cybersectarianism' (Leibold, 2011; see also Dong 2012; Hassid 2012; Hyun and Kim 2015; MacKinnon 2009). What underpins this kind of observation is an understanding of political engagements as confrontations against or outspoken critiques of the government. In this sense, 'political engagements' are indeed rare and perhaps only limited to a very small number of Chinese twitter users (Sullivan, 2012) many of whom belong to dissident diasporas.

But as Yang (2014: 136) puts it, 'the age of moral purity is long gone and contestations in Chinese digital spaces are full of ironies, ambivalence and impurities'. Here, Liesbet van Zoonen's (2005) work is inspiring in terms of illustrating the possibility and, indeed, the necessity to connect political participation with entertainment.

In her book *Entertaining the Citizen*, van Zoonen (2005) seeks to bridge the long-existing dichotomy between politics or citizenship and entertainment in Western academia. She differentiates two means of political exchanges—a 'modernist style' and a 'popular style'. The former emphasises information, deliberation and policy formation, thus corresponding to a notion of political citizenship that is confined to an 'institutionalised field in and toward which people can articulate their rights and obligations' (van Zoonen, 2005: 7, 143). As van Zoonen points out, this modernist understanding of politics has been taken for granted for centuries, such that other elements—emotions, pleasures and identities—that fall outside the serious realm of politics are too easily excluded. For van Zoonen, those works dismissing entertainment as necessarily hindering rational discussion about public affairs all share an elitist conception of politics.

The well-known 'television malaise thesis' (Postman, 1985), for instance, tends to consider only those people who can deal with the 'troubles of televisions' as 'good citizens' (van Zoonen, 2005: 15). As van Zoonen (2005: 15) puts it: while television-malaise authors seek to raise more awareness of citizenship and political participations, their arguments actually 'reproduce an authoritarian distinction between elites and masses, or at least propose that democracy will be better off if the masses think and act like elites'.

Van Zoonen (2005: 3-4) thereby argues that politics must be connected to people's everyday cultural practices, including entertainment. She asks: 'does entertainment provide a context to contemplate the concept of citizenship, does it provide an environment in which citizenship can flourish, and does it make citizenship pleasurable?' (van Zoonen: 3-4). The notion of Internet citizenship or netizens is a western concept applied to studying the Chinese Internet. Both the tendency to restrict political participation to serious articulations of rights and obligations and the exclusion of emotional elements are sedimented in a modernist if not elitist notion of citizenship. In the Chinese context, these analytical assumptions are instantiated in an imposed dichotimisation between the authoritarian party-state and the dominated masses. The latter are imagined to be constantly challenging authority as if this was the only way of participating in politics.

Van Zoonen's contestation of such a narrow understanding of citizenship and political participation is illuminating for the study of the Chinese Internet in two senses. First, her call for retrieving emotions and identities back into politics resonates with those critiques of the early Habermassian public sphere and deliberative democracy, a theoretical framework that was particularly popular among media scholars researching Weibo. As Chantal Mouffe (1999) puts it, on idealising a unified and deliberative public sphere, Habermas in his early years neglects the multiple unequal power structures of society, and consequently

downplays conflicts and emotions in public participation. While Weibo has attracted a huge number of media scholars studying online participation in the Chinese Internet, the digital platform largely silences the rural population who have been technologically, institutionally and culturally separated from urban grown-ups (see more in chapter 6). Moreover, a single attachment to rational discussion of politics runs the risk of overlooking the 'carnivalesque' (Bakhtin, 1984) style of online discourse, which may, in some cases, serve as a kind of 'hidden transcript' for resistance (Scott, 1990) among Chinese Internet users. Second, by bringing in apparently playful and mundane practices of individuals, a broader understanding of politics helps us to go beyond the simplistic dichotomy of resistance and domination when studying the Chinese Internet. As Yang (2011: 1044) puts it:

> [T]o see politics only in the higher echelons of power or as its outright subversion, and consequently to think of political change only as regime change, has its limits. This view neglects the possibility that state power, however hegemonic it may be, not only shapes, but also responds and adapts to, the influences of other institutions and even mundane social practices.

But the analysis of playful and everyday politics has to be combined with a critical investigation of a possible estrangement between politics and entertainment. The beauty of van Zoonen's (2005) argument is that she emphasises the *inseparability* of emotion and rationality for citizenship, and hence an inclusion of both popular style and modernist style of political exchanges. As she puts it: 'an exclusive popular understanding of politics would be limiting, just as the exclusive modernist one' (van Zoonen, 2005: 151). She thereby reminds researchers to question the dominant cultural mode of entertainment, 'and whether and how they enable a closure of the estrangement between politics and citizens'(ibid: 7). This is embodied by my thesis's attention

to the co-optations of Chinese Internet discourse, especially its 'mythification' (Barthes, 2009) and fethisation of individualistic consumerism.

Some scholars have already taken seriously the playfulness in Chinese cyberspace regarding political implications (see Yang and Jiang, 2015 for a review). Most scholars' research interest lies in online parodies directed against the government's Internet control. While these kinds of parodies are not the thesis's focus, the approaches they adopt have been picked up by more recent studies with regard to more 'banal' online buzzwords such as the aforementioned *diaosi* wordplay (section 1.1). Through first pointing out the limitations of the existing literature, I will then present my own approach to studying Chinese online wordplay.

1.5 Studying Online Satire in China

Among scholars who study online satire in Chinese cyberspace for its political implications, the concepts of carnival and memes loom large. Below, I first review these two existing approaches and then moderate, rather than contest, some of their claims so that the ambivalence of online satire in China for social struggles can be better understood. Several key terms arising from the following discussion, such as 'mimicry' (Bhabha, 1984) and rituals will be unpacked in the next chapter.

1.5.1 Online satire as carnivalesque rituals and memes

In 2011, the Bakhtinian concept of carnival became particularly noticeable in the study of the Chinese Internet. One volume concerning 'Online Society in China', edited by David Kurt Herold and Peter Marolt (2011), shares the theoretical assumption that Chinese cyberspace is a quasi-separate space of the 'carnivalesque' featuring a suspension of 'the laws, regulations and power structures of "normal" (offline) life' (Herold, 2011: 13). Li Hongmei (2011) reviews various online incidents between 2006 and 2009 to illustrate how

'Chinese netizens' utilise scatological humour and grotesque presentations to amusingly challenge the 'serious' rule of the party-state and its officials. This kind of scatological and grotesque parody is epitomised by a popular online expression in 2008, 'very yellow (pornographic) very violent' (*henhuang henbaoli*). In the same volume, Silvia Lindtner and Marcella Szablewicz (2011: 101), drawing on their in-depth interviews and participant observations, regard gaming 'as a site of social connections and emotional bonding'. They argue that even though online gamers can be differentiated into many sub-groups in terms of gaming choices, family background, etc., solidarity emerges in their shared concerns with official narratives of certain digital practices, such as frequenting Intrenet cafés and Internet addiction. This kind of solidarity is said to be well embodied by a 64-min machinima (in-game video) made by a World of Warcraft (WoW) player who claimed himself to be a member of the post-1980 generation. Titled *The War of Internet Addiction* (*wangyin zhanzheng*), the video 'depicts WoW gamers' struggle to save their beloved game from government control and Internet addiction "experts" who seek to destroy it' (Lindtner and Szablewicz, 2011: 99) while at the same time ridiculing two Chinese digital companies' long-lasting competition for running the game in mainland China. Major online incidents of 2009 are also represented in the machinima. According to the two authors, over 100 WoW players cooperated in producing the video over the course of three months. It 'received millions of viewers and comments within days' at the beginning of 2010 (ibid: 99).

A similar case which enjoyed even more popularity among Chinese Internet users is the aforementioned online spoof 'Grass Mud Horse' (*caonima*) that originated in Chinese cyberspace around 2009. Meng Bingchun (2011) associates online spoofs such as 'Grass Mud Horse' with a kind of 'virtual carnival' that embodies 'alternative political discourse' (39, 45-56). 'Grass Mud Horse' is a homophone of the scatological expression 'fuck your mom' in Mandarin, though it literally means a virtual animal. 'River Crab', another imaginary animal, is a homophone

of an official rhetoric '(social) harmony' (*hexie*) which is achieved at the cost of censorship. In various spoof videos and pictures made by Chinese Internet users, 'Grass Mud Horses' becomes the heroes who protect their homelands from the invasions of other imaginary animals such as 'River Crabs'. Meng (2011) observes that these kinds of online spoofs, known as *egao* in China, signify a discursive style that combines humour, satire, vulgarity and a-rationality. Similar to Li Hongmei's (2011) point, Meng (2011: 46) argues that the discursive style of online satire confronts the very effort of the state to regulate online speech and turn public life rigid.

The discrepancy between highly rigid official rhetoric on the one hand and vulgar, playful online language on the other hand is picked up again by Yang Peidong and his colleagues (2014) when researching the *diaosi* phenomenon. The term's denotation, as mentioned in the beginning, refers directly to male genitals. Yang et al. (2014) consider the scatological *diaosi* wordplay as defying the 'hypernormalisation' of official rhetoric. They also adopt James Scott's (1990) concept of 'infrapolitics' and claim that the buzzword, with its embraces by tens of millions of Internet users to articulate their underprivileged identity, signifies an emergent form of 'cyber ritual' that mediate 'overt political critiques and benign online entertainment' (Yang et al., 2014: 197). In another article on the *diaosi* phenomenon, Szablewicz (2014) compares this buzzword to the Internet meme 'we are the 99%' during the Occupy Wall Street Movement in 2011. According to her, both cases exemplify young people's growing awareness of social stratifications in their respective society. For Szablewicz, while the meme 'we are the 99%' accompanied a tangible offline movement, the meme *diaosi* can be linked to the Williamsian concept 'structures of feeling' (Williams, 1977). Although it is not a fully developed 'counter-public' culture, the *diaosi* wordplay 'sets limits on experience and actions' as being 'actively felt and lived' so that 'alternative desires and forms of mobility may be imagined and enacted' (Szablewicz, 2014: 259, 270).

Similar to Meng's (2011) analytical treatment of 'Grass Mud Horse', Szablewicz (2014: 262) regards *diaosi* as a meme that relies on 'a combination of visual and textual materials and references in order to construct humorous parodies of existing issues'. This kind of treatment of multimedia remix as memes is also adopted by Yang Guobin and Jiang Min (2015) in their attempted typography of Chinese online satire. They analytically categorise two types of online satire which, according to them, sometimes appear as the dual aspects of one satire. One is called 'ritual satire' that functions primarily 'as a medium of sociality' (Yang and Jiang, 2015: 225). The other is 'political satire' that contains political expression or resistance. Yang and Jiang (2015) argue that while the existing literature has well recognised the political side of online satire in Chinese cyberspace, there still lack enough recognition to its 'collective character', or 'its ritually oriented side'.

This theoretical connection between the concepts of memes and rituals are explicitly made by Limor Shifman (2014) in her book *Memes in Digital Culture* whose horizon claims to be worldwide. Shiftman (2014: 41) defines memes as 'a group of textual units sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which are circulated, imitated and transformed via the Internet by many users as if competing with each other'. Drawing on James Carey's elaboration on communication as ritual, she claims that memes constitute a key communicational ritual in Web 2.0 era that constructs shared identities and senses of belonging yet at the same time presents the uniqueness of each performing individual.

I will critically review the concept of ritual in chapter two. Here, I focus on the limits of studying the Chinese Internet through the lens of the Bakhtinian carnival and memes. The next section first goes back to Bakhtin's original elaboration on medieval European carnival. I will then review those critiques of the concept and discuss its applicability to the context of Chinese cyberspace.

1.5.2 Bakhtinian carnival and its applicability to studying Chinese cyberspace

According to Bakhtin (1984), 'carnival' humour was the common style unifying three major arenas of medieval folk culture in Europe: festivities such as feasts and pageants, parodic literature and the language of the marketplace. The reservoir of the marketplace language—curses, abuses and profanities—was essential for carnival festivities and folk parody, both of which made bold allusion to the Church and the feudal politics in a realistic yet vulgar manner (Bakhtin et al., 1994: 215). For example, clowns and fools 'mimicked serious rituals such as the tribute rendered to the victors at tournaments, the transfer of feudal rights' (Bakhtin, 1984: 5). The dangerous parody of officialdom was achieved 'in the form of laughter' and in the content of dismembered organs of the lower body, together with their symbols—food, kitchen, and the underworld (Bakhtin et al., 1994: 215). For Bakhtin, all these constitute a grotesque bodily image that has cosmic connotations: 'one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions' (Bakhtin, 1984: 10). Unsurprisingly then, carnival humour and parody encountered attempted suppressions which, according to Bakhtin, came 'from the Church and government on one hand and by the 'chamber' humanists on the other' (Bakhtin et al., 1994: 221). However, these condemnations and prohibitions appeared only to sharpen the feeling 'that the use of non-official oaths meant a breach of established norms' (ibid: 221). Meanwhile, the style of vulgarity and the grotesque was strictly observed as well, so that the non-official culture of the dominated existed in parallel with the official one of the dominant.

There are multiple parallels between medieval folk humour in Europe and online parodies in contemporary China. The cases of online parodies such as 'Grass Mud Horse' and the machinima *The War of Internet Addiction* resonate with the 'grotesque realism' typical of medieval carnival. That is, the real politics of online

censorship was collectively mocked by Chinese internet users in a form of laughter and in the content of scatology. Meanwhile, this style was strictly observed so that 'toying with power' remained in a safe domain (Meng, 2011). There have also been unsuccessful attempts made by the government to control dissemination of online terms such as 'Grass Mud Horse' and *diaosi*. These kinds of attempts only serve to reinforce the kind of online sentiments of official-common confronation (see more in chapters 5 and 8).

However, one of the key critiques of Bakhtin's interpretation of medieval carnivals is that his references to 'the folk' or 'the people' of carnival 'remain surprisingly unspecified and ahistorical' (Morris, 1994: 22). As Pam Morris (1994) puts it, the marginalised social groups of medieval Europe—Jews, women, homosexuals—could become the victims of carnivalesque rituals. If directly applying Bakhtin's unspecified understanding of the folk to studying the Chinese Internet, one tends to presume, rather than contesting, the existence of a universal online (unofficial) space taken part in by all Chinese people. From a feminist perspective, Cara Wallis (2015a) argues that the meme 'Grass Mud Horse' and another two mutating from it all deploy a discursive and visual style that positions the female body as the site of subordination, penetration, and insult. Wallis thus comments that these memes actually re-inscribe the patriarchal constructions of gender that is pervasive in China, thus ultimately diminishing their emancipator potential.

Apart from the issue of gender, the existing literature appears to neglect the dramatic class stratifications taking place in the country. In section 1.3.3, we have already seen that a neglect of the heterogeneity of Chinese cyberspace risks continuing to silence the rural population. Little academic attention has been paid to this information have-less population (Qiu, 2013) formed by rural migrants and peasants. When searching for political participation empowered by digital technologies, many scholars leave behind migrant workers' 'basic' uses of

new media for survival and for socialisation out of their alienated and floating lives in urban China (Wang Xinyuan, 2016). Chapter 5 briefly compares the media uses reported by my migrant-worker respondents and those by white-collar respondents so as to reflect on the aspects of class implicated in the practice of online wordplay *per se*.

As a number of scholars point out, most of the time migrant workers in China are merely represented and judged in the light of 'consumer-citizenship' by mass media and the rest of the urban population (Anagnost, 2004; Pun, 2003; Sun, 2010, 2014). Their appearance in online wordplay seems to be limited as well. One of the few online buzzwords referring to migrant workers is '*sha ma te*' (杀马特, a Chinese pun of 'Smart'). As we shall see in chapters 5 and 6, mainstream media and young white-collar workers mostly use the term *shamate* for the sake of social distinction (Bourdieu, 2010). *shamate* connotes both an imagination and mockery of young migrant workers who try yet fail to make themselves look 'truly' urban.

Apart from an unspecified and ahistorical notion of the mass, another key aspect that limits the applicability of Bakhtinian carnival to studying the Chinese Internet is the strategic co-option and shaping of online non-official culture by the *dominant bloc*. The framework of Internet memes also tends to neglect this co-optation, to which the next section turns.

1.5.3 Strategic co-optations of online wordplay by corporations and the state

It should be noted here that Bakhtinian carnival was a phenomenon referencing pre-capitalist society. Bakhtin observes from medieval parody a kind of double voice of the dominated: in their responses to 'official consciousness',[9] this doubling 'relativises the "sacred word" against other voices' such that the imposition of a monologic and absolute ideology of the authoritative on

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[9] This Bakhtinian term can be understood as ideology, a set of belief system serving the dominating class.

non-official consciousness can be challenged or even destroyed (Bakhtin et al., 1994: 15-16). But as Morris (1994) puts it, Bakhtin's association of a novel form 'with the liberation of human consciousness does seem a rather optimistic claim' (23), particularly given the fact that he fully acknowledges that any word can be re-accentuated, as reflected in his famous concept of 'dialogic' (see section 2.5). The dominant bloc can also re-accentuate words and signs of the dominated, particularly in contemporary capitalist society (Heath and Potter, 2006).

As several critical thinkers have noted when commenting on the notion of ideology, advanced capitalism today operates more on a lack of specific and metaphysical systems of beliefs such as religions or socialist doctrines; instead, it features a 'superfluous' ideology that oscillates between meaning and non-meaning on the basis of rationality, commodity exchange and the lack of consensus on social changes (cf. Eagleton, 1991; Thompson, 1984). While the actual socio-economic system at play in contemporary China is debatable, the society is undoubtedly infused with capitalist practices of the market economy. Despite the CPC's adherence to the rhetoric of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics', a technocratic logic prioritising economic development and political stability underpins this rhetoric (Wang H., 2008). What prevails in contemporary China is more a 'superfluous' ideology than a clear official consciousness—to use Bakhtin's term—to be resisted or challenged. The clear boundary between official and folk culture that Bakhtin sees and celebrates in medieval carnival and parody cannot be presumed when investigating online wordplay in contemporary China.

In effect, the party-state has paid great attention to shaping the 'direction of public opinion' (*yulun daoxiang*) by itself. It has managed to generate a new form of propaganda that appropriates the cheerful and playful style of online culture. For example, a MV titled '*shi san wu*' was made to tell foreigners how the

thirteenth five-year plan of China had been designed and conducted.[10] Chairman Xi's online nickname 'Xi Uncle' (*Xi dada*) and various comics frequently appeared on Weibo and other major Chinese websites, depicting the leader as being close to the people. Although these cases are not the focus of the thesis, they nonetheless show a blurred boundary between 'the official/government-controlled discourse universe' and 'non-official discourse universe of ordinary Chinese people', a presumed differentiation made by numerous scholars (e.g. He, 2008; Yang et al., 2014; Yuan, 2011). While there surely exists a certain degree of distinction between official rhetoric and unofficial discourse, it is important to notice that their interactions not only lie in the ridiculing of the former by the latter, but also the active 'populating' of digital platforms by the state (Yang, 2014: 138).

Furthermore, the *dominant bloc* in contemporary China is not monolithic. In media industries, particularly, there has long existed a kind of complicity between the market and the state in the post-Mao era (Meng and Rantanen, 2015). Starting to promote the notion of 'Internet plus' (*hulianwang jia*) from 2015, Xi's government has laid great attachment to cooperating with Internet corporations so as to adjust the country's mode of economic development[11]. One important aspect of this adjustment is boosting domestic consumption via e-commerce. As Yu LiAnne (2014) observes, increased access to the internet, growing use of credit cards and the explosion of e-commerce websites have co-occurred since the late 2000s in China. For her, the Chinese Internet is a critical catalyst less for promoting democracy than for 'accelerating and shaping consumption practices' (Yu, 2014: 16). A vivid example is the frenzy of 'Double Eleven Shopping Festival' mentioned in the beginning of the chapter.

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[10]Watch the song via https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YVzMomG7MNw.

[11]This close interaction is reflected in the annual 'World Internet Conference' initiated by the Chinese government where CEOs of China's major e-commerce companies are all present.

This dynamics of 'indoctritainment' (Sun and Zhao, 2009) can hardly be captured by the framework of Internet memes either. Though finding it a bit tricky, Shifman (2014) tries to differentiate 'memes' from 'virals' on the basis of Carey's distinction between communication as ritual and communication as transmission. Virals, according to Shifman, refer to those digital texts that remain comparatively closed in meaning and form during disseminations to transmit certain information or values (see also Nahon and Hemsley, 2013). For her, a single commercial or video that becomes widespread is hence more like viral content. But in the context of wordplay in Chinese cyberspace, such a boundary between memes and virals is largely blurred. Online buzzwords not only serve as 'rituals' that help to connect individuals and to construct collective identities; they are also appropriated by institutional forces for transmitting certain messages or values. In fact, numerous online buzzwords have entered people's everyday vocabulary, particularly that of the younger generations. The best way is to regard online buzzwords as signs from a socio-linguistic perspective.

1.5.4 Defining Chinese Internet discourse

Here, I propose a categorisation of two types of online parody in Chinese cyberspace. One refers to those Internet memes which are against the Internet control of the government or directly related to specific social issues, such as the cases of 'grass mud horse' and the machinima *War of Internet Addiction*. I call them 'issue-related' online parody. The other comprises those meme-based buzzwords which are more 'banal', such as the *diaosi* wordplay. Here the term 'banal' has two senses. First, this type of buzzwords is not directly related to a specific social issue. Second, they are often detached from any digital text and simply used as words by both individuals and institutions and in both offline and online contexts. This categorisation is similar to Yang and Jiang's (2015) differentiation between 'political satire' and 'ritual satire' that I reviewed in section 1.6.1. But I argue that both types can be political yet in different senses.

Issue-related parodies are political in a narrow sense that emphasises citizen rights and critiques of the government. They are less likely to be co-opted and more likely to appear as Internet memes that toy with power in a carnivalesque manner. Banal online buzzwords can be political in a broad sense particularly if they connote class and/or gender meanings. This is because, as I shall further discuss in chapter 2, the power relations of class and gender are partially reproduced or transformed by 'ideological' discourses (Eagleton, 1983) or 'social performatives' (Bulter, 1997) to which Chinese Internet discourse arguably belongs. At the same time, the power bloc—the party-state and the market—also strategically create and co-opt this kind of online wordplay, imbue it with their own meanings.

My critiques of the existing approaches to studying online satire are largely aimed at those addressing the second type—banal online wordplay. However, I believe the analytical framework that I adopt in the thesis will be illuminating for research on issue-oriented online parodies as well. Among other things, it highlights the heterogeneous composition and power dynamics of Chinese Internet users in terms of class and gender. Meanwhile, if we compare the lists of annual popular online expressions in recent years with those before 2011, it will be noticeable that issue-related online buzzwords appear to be declining; banal buzzwords that connote class and/or gender meanings remain a substantial category over the years.[12]

Given that 'issue-related online parodies' have both drawn much academic attention and been on the decline, the thesis opts to focus on 'banal' online buzzwords which connote class and gender meanings in Chinese cyberspace. The connotations of this kind of buzzword are often intertextual with others (Li Mingjie, 2016), forming a variety of 'buzzwords clusters'. For example, the

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[12] See from Wikipedia for a summary of the popular expressions stemming from the Chinese Internet: http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E4%B8%AD%E5%9B%BD%E7%BD%91%E7%BB%9C%E6%B5%81%E8%A1%8C%E8%AF%AD%E5%88%97%E8%A1%A8 (last access: 17/9/2018).

buzzword *diaosi* actually connotes discursive correlations with other buzzwords such as 'tall-rich-handsome' (*gaofushuai*), 'white-rich-beautiful' (*baifumei*) and 'vulgar rich' (*tuhao*). The framework of Internet memes concentrates more on the intertextuality within a given meme—the variety of text units under one—rather than the intertextuality between different online buzzwords. I therefore define those meme-based buzzwords stemming from Chinese cyberspace which connote gender and/or class under the umbrella of Chinese internet *discourse* in general. Doing so helps to underline how the creations, circulations and changing connotations of these terms are 'socially conditioned' (Fairclough, 2001a), i.e. the gender and class notions that are reproduced or transformed by Chinese internet discourse, its constant co-optations by institutional forces, and thus its 'articulations' (Hall, 1986a) with hegemony in contemporary China.

1.6 Overview of the Thesis

In chapter 2, I will not only unpack the key concepts briefly mentioned in this chapter—namely, mimicry and ritual—but also provide a literature review in terms of the interrelations between language, discourse, ideology, subjectivity and performativity. These theories inform my decision to adopt Sewell's (1992, 2005) conception of the duality of social structure, to integrate the Bourdieusian and the Aristotelian approaches to *habitus*, and to apply the notion of embodied agency (Taylor, 1989; Banaji, 2017) to studying the politics of online wordplay in contemporary China. Based on these three components, I elaborate on the main theoretical framework of the thesis and the three research questions. In Chapter 3, I delineate a brief history of class and gender relations in China, the party-state's role in shaping their transformations in both the Mao and the post-Mao eras, as well as the market's bearing in contemporary China. This helps to historicise Internet discourse and to contextualise the multiple dimensions of ambivalence in online wordplay. Chapter 4 presents the methodological

rationale, research design and procedure of the thesis regarding my sampling of 'buzzword clusters' combination of textual discourse analysis with in-depth interviewing, and the categorisation of four social groups of respondents—young white-collar men and women, and young migrant male workers and female workers.

Chapters 5 to 8 consist of empirical analyses of original data. In chapter 5, I conduct discourse analysis on a sample of texts which contain online terms mentioned most by my respondents to illustrate the spectrum of meanings that a given term may 'invite' people to recognise and subjectify. The 'invitation of meaning' (Banaji, 2006) that I lay out can then be compared with respondents' various interpretations of these terms in accordance with their lived experiences. Based on interview data, chapter 6 addresses the topic of class and Chinese Internet discourse from two perspectives. First, I compare young white-collar respondents' and young migrant workers' distinct media uses and the different roles played by Internet discourse in their everday lives. In the second part of the chapter, I present in detail different social group members' interpretations of the online terms signifying class connotations to uncover how Internet discourse shapes my respondents' perception of social stratifications, class relations and urban-rural duality in contemporary China. Chapter 7 discusses how respondents from different social groups interpret and subjectify the discursive tenstions between male anxiety and female fantasy entailed in Internet discourse, as well as the emerging ideology of consumerist feminism. I will also briefly discuss the social implications of online wordplay for sexual politics in contemporary China. In chapter 8, I summarise a spectrum of discursive practices which reveal different social groups' agency with regard to the narratives, social norms and *doxic* order signified by Chinese Internet discourse. I also touch upon the conventions and regulations reported by media practitioners regarding corporations' and party media's respective co-option of and reinscription of Chinese Internet discourse to illustrate the entanglement between personal

agency and institutional settings. In chapter 9, I summarise the major findings of the thesis in relation to the three research questions, tying together how online wordplay contributes to obfuscating true class categories and to naturalising the ideology of consumerist feminism that emerges among Chinese urban youth. I will also reflect on the various forms of group agency and its correlation with power and authorisation. In the end, I point out the implications of this thesis for future studies of the Internet and gender in both the Chinese context and beyond.

CHAPTER 2: DISCOURSE, STRUCTURE AND EMBODIED AGENCY

2.1 Chinese Internet Discourse as 'Popular Language'

At the end of the introduction, I defined meme-based buzzwords stemming from Chinese cyberspace which connote gender and/or class under the umbrella of Chinese internet *discourse*. Since the 'linguistic turn' in the social sciences (cf. Hall, 1986b; Sewell, 2005) in the second half of the twentieth century, the key word 'discourse' has been linked to a variety of concepts, including (symbolic) power (Bourdieu, 1991), ideology (Althusser, 1971; Bakhtin et al., 1994; Eagleton, 1991; Purvis and Hunt, 1993; Marx et al., 1965), and performativity (Butler, 1997). As Norman Fairclough (2001a) puts it when elaborating his method of Critical Discourse Analysis, the concept of discourse emphasises the social conditions of language in its daily use.

Bourdieu's (1991) elaboration of the 'institutionalised mechanisms' of linguistic production provides a starting point from which to understand the social conditions of the creation, circulation and use of Chinese Internet discourse. Bourdieu (1991) regards Western working-class men's pub talk in the 1960s as a kind of 'popular language' belonging to the dominated classes. He observes that pub talk is full of slang and vulgar jokes, while a master of this macho and misogynist form of speech can be a star in the pub. Bourdieu (1991) views this 'popular' speech form as working-class men's deliberate pursuit of 'distinction' from each other and, most importantly, from a 'legitimate' form of speech. The 'legitimate' form is adopted by the bourgeoisie whom pub talkers despise as weak and 'effeminate'. Bourdieu deploys (cf. 2010) the term 'distinction' in both senses of the word. For him, pub talkers are in constant pursuit of differentiation from and hence superiority to others. However, this sense of investment, argued by Bourdieu (2010: 78-79), 'in no way suggested that the corresponding behaviour is guided by rational calculation of maximum profit'. Practices are generated by social actors' predisposed 'feel for the game', or *habitus*, in a given

'field'—'a configuration of objective relations between positions' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2002: 132). The 'ultimate or ultimately determining field' is 'the market' (cited in Butler, 1999: 114). Bourdieu's theorisation assumes that social actors' practices are motivated by their ultimate struggle for the 'profits' of symbolic capital (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1999), or 'distinction', via their strategic accumulation and exchange of various forms of capital (economic, social, cultural, symbolic). This theorisation of market and profits illustrates Bourdieu's attempt to re-work Marxist political economy by introducing the cultural and symbolic dimensions into discussion. He sees culture as the site, *par excellence*, of 'misrecognition' of the existing social order (Bourdieu, 2010).

Bourdieu (1991: 101) thus notes that the linguistic distinction pursued by dominated classes often indicates 'a deep-seated conformity' with regard to established hierarchies. An eloquent master of pub talk can instantly feel discouraged and inferior when entering a formal social occasion as a completely different set of tacit rules prevails. His cultural capital of mastery in pub talk has little value in the middle-class settings. I will discuss Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus* at length later in this chapter. His elaboration on 'popular language' can, to some extent, be mapped onto the popularity of Internet discourse in contemporary China. Embracing a vulgar and playful form of speech, Chinese Internet users appear to counter the rigid and 'hypernormal' official rhetoric of Party officials (Yang et al., 2014). The buzzword *diaosi*, for example, on referring directly to the male genital, seems to embody a kind of carnivalesque solidarity among those who feel they possess a 'marginalised' masculinity' in contemporary China.

The extent to which *diaosi* signifies 'marginalised masculinity' as opposed to 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell, 2005a, 2005b) will be contested (see chapter 5). Putting it aside for a moment, here I would like to further explore the sense of simultaneous menace to and reinforcement of established social order that

Bourdieu observes from 'popular language'. The next section turns to post-colonial literature. It reviews the concepts of 'convivial tension' (Mbembe, 1992) and 'mimicry' (Bhabha, 1987) for a better understanding of the ambiguity that oftentimes accompanies dominated classes' 'carnivalesque resistance' via playful and vulgar form of speech.

2.2 Convivial Tension and Mimicry

In his analysis of the non-official culture of post-colonial Cameroon, Achille Mbembe (1992: 29) argues that those obscene and grotesque elements which Bakhtin regards as a form of resistance from medieval carnival are intrinsic to the modality of domination in postcolony. Mbembe defines 'postcolony' as 'specifically a given historical trajectory…of societies recently emerging from the experience of colonisation and the violence which the colonial relationship involves' (cited in Banaji, 2017: 32). According to him, the postcolony is 'chaotically pluralistic' cohered by the 'grotesque' and 'obscene' power of the 'commandment', which on the surface is futile to resist. He notes that in the face of plural social spheres and arenas, 'the postcolonial "subject" mobilises not just a single "identity", but several fluid identities' that are constantly 'revised' (Mbembe, 1992: 5). From this assemblage of improvised identities, Mbembe observes a sense of carnivalesque and vulgar 'conviviality'. While the *commandment* in the postcolony 'has a marked taste for lecherous living' and extravagance of social ceremonies, the populace lives out tyranny and 'toy with power' through the undercurrent of scatological satire referencing orficies and genital organs (ibid: 8-9). This kind of satire turns *commandment* into a 'congenial idol' whose gigantic penis is laughed by the ruled (ibid: 22). It signifies a certain degree of failure of hegemony since the rulers are not able to achieve the absolute authority that they hope for. Yet, carnivalesque and scatological satire does not yield any collective movement either. Mbembe (1992) views this type of discourse as illustrating a 'convivial tension' between rulers and those

whom they apparently dominate (ibid: 5). As Shakuntala Banaji (2017: 31) points out, Mbembe's elaboration on power relationships in the postcolony resonates with James Scott's (1990) observation of divergence between 'hidden' and 'public transcripts' of the powerless in slavery, serfdom and other types of extreme domination. Both scholars 'try to understand a form of social and political agency which is neither directly resistant to, nor entirely co-opted by and aligned with elite power' (Banaji, 2017: 32).

The social conditions of postcolonial countries in the early 1990s are not the same as those of contemporary China. But the Chinese Communist Party also seeks absolute authority, demanding to be ritually worshipped and to dominate public discourse. This has been particularly the case since Xi Jinping took over the reins. The Party demonstrates its authority via imprisoning dissident activists, suppressing social movements and blocking 'sensitive' media content (see Yang, 2014 for a review). On the surface, it appears to be futile to challenge the capricious power of the CPC. Chinese internet users are so familiar with the emptiness and rigidity of official rhetoric which they make fun of it through various forms of tacit wordplay, particularly homophones—Mbembe (1992) mentions similar cases in Cameroon. The sense of convivial tension between rulers and the ruled that he points out is also deeply felt by ordinary Chinese people, if not by the Party itself. Following Xi's proposal to scrap the two-term limit in China's Constitution at the beginning of 2018, some news reports that allowed online sharing and comments received Internet users' unified emoticons of smiling (see figure 2.1). This public performance of respect and joy was later removed together with the news reports.
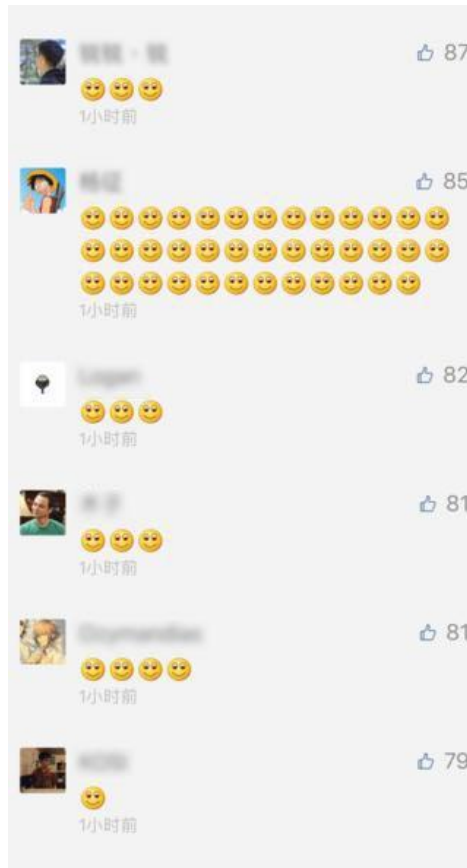
Figure 2.1: Internet users' comments on Xi's modification of the Constitution[13]

However, in Chinese cyberspace, the plurality of social spheres and arenas where Internet users perform and improvise identities not only lies in 'convivial tension' between the party-state and the populace, but is also implicated in a commercial logic. On the one hand, as illustrated by the case of 'Grass Mud Horse' (Wang, 2012), online wordplay in contemporary China can easily be 'co-opted' (Heath and Potter, 2006) and turned into a part of consumer culture. On the other hand, corporations can capitalise on Chinese Internet users' 'convivial tension' with the party-state. While Mbembe (1992) sees a shared conception of aesthetics and stylistics of power between the *commandment* and the 'carnivalesque' laughter in the postcolony, wordplay in Chinese cyberspace can internalise the commercial logic that apparently challenges the rigid officialdom. But in post-Mao China, the Party-state has been forming a strategic, albeit sometimes

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[13] To protect users' privacy, I blurred all their user names.

uneasy, complicity with the market. The two power-holders are situated within another level of 'convivial tension'. This level of conviviality can nonetheless be neglected if researchers only pay attention to the more apparent and 'celebratory' level—Chinese Internet users' tacit and carnivalesque satire of the party-state. The ambivalence of online wordplay in contemporary China largely consists in the intersection between the two levels of 'convivial tensions' where Internet users improvise an assemblage of identities, including those of class and gender.

Here, I find another postcolonial thinker, Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry highly relevant. Bhabha (1984) utilises 'mimicry' to analyse English colonial discourse that is often constructed around *ambivalence*. According to him, to achieve a strategic exertion of power, English colonisers attempted to form a sort of discursive *Other* whose difference from 'us' was both recognizable and to be reformed. The colonised were thus represented as subjects who were '*almost the same as*' colonisers, but constantly '*not quite*' (ibid: 126). Mimicry is a disavowal of otherness with a 'strategic failure' of 'appropriating the inappropriate', so that the colonised are represented as 'at once resemblance (of) and menace (to)' the colonial power (ibid: 127). The colonial discourse hence relies heavily on an 'uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a "partial" presence'; this is mainly achieved through what Bhabha calls 'the metonymy of presence' (ibid: 127, 130). The axis of metonymy in colonial mimicry exaggerates and repeats 'the difference between being English and being Anglicised' by means of 'the discriminatory identities constructed across traditional cultural norms and classifications', such as 'the Simian Black, the Lying Asiatic' (ibid: 130).

Meanwhile, Bhabha (1984) refers to Lacan to point out the 'effect of mimicry'—'camouflage' (125). That is, similar to a biological process of camouflage, one tends to become 'mottled' against 'a mottled background' when harmonising with it (ibid: 125). Mimicry and camouflage seem to be particularly the case for

acts of resistance that put on a 'carnivalesque' appearance. The sense of 'being caught in between' that was once 'a colonial tool of oppression' according to Bhabha (1984), now appears in the discursive 'mimicry' of Chinese Internet discourse in the sense that it at once highlights and re-inscribes the existing social order and logic of power.

From 'tall-rich-handsome', 'white-rich-beautiful' to 'vulgar rich', Chinese Internet discourse is abundant with metonymy. Discursively speaking, all these terms are opposite to the 'underprivileged' identity signified by *diaosi* which has a synonym 'short-poor-ugly'. But to use Fairclough's (2001a: 80) nomenclature, these triad-character terms are 'ideological synonyms' in the sense that words not necessarily having similar meanings are grouped together under a certain ideology. Here, the association of 'tall' with 'rich, handsome' as opposed to the one of 'short' with 'poor ugly' is based on a kind of assumption that having money makes one both handsome and appear higher in social hierarchy. It is intertextual with another popular online expression 'having money is to do one's whims' (*youqian jiush irenxing*). With regard to the term 'white-rich-beautiful' which refers to the female counterpart of the 'tall-rich-handsome', the character 'white' emphasises a kind of ideal femininity[14] in China without linking rich and beautiful women to any social position.

The feminine beauty of a 'white' complexion appears to be adapted to men's socio-economic position as 'tall'. The three triad-character terms and their intertextuality hence illustrate what Raewyn Connell (1987) terms 'hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity' in patriarchal capitalism. As we shall see in chapter 5, the *diaosi* narrative is constructed around a sense of simultaneous differentiation and resemblance: it highlights the difference of a *diaosi* position from that of a 'tall-rich-handsome' in the social hierarchy; yet this difference is

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[14] In chapter 3 (section 3.2.1), I discuss the aesthetic standards of white complexion and its conventional association with ideal femininity in China.

also disavowed as a *diaosi* figure identifies with the male prerogative of a 'tall-rich-handsome'. On repetitively looking 'upwards', the *diaosi* identity, discursively speaking, tends to become mottled both 'against' and 'into' the background it mimics. The expression 'vulgar rich, let's make friends' (*tuhao women zuo pengyou ba*) makes this kind of discursive mimicry crystal clear. Another widespread term 'envy, jealousy and hatred' (*xianmu jidu hen*) symbolises the mixed and ambiguous online sentiments towards the rich in contemporary China.

At the same time, the discursive mimicry entails another dimension: its ambivalence between including young rural migrants into and excluding them from the apparently 'underprivileged' or 'grassroots' *diaosi* identity. This dimension is brought home by the discursive construction of *shamate*—the male Other from rural China who aspires to be 'just like us' or even 'cooler than us' but end up becoming a laughing stock of the urbanite. A question arises from the discussion so far. Should we take so seriously the carnivalesque wordplay in Chinese cyberspace? As many respondents emphasise, 'it's just a joke'. The next section turns to Michael Billig's (2005) critical understanding of laughter and humour, and then links it to the concept of ritual in contemporary society.

2.3 Laughter, Social Order and the Discursive Ritual of Naming

In his book that aims for a 'social critique of humour', Billig (2005) first refers to Freud's (1991) and Henri Bergson's (1911) contrastive theorisation of jokes and laughter. Freud argues that 'a tendentious joke acts like a mini-festival, lifting customary restrictions for a very brief moment during the course of social interaction' (cited in Billig, 2005: 155). According to his definition, a tendentious joke has a specific target to tease or ridicule. Freud (1991: 201) argues that a tendentious joke liberates the 'inhibitory cathexis' that people unconsciously invest to suppress their instincts. For Freud, tendentious jokes are 'highly suitable for attacks on the great, the dignified and the mighty, who are protected

by internal inhibitions and external circumstances from direct disparagement (ibid: 149). Echoing Bakhtin, Freud claims that 'the joke then represents a rebellion against that authority, a liberation from its pressure.' (ibid: 149) Bergson, nonetheless, insists that 'laughter is the mechanism of discipline, the punishment in the classroom of life' (cited in Billig, 2005: 128). It functions primarily to impose social customs and rules, and to discourage infractions of them. This is typical, for example, when a group of 'normal' men laugh at a 'sissy' boy for his effeminate behaviour. For Bergson (1911: 138), the comic is 'so frequently dependent on…the prejudices of society'.

Both Bergson and Freud point to undeniable aspects of ridicule or tendentious jokes. Jokes can appear both rebellious and disciplinary. This also applies to online wordplay in Chinese cyberspace. Drawing on Janet Holmes's (2000) differentiation between 'repressive and contestive humour', Billig (2005: 202) argues that 'the distinction does not rest upon the intrinsic nature of the humour itself…but upon the social position of the person using the humour and the uses to which the humour is put.' 'Laughter is rhetorical', suggests Billig, for it enables us to achieve a variety of discursive acts: 'laughter can join people together and it can divide; and it can do both simultaneously when a group laughs together at others (ibid: 194). The accomplishment of 'uniting and dividing' does not lie in the laughter itself either. Rather, laughter takes its meaning from the wider social and cultural context.

Billig (2005: 154) quotes Alan Dundes's (1987) vivid expression: 'it is precisely those topics culturally defined as sacred, taboo or disgusting that tend to provide the principal grist for humour mills'. Therefore, the other sense of the 'rhetorical nature of laughter' is that it is historically contingent and 'potentially contestable' (ibid: 192). In chapter 5, I will illustrate how Chinese Internet discourse entails various clusters of terms that form playful narratives. These narratives are in discursive tension with each other, constituting a variety of namings that can

integrate and separate different social groups at the intersection of gender and class relations.

Another key point made by Billig (2005: 209) is a consumerist society's general tendency to position laughter 'on the side of rebels': 'Dutiful consumption encourages us to mock apparent authority, enabling us to enjoy the feeling of constant rebelliousness in economic conditions that demand continual dissatisfaction with yesterday's products'. This helps us understand the intersecting two levels of 'convivial tension' in Chinese cyberspace where Internet users' apparently rebellious satire of the party-state is implicated in and can be shaped by the commercial logic. The popularity of expressions such as 'vulgar rich, let's make friends' and 'having money is to do one's whims' illustrates how the playful and carnivalesque form of online wordplay could be underpinned by materialistic values which accompany China's ecoomic reforms. They help to 'liberate' restrictions imposed by the anti-capitalist orientation in socialist China which now becomes residual yet continues to pose a degree of tension with prevailing materialistic values.

Billig's emphasis on the rhetorical and collective nature of disciplinary laughter resonates with a critical understanding of naming as a kind of 'discursive ritual' in modern society. As mentioned in the introduction, some existing literature on online parody and Internet memes (Shifman, 2014; Yang et al., 2014; Yang and Jiang, 2015) deploys the concept of ritual to illustrate how these forms of online culture help to construct collectivity among (playful) individuals. This kind of argument is typical in the field of media studies where the introduction of 'ritual' is often uncritical, while the issue of power relations embedded in the construction of collectivity is somehow beyond question (Couldry, 2003). But for anthropologists such as Bourdieu (1991) and Maurice Bloch (1989), ritual is in connection with the naturalisation of certain social categories or boundaries, underpinned by wider values, so that the management of conflict and the

masking of social inequality may be achieved. For example, Bourdieu (1991) shows how the ritual through which boys symbolically pass into manhood 'consecrates and legitimates' the distinction between men and women in Kabyle society.

Roy Rappaport (1999: 24) defines ritual as the 'the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts or utterances not entirely encoded by the performers'. In modern society where formal settings for ritual decline, ritualisation, as Nick Couldry (2003: 43) puts it on referring to Alberto Melucci, can be seen as 'involving a particular way of naming of social world'. Naming or labelling certain groups of people is largely an 'invariant' discursive practice beyond both the preference of both those who utter the naming and those being named. In Chinese Internet discourse, for example, many urban young women have been using the term 'straight-men cancer' to name a variety of acts and thoughts that they regard as sexist (see chapter 5). Yet the buzzword's discursive association of sexism with 'straight' or heterosexual men and 'cancer' is not entirely encoded by those who utter the term. Its negative tone is also beyond the preference of those men who are being called as such, though they are likely to negotiate with or reject the negativity. But this naming, as it were, serves to familiarise people with 'an order of reality' (Billig, 2005: 214), linking certain thoughts and behaviour to the discursive lable of 'straight-men cancer'. In other words, it can inform people's common sense just as laughter can suggest what is 'objectively' comic (Billig, 2005). On repeatedly uttering the various online terms signifying gender and/or class, Chinese Internet users can be seen as joining in a kind of loose and discursive ritual that draws on and may contribute to shaping their common sense with regard to gender and class relations in contemporary China.

Althusser (1971) famously relates 'ritual' to the 'interpellation' of dominant ideology. The next section turns to his theory and points out the theoretical connection between 'ideology' and 'common sense'.

2.4 Ideology and Common Sense

In his well-known essay on ideological state apparatus, Althusser (1971: 162) argues that ideology 'represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence'. Influenced by Lacan, Althusser emphasises the central role played by ideology in generating certain types of symbolism that supply individuals with a 'satisfyingly unified image of selfhood' (Eagleton, 1983: 172) out of the otherwise fragmented and meaningless Real. Using religion as an example, he illustrates how ideology 'hails' individuals into subjects through the repeated practices of ritual surrounding an 'Absolute Subject'—the 'divine voice' of God. Drawing on the Freudian notion of super-ego and the Lacanian Subject, Althusser (1971: 180) compares ideology to a 'doubly specularly mirror': ideology 'interpellates around it the infinity of individuals into subjects' while at the same time giving 'the Subject in which each subject can contemplate its own image'. Religious ideology operates through each believer's contemplation and recognition of his/her own correlation with God(s) via repeated ritualistic practices. As Terry Eagleton (1983: 172-173) summarises: 'The relation of an individual "subject" to society as a whole in Althusser's theory is rather like the relation of the small child to his or her mirror image in Lacan's…In both cases…this image involves a misrecognition, since it idealises the subjects' real situation'.

Althusser's theory of ideology, on the one hand, marks his effort to retain the orthodox Marxist tradition which relates ideology to the complex ways in which meaning is mobilised for the maintenance of relations between the dominant and the dominated (Thompson, 1984; Eagleton, 1991). On the other hand, it moves away from Marx's (1965) approach to ideology as 'distorted ideas' and

'false consciousness'. As Stuart Hall (1986b: 32) points out, the Althusserian concept of 'interpellation' 'opened the gate to a more linguistic or "discursive" conception of ideology. It put on the agenda the whole neglected issue of how ideology becomes internalised, how we come to speak "spontaneously".' It is via the realm of language where the individual and the social meet.

Dwelling on how ideology is lived out by subjects, Hall (1986b; Hall & O'Shea, 2013) refers to Gramsci's (1971) conception of 'common sense'. According to Gramsci, common sense is a form of 'everyday thinking' that works intuitively, without too much forethought or reflection (Hall & O'Shea, 2013). Common sense is 'disjointed and episodic' with a contradictory amalgam of values imbibed from the ruling ideology and notions which spring more directly from the practical experience of social agents (Eagleton, 1991: 119). It contains both 'critical and utopian elements', because individuals, especially the socially dominated, need to express the unfairness and injustice that they deeply feel on the one hand, and for aspiring for a better future on the other (Hall & O'Shea, 2013). Common sense is essential for the maintenance of hegemony—the temporary consent that ruling power wins from those whom it subjugates (Gramsci, 1971). Hall (1986b: 36) regards 'common sense' as 'an inadequate explanation' of society whereas ruling ideology serves as a kind of discursive 'terrain' shaping people's mapping of the social world.

The discursive mimicry of the term *diaosi* and its intertextuality with other neologisms such as 'reversing the situation and fight back' (*nixi*) exemplify both a sense of social injustice collectively felt by Chinese Internet users, and their aspirations for a better life in the future. In contemporary China, the increasingly dominant ideology of consumerism (Yu, 2014) situates many people's perception of social injustices and the ways to change them within the logic of individual consumption. Online buzzwords constitute not only a channel for Chinese Internet users to fuse covert political critiques and identity-construction, but also

a kind of discursive 'terrain' for making sense of their living conditions. When people are being called and calling others '*diaosi*' and 'vulgar rich', it is precisely through such repeated practices as a sort of daily ritual that the consumerist ideology may 'hail' individuals to 'contemplate' their relationship to these terms. But as Judith Butler (1997) emphasises when referring to Althusser, our subjectivity formation that 'misrecognises' ideological interpellations is mostly subconscious and insidious. Ideology is embodied and imbued into people's subjectivity via repeated discursive ritual such that it becomes taken-for-granted common sense.

In this sense, Szablewicz (2014) is partially right in relating the *diaosi* phenomenon to a kind of 'structured feeling' among Chinese Internet users. The term 'structure of feeling', elaborated by Raymond Williams (1977), stands for 'practical consciousness'. It refers to being in between conscious thoughts and spontaneous feeling—'thought as felt and feeling as thought' (Williams, 1977: 132). Although a structure of feeling is not fully articulated, it is affectively and collectively subjectified by individuals. But Szablewicz fails to identify the kind of 'ideological effects' that online buzzwords such as *diaosi* may contribute to and the 'directionality' of its changing connotations that 'mystifies the situation, circumstance or experience of subordinate classes or dominated groups' (Purvis and Hunt, 1993: 478). The thesis insists on the usefulness of the concept 'ideology' and a critical analytical position it carries. I define hegemonic ideologies as cultural ideals that are taken for granted, perceived as natural in a society, even though they are in the best interests of the dominant classes or groups.

While Althusser's concept of 'interpellation' provides a fruitful link between ideology and language, it also entails several key flaws largely resulting from his structuralist position. His theorisation leaves no space for the agency of subjects (Eagleton, 1991). The ways in which social agents react to attempted

interpellations—accepting, ignoring, negotiating or rejecting—cannot be presumed. Otherwise, there would be no possibility for social struggles at all. In fact, Althusser's wording of 'misrecognition' indicates that he understands the social structure of symbolism as merely negative, as only constraining social actors' otherwise expression of free will. This theoretical assumption epitomises 'a traditional Western conception of the self as an autonomous, discrete and atomistic individual' (Potter, 2013: 76). In addition, prevailing ideology does not necessarily stem from what Althusser calls the *ideological state apparatus* (ISA)—the church, the educational system and (mass) media in contemporary society. Although these powerful institutions' pivotal roles should be underlined, ideological interpellation is more diffuse so that those who are 'hailed' and who internalise certain ideology can participate in 'hailing' others as well. This point is well elaborated by Judith Butler (e.g. 1997, 1999) through her concept of performativity.

Before turning to Butler's theory, I find it useful to first elaborate on Bakhtin's conception of the 'dialogic' nature of language (Bakhtin et al., 1994) and Merleau-Ponty's (1962) notion of bodily perspective. Through pointing out the connections between their thoughts, I aim to illustrate the important role played by language in shaping our pre-reflexive and embodied perception of the social world which is constitutive of our agency.

2.5 The Body, Habituation and the 'Dialogic' Nature of Language

As linguistic beings, we are born into a matrix of meaning that exists both before us and beyond us. Emphasising language as 'a matrix' is to acknowledge its 'holism' in the sense that no word's meaning stands alone but always in connection with other words that it 'contrasts with' (Taylor, 1985: 230; see also Eagleton, 1983). 'Red' means nothing without other colour terms. The discursive construction of *diaosi* is related to that of 'tall-rich-handsome' together with a series of other neologisms as well as the 'old' lexicon, such as 'poor'. As Charles

Taylor (1985: 235) puts it vividly, acquiring the linguistic habits of one's society is gaining access to a whole world of *intersubjective* meaning and symbolic culture as if we are 'plunged' in a medium 'which we cannot fully plumb'.

For Bakhtin (1994: 75), Individual consciousness *can only* take shape in the 'material of signs': we are in a constant process of 'confronting outer signs through inner speeches'. In other words, we are constantly 'dialogic' with signs and their conventional meanings 'which are culturally, historically and ideologically available' (cited in Billig, 2001: 217). According to Bakhtin (1994), words are 'multi-accentual' in the sense that different social groups and individuals can 'evaluate' others' semantic positions sedimented into the conventional meaning of certain words and imbue their own understanding when using these words. Yet, it should be noted that words are not equally 'evaluative'. That is to say, although all words of a language can be regarded as discourse to emphasise their social conditions of use, not all discourse is central to the power relations and struggles of a society so as to be regarded as ideological (Eagleton, 1991). The distinction between 'ideological' and 'non-ideological' discourse is less a dichotomy than a spectrum in accordance with specific socio-historical conditions. The signifier 'apple', for example, is arguably less 'evaluative' than other signifiers such as 'the working class', 'women', 'black people' and 'homosexuality' at present. But 'apple' could be a pivotal signifier when people debating its reference to the 'forbidden fruit' at an age where Christianity still ruled Western society. As Eagleton (1983: 131) puts it, out of the endless chain of signifiers and signifieds of language, 'certain meanings are elevated by social ideologies to a privileged position, or made the centres around which other meanings are forced to turn'.

Baktin's conception of the 'dialogic' nature of language resonates with Merleau-Ponty's (1962) emphasis on the interaction between habituation and reflection with regard to human perception and action. In *Phenomenology of*

Perception, Merleau-Ponty underlines (1962: 169) the centrality of the body for understanding human action: 'the body is our anchorage in the world…the body is our general way of having a world'. These statements may appear as truisms. But as Taylor (1989: 1-2) comments, Merleau-Ponty leads us to acknowledge the *inescapabilty of the subject in a world* marked out, experienced and engaged by the body. In other words, we always perceive and act in the world from somewhere, from a certain point of view; for Merleau-Ponty, that is a bodily point of view (Carman, 2008). Moreover, he emphasises that our embodied engagement with the world involves constant interactions between the background of habitual mode and the foreground of more attentive mode. For example, when we get around in a familiar area, we navigate with great ease through our bodily sense of direction—where to turn left, and where next. But one day, when I turn left only to find a road block, I will change to a more reflexive mode to figure out an alternative route. If the road blockage persists for a long time, I may eventually gain a new habitual navigation without reflection as if it has become embodied.

In the symbolic realm, we also mostly negative with little attentiveness through our acquired linguistic habits. As linguistic beings, we are involuntarily but inescapably situated in a whole matrix of signs that inform our engagement with the world. On acquiring our linguistic habits, we may pre-reflexively subjectify, or 'misrecognise'—to use Althusser's (1971) term—certain ideology that shapes the directionality of the web of intersubjective meaning into which we are born and take actions. This background web 'serves to express/constitute different relations in which we may stand to each other' in a given society (Taylor, 1985: 234). It guarantees the temporary 'verbal and ideological unification and centralisation' of language (Bakhtin et al., 1994: 74-75) which is essential for societal continuation. However, the 'centripetal force' of language can never reach a complete closure as language is simultaneously 'centrifugal' (Bakhtin et al., 1994). Ideological discourses do not 'hail' us in the same way since we

perceive the interpellation from different bodily perspectives. Some social groups are likely to be 'immune' or indifferent to certain interpellation that rarely resonates with their lived experience. This point is important to understand some young migrant workers' agentic disengagement from Chinese Internet discourse.

Moreover, there are always social actors who remain more reflexive and 'evaluative' in relation to the conventional meaning of certain words due to their experienced contradictions between the symbolic domain temporarily unified by certain ideology and the real world with which they are engaged. For example, LGBTQ communities can be more critical of and attentive to the negative representation of homosexuality and heteronormative orientation in Chinese Internet discourse. Yet, as Frantz Fanon (2007) contends, one's reflective awareness is grounded in the background web of meaning that he/she pre-reflexively acquires. The reflection can be full of confusions, ambivalences, and *dialogues*—'why does the society make fun of gay people like me?' In addition, people's perception of LGBTQ people can surely change given the constant interactions between one's habitual mode and more attentive mode. Through studying gender and queer theories, watching films on non-heterosexual relationships, or befriending LGBTQ people, a heterosexual person can become reflexive on his/her habitual avoidance of the sexual minorities. One may eventually embody a more open and fluid notion of gender and sexuality, 're-accentuating' the conventionally negative connotations of terms such as 'sissy' and 'gay' with his/her own understanding and meaning. The 'dialogic' nature of language means that when social actors' collective re-accentuation reaches a certain scale, it forms the kind of new social and ideological unifications—a new centripetal force, to shape people's common sense. Though language enjoys 'relative autonomy' because it cannot be reduced to mere reflex of social interests, words and their changing connotations 'are the very material medium of ideology' and traces of social struggles (Eagleton, 1983:

117). As Fairclough (2001a) underlines, language is 'both a site of and a stake in' struggles for power.

Among scholars who write on the important role of language and signs in social struggles, Butler's concept of 'performativity' of social discourse remains influential. I now turn to a critical review of her theory.

2.6 Theories of Performativity

2.6.1 The performativity of social discourse

The concept of 'performativity' is initiated by J.L. Austin (1962) who categorises two types of 'utterances' in our language use: constative and performative. The former refers to the speech act of describing a situation or stating a fact. The performative speech act incites further actions. Austin (1962) makes a further differentiation of the performative type into 'illocutionary act' and 'perlocutionary act'. Illocutionary act performs a deed at the moment of the utterance, such as a judge's statement of sentence, a leader's declaration to inaugurate a national ceremony, etc. Perlocutionary act elicits responses that are not immediately achieved, and indeed may never be performed: for example, a promise, a threat and a request. It is important to notice that these types of speech acts are not mutually exclusive. The traditional saying in China that 'the man goes out to work while the woman looks after the house' (*nanzhuwai nüzhunei*) appears to be constative, stating a naturalised 'fact' or common sense. But it is also performative and illocutionary in that the saying prescribes a kind of gendered norm and division of labour. Yet, a couple does not necessarily adhere to this prescription. The saying is hence a perlocutionary speech act as well. Indeed, we can say that all ideological discourses central to social relations are apparently constative yet simultaneously performative. They are illocutionary but also perlocutionary.

According to Austin (1962), an utterance must meet certain social conventions, frequently ritualistic or ceremonial, in order to become performative. For instance, the felicitousness of a leader's inauguration of a national ceremony lies in a specific ceremonial convention. Butler (e.g. 1997, 1999) acknowledges the rituality that performative utterances draw on, but she refers to Althusser's (1971) conceptualisation of interpellation as 'hailing' individuals via repeated discursive ritual in daily life. Grounding her theory in the gendering and the racialisation of the subject, she nonetheless insists that 'interpellation need not take on an explicit or official form in order to be socially efficacious and formative' (Butler, 1999: 121). The performative 'is not a singular act used by an already established subject', Butler (1997: 160) emphasises, but 'one of the powerful and insidious ways in which subjects are called into social being from diffuse social quarters, inaugurated into sociality by a variety of diffuse and powerful interpellations.' A girl might be taught not only by the school and the media but also by her parents how to behave as 'a proper girl' from the inception of existence.

Butler appears to accept Althusser's assumption regarding a social actor's inevitable misrecognition of interpellations though, from a post-structuralist position, she underlines the paradox of subjectivation: 'the very process and conditions that secure a subject's subordination are also the means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent' (cited in Mahmood, 2005: 17). Based both on Austin's original distinction between the illocutionary act and the perlocutionary act, and Derrida's remarks that 'no performative can work without the force of iterability' (cited in Butler, 1999: 128), Butler underlines the possibility that the social performatives can go awry or even be open to subversion. She regards 'the social performative' as a crucial part 'not only of subject formation, but of the ongoing political contestation and reformulation of the subject as well' (Butler, 1997: 160). She sees this kind of political contestation via reiteration of the existing social performatives in the 'Queer'

and 'Black' movements (Butler, 1997), as well as in the parody of drag performances (Butler, 1990).

Butler's theory of performativity has been particularly influential in gender studies as she challenges 'the long-standing opposition of external gender norms and constraints on the one hand, and internal freedom, will and intentionality of individuals on the other' (Mahmood, 2005: 20). Instead of associating the notion of agency with 'an undominated self that existed prior to the operations of power', Butler conceptualises agency as a capacity for action that specific relations of subordination or subjectivation 'create and enable' (Mahmood, 2001: 45). There is no possibility of 'undoing' gender norms that is independent of the 'doing' of norms. By insisting on an analytical distinction between 'performance' and 'performativity', she highlights the 'necessary ambivalence' with regard to social actors' mimetic identification with and embodiment of conventional norms (Butler, 1999). For Butler (cf. 1997), agency thus lies in the ever-lasting possibility of individuals to re-iterate or reformulate social norms in a non-conventional way.

Although Butler's theorisation of interpellation grants social actors more agency compared to Althusser's, her understanding of agency is still limited due to her presumption of the powerfulness of 'social performatives'. Following her logic, it is necessary for a Chinese woman to subjectify and to *do* the gender norm 'the man goes out to work while the woman looks after the house' before she becomes agentic and reformulate this norm in a non-conventional way. But there can be more chaos and questioning in one's subjectivation of interpellation (see Banaji, 2006) because we are both linguistic beings and embodied agents. The interpellation of social performatives is filtered by our conditions of living and the ways in which we interact with the world marked out by our body. A rural Chinese woman from a poor family may have no choice but to work outside

the house; and her subjectivation of the gender norm can be more chaotic than another woman from an affluent family.

As Saba Mahmood notes, Butler's theory of performativity adopts a rather 'agonistic framework' of agency, one in which social norms are either consolidated or subverted, and leaves unaddressed 'the variety of ways in which norms are performed, inhabited and experienced'. This agonistic framework largely derives from her sort of 'symbolic determinism which does not have the conceptual resources to differentiate discursive from other types of power relation' (McNay, 2003: 182). Butler's theory of social performatives appears to address social structures, power struggles, subject formations and re-formations all in terms of a linguistic or discursive issue (Krais, 2006; McNay, 2003, 2004). In a slightly harsh tone, Lois McNay (2003: 181) underlines: 'the ability to participate in performative politics presupposes a relatively privileged access to certain economic resources and cultural capital…the over-extension of a linguistic model of identity formation is, in the final analysis, a form *par excellence* of symbolic violence perpetuated by "enlightened" elites upon the practical activities of social actors.' Despite Butler's huge contribution to gender studies, her over-extension of the linguistic model risks neglecting the material dimension of social relations and the issue of authorisation. In effect, her emphasised agency of re-iterating social performatives in a non-conventional way not only lies in individuals but also in institutional forces. Or, to put it more correctly, institutions can greatly expand and authorise the individual exercise of agency, as discussed below.

2.6.2 Symbolic power and the mystification of social performatives

In fact, apart from Butler's purely post-structuralist view of 'performativity', Bourdieu (1991) also elaborates on this concept and associate the social convention that makes performative utterances felicitous with 'symbolic violence' or 'symbolic power'. For Bourdieu, symbolic power not only refers to

the operation of power in symbolic forms, but also social actors' routine 'misrecognition' of or pre-reflexive complicity with a kind of naturalised social order—*doxa* in his term. The key to the success of performative utterances, for Bourdieu, 'depends on the social position of the speaker in relation to the hearers' (cited in Bohman, 1999: 132). In other words, an illocutionary act draws less on what is said than who is speaking, and to be more precise, on the institutional power that the speaker serves to delegate. For example, we all know how empty and dry—at least in the Chinese context—a national leader's speech can be when he/she inaugurates the opening of a big event, yet we rarely doubt the felicitousness of this kind of ceremonial speech. The leader is 'authorised' by the political power that he/she delegates to make that kind of speech regardless of its specific content. The issue of authorisation thus looms large in Bourdieu's understanding of performative speech acts and symbolic power. The symbolic power to make certain performative discourses felicitous or socially acknowledged is not evenly distributed, but favouring power holders of the existing social order (Couldry, 2003).

A relevant example in Chinese Internet discourse is e-commerce corporations' collective 'resignification' of 'Double Eleven' (Nov. 11th) from a self-mocking 'Singletons' Day' merely known to some college students to an annual online shopping festival nationwide (cf. Meng and Huang, 2017). The resignification is so 'performative' that it inaugurates hundreds of thousands of people to consume goods and numerous online sellers to offer discounts on that day. Here, the reiteration of social performatives constitutes commercial co-option and 'mystification'. Roland Barthes developed the concept of myth in 1950s when structuralist thoughts prevailed in the French and Western academia. Influenced by Saussure, his theorisation of myth assumes that there exists a purely linguistic and semiotic system where each connection between a signifier and signified is 'totally arbitrary and mental' (Barthes, 2009: 140). This assumption is problematic in that language is always socially conditioned and historically

evolving. Nonetheless, his structuralist theorisation of myth remains helpful for analysing the co-option of social performatives, such as Chinese Internet discourse, by institutional forces.

Barthes (2009) refers 'myth' to a mode of signification that at once builds on and 'distorts' a previous level of signification. On the previous level, a signifier is 'arbitrarily chosen' in a language or a semiological system to refer to a signified. Yet on the second level of myth, only the signifier is kept while the original signified becoming 'impoverished'. The signifier becomes a *form* in the myth so as to signify another concept that may have little to do with its original meaning. A famous example that Barthes (2009) uses is a front cover of the magazine *Paris Match* where a young black solider in French uniform salutes. The details of the soldier are unknown. But according to Barthes, this is not important for the myth that the magazine creates, because these details are impoverished anyway so as to serve as a form and to signify Frenchness and militariness—'all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under the (tricolour) flag…' (Barthes, 2009: 139). Barthes compares myth to a 'turnstile' that works on 'a constant alternation between presenting the meaning of the signifier in the previous semiological system…and the concept of its form in the current myth plane' (ibid: 147). Myth is thus unstable, functioning to cause 'an immediate impression'. It can only exist on the natural state achieved by the concept which the myth signifies. In the example of the young Black soldier saluting, the myth could not exist without the established French imperialism. Similarly, it would be meaningless for co-opting the signifier 'Double Eleven' and imbuing it with the value of consumerism if China had not gone through its ecoomic reforms. As Barthes (2009: 154) emphasises, 'myth is speech justified in excess'. The proliferation of certain myth can be fetishising in that ideology such as nationalism reproduces its natural state and appears to exist on its own via banal signifiers (e.g. national flags) in people's everyday life (Billig, 1995). As shown by

the case of 'Double Eleven', Chinese Internet discourse can also become everyday vocabulary that is mystifying and fetishising.

In this sense, Chinese Internet discourse seems to be a form of speech which is at once 'popular' and 'legitimate' in Bourdieu's (1991) terms. Through carnivalesque and sometimes vulgar wordplay, ordinary Internet users 'mimic' the power blocs in contemporary China, oscillating between exposing and complying with the existing social order. At the same time, the ambivalent online wordplay has been further co-opted and reshaped to serve the interests of the power holders. As Garnham and Williams (1980) point out, Bourdieu's opposition between 'popular' and 'legitimate' speeches fails to see the possibility that economic interests of the dominant social fraction can directly threaten the cultural interests of the dominated fraction such that 'popular' language can become increasingly 'legitimate'. As we shall see in chapter 5, with its co-option by corporations, the connotation of the buzzword *diaosi* has become increasingly bourgeoisised, changing from its initial orientation towards men of lower-middle class to encompassing even the 'vulgar rich' nowadays. Power struggles via language are thus not purely a discursive or symbolic issue, but intersecting and being refracted by the material and resourceful dimension of social structures.

The next section discusses the duality of social structures. This sense of duality looms large in Bourdieu's conception of *habitus*, which is nonetheless as fruitful as agency-proof (Sewell, 1992).

2.7 Social Structures and *Habitus*

In his endeavor to reformulate the duality of structure based on Gidden's theory of structuration and Bourdieu's *habitus*, William Sewell (1992: 3) writes: 'the notion of structure does denominate, however problematically, something very important about social relations: the tendency of patterns of relations to be reproduced.' Anchoring structure to social relations, he views structure as both

conditioning and being instantiated by human beings' practices and interactions in historically contingent situations. Sewell emphasises (ibid: 4) that structure 'must be regarded as a process, not a steady state', despite its 'reproductive bias'. This view of structure as a process resonates with a 'dialogic' understanding of language.

Sewell (2005) acknowledges the importance of the 'language metaphor' for understanding social structures and transformations, but he insists on taking into account 'the built-environment metaphor' and tracing out their dialectical interrelationships. He writes:

> '[the social] is best understood as first, an articulated, evolving web of semiotic practices (this is the language metaphor) that, second, builds up and transforms a range of physical frameworks that both provide matrices for these practices and constrain their consequences (this is the built environment metaphor)'. (Sewell, 2005: 369)

For him, structure is indeed 'a profoundly cultural phenomenon' (Sewell, 1992: 27) as social relations are instantiated by human beings who act according to certain embodied schemas. However, the sustained reproduction of schemas 'must be validated by the accumulation of resources' (ibid: 13). Sewell emphasises that sets of schemas and resources constitute structures 'only when they mutually imply and sustain each other over time' (ibid: 13).

Taking the structure of gender as an example, it is sustained, on the one hand, by people's cultural schemas conditioned by performative discourses such as norms and common sayings. On the other hand, it also has to do with both material resources, such as incomes, division of labour and relevant legislations, and human resources, such as body, gesture and bearing (Connell, 2005b). Cultural schemas guide the ways in which these resources are mobilised, meanwhile being further sustained by their mobilisations. In the context of contemporary China, the gender expectation that a man should purchase a house or a flat in order to marry a woman has become a naturalised schema, while the resources

of real-estate further legitimate and reinforce the prevailing gender order. Butler may insist on the ever-lasting possibility of being able to resignify or to subvert this performative gender norm. Nonetheless, the discursive options for 'doing' and 'undoing' gender are unevenly distributed among different social groups. In addition, powerful institutions such as the party-state and real-estate corporations may attempt to reshape and mystify resignifications so as to protect their own interests. For example, some digital marketers working for real-estate corporations may reformulate the meaning of *diaosi* to underline a sense of 'upgrading' by purchasing a fancy flat (see chapter 8). It can thus be 'downright crippling to apply the linguistic analogy and conceptualise structures purely as schemas' (Sewell, 1992: 24).

As Sewell (1992: 14) acknowleges, 'Bourdieu has powerfully illustrated the mutually sustaining relationship between schemas and resources' via his conception of *habitus*. In a nutshell, *habitus* is 'a structured and structuring structure' (Bourdieu, 2010: 167). It is 'a system of durable and transposable dispositions' that is structured by a social group's conditions of existence and 'objective' position in a social space. Incorporating the 'collective history of one's group or class', *habitus* in turn 'functions as a generative basis of objectively unified perceptions, appreciations and actions' (Bourdieu, 1990: 82-83, 86). Echoing Merleau-Ponty, Bourdieu underlines the importance of recognising the habitual and pre-reflexive aspect of human actions. For Bourdieu, *habitus* refers not to a particular habitual practice, but connotes a kind of systematic similarity or homology.

The homology has two senses. First, Bourdieu sees 'a stylistic or ethical consistency apparent across a range of practices' (Crossley, 2013: 155)—such as table manners, accents and tastes of music, movie, theatre, wearing and decoration—insofar as they are enacted by a particular social group. Second, these distinctive practices and distinctive appreciations of practices share a

homology with the 'volume and composition of the different forms of capital (economic, social, cultural, symbolic)' that different social groups accumulate and pass on in a variety of social fields (Skeggs, 2004: 85). The real differences in conditions of existence are thus transformed into 'classifiable' practices and tastes, misrecognised as 'natural' and 'objective' differences in ways of living. For example, a working-class kid's poor family conditions are concealed and naturalised through his 'vulgar' accent, aesthetics and manners, as if these markers of his *habitus* come to legitimate him as 'the deserving poor' (Lawler, 2004).

Bourdieu sets an even bleaker tone with regard to social dominance by pointing out 'the paradox of the dominated': 'Resistance may be alienating and submission may be liberating' (cited in Lawler, 2004: 121). In the British context, for example, Paul Willis (1977) has illustrated how the hyper-masculine and labour-glorifying counterculture developed by working-class lads at school contributes to their inheritance of working-class jobs (see also Connell, 2005). Bourdieu's theory of *habitus* and social practice acknowledges that the reproduction of the social order involves innovative human conduct and interpretation. By comparing *habitus* to a practical 'feel for the game', he suggests that the practices generated by *habitus* are both spontaneous and creative just as an athlete's move in a ball game (cf. Krais, 2006). This comparison also implies that social actors' practices, albeit creative and strategic, can only reactivate and follow the tacit rule 'objectively demanded' by the social game in a given field. A working-class lad may be highly creative in making vulgar jokes and teasing teachers, but for Bourdieu, his creativity cannot go beyond this limit 'objectively demanded' by the existing *doxa* at school to serve as 'a negative reference point' (Bourdieu, 2010: 50). *Habitus* is a 'pre-strategic basis of strategy' (Bohman, 1999: 133), a kind of 'cultural unconsciousness' that induces 'social agents such aspirations and actions as are compatible with the established social order' (Eagleton, 1991: 156).

Crossley (2013) comments that the concept of homology in Bourdieu's *habitus* is as much a strength as a weakness. While Bourdieu's theorisation contains a sense of temporal contingency in social actors' embodiment of the collective history of their social groups, there seems to be little further they can do except for reproducing that collective history via their *habitus*. For Bourdieu (1990: 108), social actors only resort to 'rational and conscious computation' when external major crises, such as social and political upheaval, arise and 'adjust the immediate adjustment of *habitus* to the field.' There are two key problems in Bourdieu's theory of *habitus* and social practice that result in his ruling out of social change from within structures—within existing social relations. First, his theory is built on a fundamental assumption that social actors are constantly in pursuit of distinction, or symbolic capital, by investing in, accumulating and exchanging various forms of values (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1999; Skeggs, 2004). As Beverly Skeggs (2004: 90) puts it, this assumption may well explain 'the middle-class and aspects of working-class inability to inhabit entitled dispositions'. Yet, it does not address *those who cannot or do not want to* join in this kind of social game, together with other systems of values such as those related to emotions, religions and the pursuit of social justice that Bourdieu himself come to embody. Here comes the second problem: in fact social actors are rarely engaged in just one type of 'social game', since we are never situated on a single axis of gender, class, race, ethnicity, kinship, age, occupation, etc. As Sewell (1992: 16) points out: 'While it is common for a certain range of these structures to be homologous, it is never true that all of them are homologous.' The 'multiplicity' and the 'intersection' of structures that 'operate in different modalities' (ibid: 16) suggest that *habitus*, just as the notion of 'common sense' that I reviewed above, is never stable but articulating contradictory elements. After all, *habitus* comprises practical consciousness or knowledge that social actors acquire from a variety of social fields the tacit rules of which may not be compatible. It is thus always in process, subject to revision and change.

Here, I find Saba Mahmood's (2001, 2005) ethnography of the Egyptian Muslim women's piety movement a fruitful example for illustrating how the multiplicity and the intersection of social structures can inform *habitus* transformation in daily life. The next section reviews her work as well her deployment of the Aristotelian approach to *habitus*. I argue that the Bourdieusian and the Aristotelian approaches can be integrated to understand both the activeness and the spontaneity of individuals whose subjective formations are shaped by their discursive practices central to the power struggles of society.

2.7.1 Integrating the Bourdieusian and Aristotelian *habitus*

Mahmood (2001, 2005) conducted her fieldwork amongst Islamic women's reading groups in mosques situated in both middle-class and working-class districts of Cairo. She deploys the concept of *habitus* to theorise her participants' *active* and *conscious* inculcation of pious dispositions via ritual body performances according to their interpretations of Quran scriptures. Mahmood explains that her conception of *habitus* is not in the Bourdieusian sense, but drawing on Aristotle's notion of *hexis*. In the Aristotelian tradition, *habitus* is understood as 'an acquired excellence at either a moral or a practical craft, learned through repeated practice until this practice leaves a permanent mark on the character of the person' (Mahmood, 2005: 136). Mahmood observes that most Egyptian women she worked with understand their ritual practices 'both as *a means* to pious conduct and as *an end*' (Mahmood, 2005: 126). The pious disposition is not the antecedent to, or cause of, ritual and moral actions, but the desired result that these Islamic women aim to gradually acquire via active practice.

For Mahmood (ibid: xi), the piety movement consolidates the religious structure in Egyptian society by 'the cultivation of submission to what its members interpret to be God's will'. From a liberal feminist perspective, these pious women appear to submit to patriarchy as they now take the initiative to put on

hijabs as a ritual practice of piety. However, Mahmood (2001) insists that the meaning of hijabs is much richer than what the dichotomisation of resistance/submission can contain. In fact, the old convention that prevented women from going to mosques collided with the piety movement. This led to many participants' reflections on conventional gender norms, though most of them give priority to the bearing of these norms on their pious practices. While pious subjects seem 'at times inimical and at times indifferent to feminism', their practices of piety, noted by Mahmood (2005: xi), 'have a profoundly transformative effect in the social and political fields'. This can be seen on both the macro level where an increasing number of Egyptian women attend mosques and on the micro level where power dynamics between men and women are 'mediated' by piety to the God (Mahmood, 2005).

Mahmood is surely correct in differentiating the Aristotelian *habitus* from Bourdieu's *habitus*, given that Bourdieu sees the process of acquiring *habitus* as pre-reflexive, 'profoundly unconscious' (Bourdieu, 2010: 70). However, as I noted above on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, the attentive and the pre-reflexive modes are not easy to separate, but inform each other in human actions. We rarely stop acquiring new habits and reforming old ones. For example, using online buzzwords can be seen both as acquiring a 'new' linguistic habit and reforming an 'old' one. We can also notice the influence of the Aristotelian *habitus* on Bourdieu's understanding of the term as 'the incorporation of the social into the corporeal' (Adkins, 2004: 198). I would argue that it is not only possible but fruitful to integrate the Aristotelian and Bourdieuian approaches to *habitus*.

In the piety movement, participants' active pursuit of pious dispositions—'the Aristotelian sense of *habitus*'—leads to a certain degree of reflection on and change from previously taken-for-granted gendered dispositions—'the Bourdieun sense of *habitus*'. But integrating the two approaches, we can see that

the piety subjects' *habitus* becomes contested as one part of it undergoes certain transformation, while the whole process of *habitus* reformation goes back and forth between attentiveness and spontaneity, between reflection and practical consciousness or 'cultural unconsciousness'. Merleau-Ponty (1962: 183) writes: 'Thought and expression...are simultaneously constituted...as our body suddenly lends itself to some new gesture in the formation of habit'. This is particularly the case when individuals actively or spontaneously participate in new discursive practices central to power relations of a society. It is here that identity and cultural politics can play a role, as Butler may argue. To a large extent, the piety movement is a movement of cultural politics. The focal point is the conflicting meanings of piety that mediate and articulates different sets of social relations.

The piety movement that Mahmood describes illustrates that social structures simultaneously constrain and empower social agents (Sewell, 1992). The Islamic women in the Egyptian piety movement can be seen as situated in two major social structures. The first one is the religious structure. Its duality means that Islamic men and women acquire a system of durable and transposable schemas to view the world that enable them to mobilise resources—their body, mosques, etc.—in a specific meaningful way. The meaningful mobilisation of resources in turn enacts their schemas. Yet, the gender structure that these Islamic women are simultaneously situated within entails another duality: married women should not go out (schema), including their access to mosques (resources). This poses a tension to the enactment of their schema of piety, which is transposable across different structures.

A similar tension arises between the gender norm that women should obey their husbands and the religious schema that urges them to convert their husbands to be more pious (Mahmood, 2005). For the two social structures, the norm of piety signifies different and conflicting meanings, which are nonetheless articulated together in pious subjects' *habitus*. The contradictions will thus come to the fore

on some occasions, particularly when a collective movement takes place, leading to their reflection on and change of certain schemas and actions. For John Dewey (1988), reflection on and reform of one habit or set of habits necessarily touches upon other habits. However, we could never reflect on and revise all habits at once, because we are inescapably situated in particular sets of social relations which are constitutive of our embodied agency. As Mahmood (2005) insists, to spot agency, one has first to understand the process and conditions through which subjects acquire certain socially prescribed desires, rather than assuming the existence of independent freedom (see also Crossley, 2013). Taylor's interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's conception of embodied agency resonates with Mahmood: we 'cannot give a purely intrinsic description of the subject' without taking into account 'some features of the world which surrounds him/her' because it is from the embodied world that he/she gains purposes, goals and aspirations (Taylor, 1989: 2).

I now turn to elaborating the notion of embodied agency and then apply it alongside *habitus* to the context of Chinese Internet discourse.

2.8 Embodied Agency

The 'reproductive' tendency of social relations is grounded in the fact that our agency is constitutive of habits which lend both our identities and society a great degree of continuity (Dewey, 1988). The notion of embodied agency first acknowledges the dispositional aspect of social actors' engagement in and with the social world. At the same time, it recognises that the engagement also involves a more reflective and attentive mode of perception and action which is yet grounded in *habitus*. Drawing on Harry Frankfurt, Taylor (1985: 42-43) argues that 'a crucial feature of human agency is the capacity for second-order desires or (self) evaluations of desires'. This kind of re-evaluation or self-interpretation takes on a more attentive mode, reflecting on what is initially taken for granted.

But Taylor emphasises that re-evaluations always have a limit; this limit is 'a largely inarticulate sense of what is of decisive importance' (ibid: 38).

Religious belief is of decisive importance for those participants of the piety movement. To a large extent, their reflections and new insights on gender issues are implicated in their life-long immersion in the social structure of religion. Therefore, as McNay (1999) argues, reflexivity should not be understood 'as a generalised, universal capacity of subjects but to arise unevenly from subjects' embeddedness within different sets of power relations' (cited in Adkins, 2004: 200). Banaji (2017: 34) argues that if agency comprises the dual aspects of dispositions and reflections, then it should be understood as taking on 'historically and contextually specific forms'. In this sense, as Banaji (2017: 196) points out, agency 'exists as a potential' rather than as 'an ontological essence'; her work with rural and urban labouring children who both participate in and are subject to adult values and structural inequalities of caste, gender and class, demonstrates that it appears in an 'ephemeral' manner, being embodied and instantiated via social actors' engagements in and response to specific *temporal-relational situations*. As Banaji points out, Emirbayer and Mische's (1998: 970) definition of human agency is fruitful in this regard:

> *We define it (agency) as the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal-relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations* (original emphasis).

For Emirbayer and Mische, agency is present in all empirical instances of human actions, but it manifests in different forms of 'agentic orientations' that may incline towards an iteration of habits, projection of future, and/or evaluation of the present. Participants of the piety movement who insist on going to mosques and practicing ritual performances illustrate the three orientations at once. Their pious conducts iterates habitual religious practice, but they also anticipate a desired result in the future—to acquire pious dispositions—and evaluate the

present—how to deal with the contradictions between gender norms and religious norms.

Given the multiplicity and intersection of various structural environments, agentic actions can simultaneously appear innovative and obedient with regard to different temporal-relational contexts. Through her ethnography of Indian working-class and middle-class children's uses of media, Banaji illustrates that 'agency can be expressed through a host of actions on a spectrum of conformity and resistance' (2017: 193). In her view, there, agency ranges from 'defiant alienation, through complex negotiated and ephemeral acts of implicit subversion, to apparent conformity or co-option' (ibid: 35). Some actions express what she calls 'contaminated agency' as they are 'deployed against those who are weaker than others, on behalf of the powerful' (ibid: 193). Indeed, as Sewell (1992: 21) emphasises, while agency is exercised by individuals, it is 'collective in both its sources and its mode of exercise. Personal agency is…laden with collectively produced differences of power.' A thoroughly 'embodied' conceptualisation of agency not only grounds the meaning and sense of agency to social actors' lived experiences in specific temporal-relational contexts, but also grapples with the kinds of authority upon which agentic actions rely and the kinds of authority which they endorse.

The last section of the chapter elaborates my notion of the *habitus* of Chinese Internet discourse and the corresponding definition of embodied agency for the thesis. It constitutes the major theoretical framework, followed by my research questions.

2.9 The theoretical framework and research questions

On using online terms in work and everyday life, many Chinese Internet users adopt online buzzwords into their linguistic habits. If Chinese Internet discourse can be compared to a sort of discursive ritual, then it forms a linguistic *habitus* that its users *actively* or *spontaneously* acquire. An immediate question to

explore is what, if any, motivates Internet users to use online terms in daily interactions. My insistence on deploying the concept of *habitus*, to which I integrate the Bourdieusian and the Aristotelian approaches, aims to underline three key points.

First, the habitual use of Chinese Internet discourse can inculcate certain *doxa* into its users in both discursive and social terms. On signifying various intersubjective positions, such as that between *diaosi*, 'vulgar rich' and 'tall-rich-handsome', Chinese Internet discourse draws on and may in turn shape its users' common sense (Gramsci, 1971; Hall and O'Shea, 2013) with regard to the class and gender orders. I am interested in how Chinese Internet discourse forms 'structures of feeling' (Williams, 1977) that intersect and contribute to the structural reproductions or transformations of class and gender in contemporary China. Socially speaking, knowledge and adept use of Internet discourse *per se* constitute a kind of symbolic capital. Many white-collar respondents I interviewed both assume young migrant workers' lack of knowledge to participate in the wordplay of Internet discourse, and interpret this assumed lack as a marker to differentiate the two social groups.

Though both the Williamsian 'structures of feeling' and the Bourdieusian *habitus* can be understood as practical consciousness, the two concepts have been deployed for different analytical purposes. 'Structures of feeling' is a concept more concerned with the 'affective elements of consciousness and relationships'; it refers to 'a form or quality of social experience' which may not be explicitly articulated but 'exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action' (Williams, 1977: 132). I will argue that the 'structure of feeling' among the Chinese urban youth at present can be related to the online term 'envy, jealousy and hatred' and understood as their mimicry of wealthy men and deeply felt lack compared to the aspirational middle-class. This structure of

feeling is constantly registered by young urbanites' *habitus* of Chinese Internet discourse.

The intermediate position that Chinese Internet discourse, as a speech form, tends to construct constitutes the second reason why I deploy the notion of *habitus*. As mentioned above, Bourdieu's conception of *habitus* is in fact oriented towards the Western middle-class. It can well address their pursuit of social distinction and their authorised 'imposition of forms' (Bohman, 1999)—what aesthetics, manners and actions are socially acknowledged or sanctioned—as well as the working-class inability to inhabit entitled dispositions. The wordplay of Chinese Internet discourse is oriented towards young white-collar workers and university students born after 1980 who comprise a majority of the new middle-class in contemporary China. The middle-class orientation of Chinese Internet discourse not only lies in its representations (see chapter 5), but also a variety of 'readiness' in everyday life, such as Internet access, daily routine, other linguistic habits, people that one interacts with, etc (see chapter 6). While acknowledging this middle-class orientation, I do not consider the discursive practice of online wordplay as 'generated' and 'objectively unified' by the so-called 'new middle-class *habitus*', as Bourdieu might have argued it to be. This is because, on the one hand, 'new middle-class' is a fuzzy notion which remains difficult to pin down in contemporary China (see chapter 3). On the other hand, I seek to avoid Bourdieu's deterministic understanding of *habitus* that reduces social actors' agentic practice to their positionality in and the 'objective demands' of the existing social order. The discursive practice of using Chinese Internet discourse, which entails a variety of narratives and intersubjective meanings, does not neatly correspond with a certain class or gender position. For example, in chapter 8 (section 8.1.4), we will see how a number of young migrant workers make active attempts to participate in this middleclass-oriented wordplay so as to earn a kind of cultural entitlement. I am interested in both how Chinese Internet discourse, as a form of linguistic structure, conditions its users' schemas

to perceive social relations in contemporary China, and how different social groups mobilise it as resources in their social actions.

This then leads to my third reason for deploying the concept of *habitus*, which is closer to the Aristotelian approach. Adopted by scholars such as Mahmood and Butler, the approach recognises the room for social actors to be actively engaged with the formation and reformation of certain dispositions. In other words, the approach acknowledges that *habitus* is not static, but open for social actors' reflexivity, reformulation and change. Yet, this attentive mode is grounded in and interactive with the background mode of practical consciousness. Taylor (1999) compares our intelligent action to a seascape. It comprises a vast majority of sea—our largely unformulated and 'practical grasp on the world', dotted with islands—our more formulated and attentive representations which are nonetheless only 'comprehensible against the background provided by…inarticulate understanding' (ibid: 34). Through in-depth interviews (see chapter 4), my research invites respondents to make a more attentive description of their mostly habitual usage and pre-reflexive understanding of Internet discourse. It thus helps to examine the illocutionary force of Chinese Internet discourse and the various forms of ambivalence implicated in people's mimetic identifications with it. That is, the variety of ways in which they inhabit, disengage from, reformulate and contest the socially prescribed desires, aspirations, and *doxic* order signified by Chinese Internet discourse. A reflection on this linguistic *habitus* can also lead to one's elaboration on or even re-evaluation of the articulation of his/her class and gender habitus.

The research nonetheless acknowledges that some utterances of Chinese Internet discourse are just habitually made in a whimsical or shallow manner. More importantly, to avoid an 'agonistic framework' of agency that views performative discourses as either being conformative or subversive, I follow Banaji (2017) in adopting the approach of embodied agency. I relate respondents'

different ways of engagement with Internet discourse to different sets of power relations where they are embedded and their distinct conditions of living. While online terms may 'hail' Internet users in an insidious and diffuse manner, their apparent meaning or meaninglessness is 'filtered' by different social groups' lived experiences. Further, to underline social actors' more chaotic subjectivation in terms of Internet discourse, I adopt Banaji's (2006) term 'invitation of meaning' when she addresses audience interpretations of Bollywood films, instead of using Althusser's nomenclature 'interpellation'. I consider a social group members' general disengagement from or indifference to certain online terms as a form of agency. But this kind of disengagement does not necessarily equate to resistance. Neither does reformulation nor even contestation of Chinese Internet discourse. Both a white-collar man who deploys the term 'black wood ear' to stigmatise female migrant workers and a digital marketer who reformulates the conventional meaning of 'Double Eleven' in a misogynist way are agentic and innovative in terms of wordplay, but, as Banaji (2017) would argue, their innovative agency is conformist and contaminated with regard to the existing gender order that intersects class. It is of great importance to take into account the social authority upon which agentic actions rely on, as resignfication can also be mystifying and fetishising. For the thesis, I define embodied agency as different social groups' various forms of engagement with (including disengagement from) Chinese Internet discourse in multiple temporal-relational contexts.

Based on my theoretical framework, the research questions of the thesis are as follows:

(1) What, if anything, motivates members of different social groups to use or disengage from Chinese internet discourse in their daily life?

(2) Via its use by institutional forces as well as individuals, how does Chinese Internet discourse arise from and contribute to the transformations of gender

and class relations in China?

(3) What forms of agency in relation to gender and class are revealed by the use of or disengagement from Chinese internet discourse by different social groups?

CHAPTER 3: A HISTORICAL REVIEW OF CLASS AND GENDER IN CHINA

To better historicise Internet discourse, this chapter embarks on the challenging yet necessary task of providing a historical review of class and gender relations in China. It covers four major periods: pre-revolutionary China when the country was generally an agricultural society built on Confucianism and patrilineage; the period of the Republic of China (1912-1949) when a series of intertwined revolutions and wars took place; the socialist era (1949-1976) when the CCP (China's Communist Party), under Mao Zedong's lead, carried out radical socialist experiments; and the contemporary era since the CCP's ecoomic reforms in 1978.

I identify with R.W. Connell (1987: 292)'s argument that gender inequality is neither secondary to class, nor could be 'torn down without a class politics'. The core institutions of the contemporary social structure, as she points out, 'fuse gender and class dominations' (ibid: 292). Hence, the chapter juxtaposes reviews of class and gender in each period, and seeks to examine their interconnections. The first two sections of the chapter set my approaches to the concepts of class and gender. In the concluding sections, I will elaborate on the Chinese historian Wang Hui's (2014) concept of 'two types of new poor' and map this conception to the class orientation of online wordplay in contemporary China.

3.1 My Approach to Class and Gender

3.1.1 Debating class

In Western academia, debates about class date back to Marx's and Weber's different theorisation of the concept. Marx (Marx et al., 1998) refers 'class' to a group of individuals in a common relationship to the existing form of production. Accordingly, the possession of economic resources, or ownership, divides two major classes—a dominant class and a subordinate class. Marx's theorisation

points to the exploitation of the proletariat, or the working-class, by the bourgeoisie within the very process of social production in capitalist society. For him, this confrontation will inevitably lead to antagonistic class conflicts and certain forms of social consciousness so that the proletariat, as a 'class in itself', will one day become a 'class for itself' who actively pursue their own interests via social struggles and revolutions (Marx et al, 1998). Weber (1978) does not limit his conceptualisation of class to the single realm of social production and economic resources. For him, class means 'all persons in the same class situation' while different class situations derive from 'various controls over consumer goods, means of production, assets, resources and skills' (Weber, 1978: 302). The differences are not necessarily antagonistic, so class merely represents the 'possible', rather than the inevitable, bases for collective action. To understand what he calls 'social stratification', Weber not only categorises three types of classes—property, commercial and social, but also adds the notion of 'status group' (or stand). For him, 'status' refers to 'an effective claim to social esteem' which is founded on lifestyles, education, social conventions, etc.; it is often related to but not reducible to socio-economic conditions (Weber, 1978: 305-307). For example, the declined nobility may still enjoy privileges despite their lack of wealth.

This last line of thought has been addressed by Bourdieu (e.g. 2010) who further categorises 'dominated fractions' and 'dominant fractions' within the dominant class. If Marx's conception of class underlines socio-economic inequality, Weber emphasises the contribution of prestige, status, culture or lifestyles to refracting social and economic inequality. As I mentioned in chapter 2, Bourdieu acknowledges both the cultural and economic dimensions in reproducing social structure, thus viewing capital as instantiated in economic, cultural, social and symbolic forms. The concept of class is used by him as a 'generic name for social groups' distinguished by their distinct combinations of capital resulting from different conditions of existence (Crompton, 2008: 100-101). While Bourdieu's

theory, particularly his notion of *habitus*, tends to be reproductionist (see section 2.7.1), he nonetheless inherits Marx's insistence on viewing class as *relational*. This is in contrast with the Weberian approach which, despite its more nuanced analysis of inequality, can lead to a *gradational* taxonomy of social stratification. As we shall see in section 3.5.4, stratum analysis has become increasingly orthodox in contemporary China, downplaying the Marxist notion of class and its emphasis on exploitations in social relations of production (Guo, 2009; Lin, 2015). It serves to contain class conflicts and to compartmentalise the living conditions of each social group.

Rosemary Crompton (2008) notes that Marx's initial distinction between 'a class in itself' and 'a class for itself' develops into two directions within Marxist class analysis. Represented by Erik Olin Wright (1979, 1980), the first direction emphasises the primacy of identifying a set of structural conditions which define classes. Methodologically, it adopts an 'employment-aggregate' approach and utilises indicators such as occupations and income to categorise classes by means of surveys. Although integrating indicators proposed by both Weber and Marx to theorise class, Wright (e.g. 1997) articulates his Marxist position by highlighting relations of exploitation and relations to means of production among various occupations. The other strand of Marxist class analysis focuses on human actors, their agency and the historical formation of classes. This 'humanistic' approach is most famously developed by E.P. Thompson (1991) who uses case studies to explore the *processes* through which class consciousness is formed as a consequence of historical changes and political struggles. Emphasising the necessity of viewing class as a historical category, he argues: '[i]f we stop history at a given point, there are no classes but simply a multitude of individuals with a multitude of experiences. But if we watch these men [sic] over an adequate period of social change, we observe patterns in their relationships, their ideas, and their institutions' (Thompson, 1980: 10).

The debates on 'economy' versus 'culture', 'structure' versus 'consciousness' for class analysis are not irreconcilable. As Crompton (2008: 113) points out, since 'inequalities have complex origins, it is perfectly possible that particular circumstances and cases might indeed be primarily explained by structure *or* agency, economy *or* culture'. Perhaps the best example of an integrated understanding of class in China is from Mao Zedong. Despite the very limited number of proletarians in China's revolutionary era, he managed to unite different classes who were least or less powerful—workers, farmers, petty bourgeoisie, intellectuals and even local native entrepreneurs—for a proletarian-led revolution (see more in section 3.3.2). As the Chinese historian Wang Hui (2015) puts it, class can neither be understood as a positivist category, such as a stratum, nor a set of socially baseless rhetoric. Rather, class politics lies in the interplay between objective division of labour and political mobilisation (Wang, 2015).

This thesis, on the one hand, acknowledges that 'social class is subject to historical formation, revision, differentiation and change' (Banaji, 2017: 37; see also Williams, 1977). On the other hand, it attends to the economic relations between classes in a specific historical period as well as the institutional, cultural and symbolic dimensions that conceal, naturalise or refract socio-economic inequality. I adopt a similarly holistic and historical approach to gender, to which the next section turns.

3.1.2 The three dimensions of gender

In chapter 2, I engaged critically with Butler's (1990, 1997) seminal theory of performative discourses and elaborated the duality of social structure (Sewell, 1992, 2005). While the discursive approach is highly instrumental for understanding the historicity and contingency of gender norms and relations, it 'gives no grips on issues about economic inequality and the state' (Connell, 2005: xix) both of which constrain the repertoire of discourses available to certain

social groups or citizens of a country. I thus identify with Connell's (1987) call for studying gender politics from three dimensions: structure, identity and ideology. They are well summarised by van Zoonen (2002: 14):

> In gender theory, gender is understood as referring to three dimensions: social structures which relegate women and men to different social positions, individual identities and experience of what it means to be a woman or a man, and symbolic organisation of society in which several dualities like nature/culture, private/public, leisure/work, coincide with female/male.

The three empirical chapters (particularly 7 and 8) present Chinese youth's gender identities and experience of being men and women in contemporary China. In this chapter, my historical review of gender pays attention to evolving discursive organisations regarding masculinity and femininity as well as the socio-economic conditions that structure Chinese men's and women's social positions in different periods. Following Connell (1987: 98-99), I view the gender order as a 'historically constructed pattern of power relations between men and women and definitions of femininity and masculinity'. The term 'patriarchy', which I will mention repeatedly, refers to men's overall domination over women and the exchange and domination of the female body, physically and/or symbolically, by means that are historically and culturally changing. One major thrust of this thesis aims to illustrate that patriarchy also entails that men of different social positions benefit unevenly from a patriarchal gender order which in some cases imprisons as much as empowers some groups of men. With these theoretical considerations in mind, I now present a brief review of class and gender history in China, starting with the pre-revolutionary period.

3.2 Pre-Revolutionary China

While the notion of 'China' itself is debatable in the field of history, for example, regarding its earliest date, Chinese historians mostly insist that China as a cultural community can be dated back to the Xia Dynasty (approximately 2070-1600 BC) (Xu, 2015). Despite the alternation of dynasties and its reign by

non-Han ethnic group in the Yuan and the Qing Dynasties, ancient Chinese society—known as Imperial China—operated by and large on a social system established in the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC) which was characteristic of centralised government, unified legal code, written language, currency, and an agricultural economy.

3.2.1 China 'from the soil'

The subheading draws on Fei Xiaotong's (1992) sociological analysis of traditional Chinese society. One of his major arguments is that Chinese society is fundamentally rooted in agriculture and villages, which has a huge impact on the way the society is ruled and various social orders, including the gender order. The country's class structure before the early 20th century has mainly been described in relation to a dichotomy between the majority of the population as peasants who were either landless or owning a small portion of land and rural landlords who owed their privileged lives to 'their ownership of a disproportionate share of village land' (So, 2013: 11). In the very limited number of cities, there were imperial bureaucrats and their wives, cocubines, servants and children, as well as few individual craftsmen and businessmen with their families.

Ideologically, Confucian doctrines permeated ancient China, emphasising order between emperor and bureaucrat, father and son, man and woman, wife and cocubine, as well as a disdain for entrepreneurship. The four major professions were categorised in a hierarchical way as 'scholar-official, farmer, craftsman and businessman' (*shi nong gong shang*). In terms of gender, more specifically, the traditional Chinese understanding was situated within the broad cosmology of the *Yin/Yang* dichotomy, which originally connoted a kind of fluid relationship between shade and light (Brownell and Wasserstrom, 2002). Although *Yang* was typically associated with masculine and *Yin* with feminine principles, the two elements were regarded as fluid, possessed by both men and women with

various proportions, as exemplified by the theory of Chinese Traditional Medicine which advocates the balance of *Yin* and *Yang*. A further dichotomy of nature and culture was made and associated with women and men, *Yin* and *Yang*. Whist the naturalistic Taoism prioritises *Yin* over *Yang*, nature over culture, and thus women over men, the Confucian orthodoxy featured the other way around: a wife was seen as inferior to her husband (Brownell and Wasserstrom, 2002: 26).

This gender order was instantiated in the sociospatial construction of the *inside/outside* dichotomy that integrated the division of labour with gender separation. According to Confucian ideals, women were in charge of 'work inside the walls of the family or compound, and their movement beyond those walls was restricted, while men's domain was outside the house' (Jacka, 1997: 3-4). The traditional saying 'men farming and women weaving' (*nangeng nüzhi*) epitomises the gendered division of labour in agricultural China. Although some scholars argue in favour of understanding this norm as entailing a complementary relation of labour instead of women's subordination to men (e.g. Bray, 1997), the inside/outside dichotomy undeniably limited women's gender roles and mobility, assigning all domestic work to women. This dichotomy and division of labour was further naturalised via aesthetics. A genteel way for a husband to refer to his wife is using the euphemism 'inside person' (*neiren*) which has an even more 'elegant' and modest version—'hold-broom' (*zhizhou*). In imperial China, the aesthetic standard of white complexion was constantly promoted by the literati and associated with ideal femininity. In *Classic of Poetry* (*Shijing*), for example, a beautiful woman's fingers are compared to 'white tender sprouts' and her complexion to 'frozen cream'[15]. White complexion not only symbolised ideal femininity—i.e. a woman did not labour 'outside' a household—but also the social status of the man to whom she was married.

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[15] "手如柔荑，肤如凝脂" (*shoururouti, furuningzhi*)

With the recent commodification of gender and sexuality, this patriarchal aesthetic standard of white complexion has been resurrected in contemporary China, illustrated by the online buzzword 'white-rich-beautiful'.

The patrilineal system and prevalence of patrilocal marriage in Imperial China corresponded with women's overall confinement to the inside walls of the family, as discussed below.

3.2.2 Patrilineage and patrilocal marriage

As Evans (1997: 4) points out, a patrilineal system of 'inheritance and power' governed matters concerning marriage and sexual conduct in ancient China. Marriage was predominantly arranged between parents and marriage brokers, most of the time taking the form of patrilocal exogamy (ibid: 5). Uxorilocal marriages were generally 'a last resort in cases of extreme poverty or when the lack of sons threatened continuity of the male line of the bride's natal family' (ibid: 5). The continuity of the patrilineage was so prioritised that young wives who moved into their husband's families could not secure their positions until they had given birth to a son (Wolf, 1972). The phenomenon of selling or sending away daughters as child-brides or maids was common among families of the lower classes who could only afford to and preferred to raise sons. However, Margery Wolf's anthropological work (1972) on a Taiwanese well-off rural family in the late 1950s also indicates that, though Chinese women largely had no rights of divorce or inheritance, they possibly had various ways to negotiate the power relations of the patrilineal system. For example, a woman and her children formed an informal 'uterine family' which at times competed with the formal patrilineal extended family. Women living close to each other could also form a kind of 'women's community' to support each other emotionally. The most famous instance is *Nüshu*, a syllabic script derived from Chinese characters and used exclusively among women in Jiangyong County in Hunan Province.

Another key aspect of the patrilineal system is a premium attached to female chastity which resonates with women's confinement to the domestic realm. As Evans (1997: 5) notes, female virginity, on the one hand, was indispensable to the negotiations of marriage 'for its symbolic value as a signifier of sexual and reproductive ownership'. On the other hand, Confucian doctrines constructed women as the key holders of social morality and stability with their chastity and reproduction of next generations being emphasised. It can thus be observed that certain popular online expressions in contemporary China have historical origins. The online term 'black wood ear' indicates many Chinese men's continuous obsession with vagina and female chastity, as well as their moral judgment of women who take on an active stance in sexual matters (see more in chapter 5). Women opting to stay outside the gender expectation of marriage and motherhood are also negatively evaluated and named as 'leftover women' (cf. Fincher, 2014).

Under the patrilineal system, a man could have a number of wives or concubines as well as free mobility outside a marriage. These practices were frequently justified by one's obligation to have a son. Chinese patriarchy was also characterised by the *wen/wu* dyad which defined hegemonic masculinity.

3.2.3 The *wen/wu* dyad

Drawing on Gramsci, Connell (2005b: 832) deploys the concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' to theorise 'the pattern of practice (i.e. things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity)' that helps to perpetuate inequality and hierarchy between men and women and also among men. Though few men could embody it, hegemonic masculinity maps out the most venerable way of being a man in a historical and cultural setting and requires all men to position themselves in relation to it (Connell, 1987, 2005a). Andrea Cornwall and Nancy Lindisfarne (1994) argue that various hegemonic masculinities can coexist and produce subordinate variants in a gender order. This point appears to be

instantiated by the *wen/wu* dyad which, as suggested by Kam Louie (2002, 2015), underpins the construction of hegemonic masculinity in imperial China.

Wen-wu literally means 'literary-martial' and 'encompasses the dichotomy between intellectual and physical attainments (Louie, 2015: 110). The concept was only used for Chinese men: even though some women excelled in literary or military pursuits, they could not be entitled to the naming of *wen-wu* unless they dressed as men (ibid: 111). The story of Hua Mulan is a famous example. The *wen-wu* dichotomy thus naturalised the gender hierarchy in ancient China by excluding women being naming as such. This exclusion corresponds to the closure of the civil service examinations, known as the *Keju* system, to Chinese women before 1905 when they were abolished. As the only official way of selecting people to become bureaucrats and leaders, the *Keju* examinations were in fact a test of knowledge of classical confusion works (Louie, 2015: 3). Although martial selections were also a part of the *Keju* system to recruit generals, they were not held regularly. Guan Yu, a legendary general from the period of 'three kingdoms' (220-280 A.D.) who has been sacralised as the god of *wu,* is hailed for his martial techniques, strength, as well as his passion about reading books on military strategies. The commendatory idiom 'both wise and brave' (*zhiyong shuangquan*) as opposed to the derogatory one 'having courage but no wisdom' (*youyong wumou*) exemplifies the duality of knowledge and valour in defining ideal masculinity in imperial China. Louie (2015: 3) argues that under the great influence of Confucianism, *wen* (bookish knowledge) was valued higher than *wu* (physical strength) in the *wen/wu* dyad.

However, drawing on Bret Hinsch's (2013) and Zhang Hongjie's (2013) works on masculinities in Chinese history, Magdalena Wong (2016: 22) argues that 'the relative weight of *wen* and *wu* is…manipulated by emperors and leaders for political purposes'. According to both Hinsch and Zhang, it was the founding emperor of the Song Dynasty (starting from 960 BC) who took the initiative to

prioritise cultural accomplishment in order to contain the power of martial generals. From then on, the two prestigious forms of masculinity co-existed. The sort of examination culture and rule of the country by *wenren* (literati) sustained Chinese society until late Qing while the demonstration of bravery and toughness became an exemplary masculinity in the lower rungs of society (Hinsch, 2013), as exemplified in the novel *Outlaws of the Marsh* (*Shuihuzhuan*).

Mastery over the body and over sexual impulses, which is related to the *wen/wu* dyad, also loomed large as a criterion of true masculinity. Again, Guan Yu, one of the most physically powerful male figures in Chinese culture, is nonetheless well-known for his self-containment from female attractiveness. As Louie (2015: 113) puts it, 'containment of excessive and extended use of force' and suppression of one's sexual urges form a predominant part of the discourses of ideal masculinity in ancient China. The suppression of individual sexual desire corresponded with the patrilineal system which prioritised principles of familial and social life. Yet, it also left much leeway for elitist men to patronise prostitutes and male actors (*dan*) who appeared more sexually attractive and culturally refined than their spouses in arranged marriage (Hershatter, 1994). This practice was represented and fantasised in vernacular fictions which gained huge popularity in late imperial China—Ming and Qing Dynasties (Kang, 2009; Wang, 2003; Wu, 2003). Known as the 'talented youth and beauty' (*caizi jiaren*) genre, these kinds of novels feature anti-masculine taste and valorise men of 'feminised appearance and manners' (Wu, 2003: 20). The popularity of beautiful and effeminate boys in contemporary China, which is symbolised by the online buzzword 'little fresh meat' (*xiaoxianrou*), can find its historical roots in late Imperial China, though its patronage has transformed from elite literati to urban women with strong purchasing power.

3.2.4 Valorisation of effeminate masculinity in late Imperial China

Reading through various works of Ming-Qing vernacular fiction, Wu Cuncun (2003) observes that male protagonists in these novels feature a combination of literary talent, feminine beauty, and emotional sensitivity (see also Wang, 2003; Wu and Mark, 2013). Their effeminate attributes, such as white skin, slim figure, and a shy and bashful personality win the heart of many women. In contrast, negative characters are typically exaggerated with 'ample beards, strong, tall bodies and deep voices' (Wu, 2003: 28). Cao Xueqin's depiction of Jia Baoyu, the male protagonist in *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Hongloumeng*), is intertextual with the anti-masculine taste among the literati milieu in the Qing Dynasty. However, this masterpiece is also revolutionary in the sense that Jia Baoyu is critical of Chinese patriarchy and sympathises with the feelings, talents and fates of those young women surrounding him.

Wang Yiyan (2003) insists that the aesthetic trend of soft masculinity in Ming-Qing China did not equal the elevation of women's status. According to her, feminine attributes were 'deemed indispensible for a balanced male body and mind' and thus complementary to masculinity, but 'not vice versa' (ibid: 43). Similar to Wang's position, Wu (2003) argues that the aestheticisation of female beauty among the literati served to reify and reinforce gender difference from a male-centric perspective. This gender-dichotomising and male-centric perspective still lingers in contemporary China. While online buzzwords such as 'little fresh meat' and 'warm men' connote aspirational soft masculinities, some groups of men express strong distaste for these buzzwords and the 'sissy' male figures they signify (see more in chapter 7).

In Ming-Qing vernacular fiction, young effeminate men are attractive not only for women but also for men. Homoerotic novels, with which the modern BL genre (boys love) in East Asia resonates, emerged in the mid-Qing dynasty, depicting romance between literati and boy-actors (Mark and Wu, 2013). Coming from

lower classes with little social status, beautify young boys who played female characters in theatre performances such as Peking Opera were often 'objects of homoerotic desire' and patronised by the literati (Louie, 2015: 128). As Mathew Sommer (2002: 76) notes, the young pretty male 'were cast in 'female' roles as a penetrated object…regardless of the sex of the individual who possessed them (feminine features)'. Therefore, this kind of male homosexuality was rarely deemed as problematic as it did not threaten patriarchy and the phallocentrism epitomised by a fetish of penetration (Sommer, 2002). However, as Kang Wenqing (2009) points out, it remains difficult to evaluate how widespread the practice of sex between men was in late Imperial China, because both the literary writings about sex between men and the patronage of young beautiful boys may only represent the opinions and practice of the elitist literati.

Starting with missionaries and eventually with weapons in mid-19th century, Western forces gradually shook the thousand-year-old Chinese society built on monarch, agriculture, patrilineage and Confucian doctrines. After some unsuccessful reforms which exacerbated conflicts within China, the Qing Dynasty was overthrown by the Nationalist Party (KMT) in 1911. From then on until 1949, the country went through a serial of social movements and wars.

3.3 The Revolutionary Era

This historical period was entangled in a kaleidoscope of major events, the complexity of which is beyond the scope of discussion here. Nonetheless, a key thread ran through this compressed and complex period: Chinese intellectuals' endeavors to revitalise the country through modernisation and enlightenment. A prominent component of this grand project was the modernisation of gender notions and sexuality. As Wang Zheng (2017: 2) summarises: the early 20th century witnessed the 'cross-currents of feminism, anarchism, socialism, liberalism, nationalism, and Marxism'. Corresponding with these ideological struggles were real-life violence, military combat and political strife among

Chinese local warlords, Western colonisers, Japanese fascists, Nationalists and Communists. The next two sections respectively sketch out the entanglement of national modernisation, individual freedom and women's liberation, and the CCP's route of struggle to reunite the country.

3.3.1 Cross-currents of national independence, modernisation, individualism, and feminism

When Sun Yat-sen, first president of the Nationalist Government and the Republic of China, established the Chinese Revolutionary Alliance (*tongmenghui*) in 1905, he raised the slogan 'To expel the northern barbarians, to revitalise the Chinese nation, to establish a republic, and to distribute land equally among the people'. The 'northern barbarians' (*dalu*) refers to the Manchu ethnic group who ruled China in the Qing Dynasty, while the 'Chinese nation' (*zhonghua*) was specifically linked to the majority Han Chinese. China's nationalistic movements in the early 20th century entailed a duality of both resisting foreign invasions and asserting the orthodox reins of Han ethnicity. Sun's slogan also exemplified many Chinese revolutionaries' imagination to modernise the country via democracy and socialism, though it was Chinese Communists rather than Nationalists who eventually put into practice his initial socialist scheme.

The double agendas of modernising and democraticising China gained wider circulation via the May Fourth New Culture Movement which lasted from the mid-1910s to the 1920s. Urban intellectuals who were disillusioned with the newly established Republic of China called for an 'anti-tradition' and 'anti-Confucianism' new culture based on the Western notions of democracy and science. Some of the progressive intellecutals that were active during the May Fourth Movement later became founding members of China's Communist Party in 1921. Another key agenda of the Movement was to abolish the patrilineal family in favour of individual freedom and women's liberation. Related notions such as *nannü pingdeng* (equality between men and women) and *nüquan zhuyi*

(the –ism of women's rights) became increasingly popular among intellectuals and urban students who viewed gender hierarchy, gender separation and double sexual standards as quintessential symbol of China's backwardness (Wang, 2017: 4). As Qin Hui (2015) points out, in the New Culture Movement, individuals' liberation from the highly ordered structure of family and society were endowed with a nationalistic meaning. This articulation between the individual and the national has formed a major thread underpinning the ideological struggles and changes in China since then.

During the May Fourth Movement, free-choice monogamous marriage was advocated and practiced among educated urban people. Meanwhile, in big cities such as Shanghai, sexual commodification took place. This not only led to a variety of new gender representations and practices, such as advertisements using female models (e.g. Wang and Lü, 2016), but also triggered debates among intellectuals. For example, the emergence of courtesans in early 20th-century Shanghai was simultaneously celebrated as embodying sophisticated urbanity and criticised as a marker of national decay (Hershatter, 1994). Similarly, urban elites' opinions split regarding male same-sex relations, which were either pathologised according to Western sexology or idealised as an alternative to conventional social and sexual norms (Kang, 2009). As both Hershatter (1994) and Kang (2009) observe, these debates over sexual relations were typically associated with broader issues of nationhood and cultural identity. This logic is epitomised by May-Fourth intellectuals' nationalistic and gendered comparison of China to a man who 'was treated like a woman by stronger nations' (Hershatter, 1994: 162).

It could thus be said that gender and sexual liberation in the Republic of China was quite limited in both scale and scope. On the one hand, new gender practices were far from reaching rural areas (Evans, 1997). On the other hand, there constantly existed tensions over 'whether to stress nationalism or gender

oppression in the mobilisation of women' (Gilmartin et al., 1994: 20). Through analysing an influential journal devoted to discussing family issues in the New Culture Movement, Susan Glosser (2002) argues that some of the progressive male intellectuals in the New Culture Movement were most interested in finding ideal wives to serve their nationalistic actions, despite their rhetoric about women's independence and full personhood in marriage. According to her, the patriarchal authority appeared in a more subtle way among some of the progressive male intellectuals in the New Culture Movement.

Nonetheless, there were also numerous Chinese women struggling for gender equality alongside their participation in nationalistic movements (cf. Gilmartin, 1994; Yang, 2017). Among them, leftist women intellectuals constituted a prominent group. Holding that women's thorough emancipation could only be achieved in a socialist society, these feminists joined the Communist Party in the 1920s (Wang, 2017). With Nationalists and Communists turning against each other in 1927, the CCP was forced to occupy mountainous and rural areas with its outlawed status. Experiencing the reality of rural life, these leftist women intellectuals recognised that rural women lived not only in the 'feudalist' captivity of patrilineal kinship and patrilocal marriage, but also in stark poverty. To transform the 'interlocking oppressions of poverty and gendered bondage', they sought to mobilise rural women into social production (Wang, 2017: 6). This endeavour dovetailed with the Communist Party's strategy of 'strengthening rural villages to encircle the cities' (*nongcun baowei chengshi*).

3.3.2 The strategy of 'strengthening villages to encircle the cities' and mobilisation of *funü*

By the time the CCP was founded in 1921, China had been in great division: on the one hand, western invaders established their settlements in major cities and enjoyed a high degree of extraterritoriality. On the other hand, the country was divided into several parts controlled by warlords while the Nationalist

government remained too weak to mediate amongst them. Although the Qing Dynasty was overthrown, most parts of China had not yet gone through fundamental changes economically (Fei, 1992). According to some surveys which provided an approximate picture of land distribution during the Republican Era (Goodman, 2014: 10), landlords who accounted for merely 4% of rural households owned 39% of the land, followed by 6% rich peasants (*funong*) who hired labour to help them farm the 17% of the land that they owned. 22% of rural households were middle peasants (*zhongnong*) who owned and farmed the 30% of the land by themselves, while 36% poor peasants (*pinnong*) owned 14 per cent of the land and had to rent land from landlords to survive. Lastly, there were 24% tenant peasants (*gunong*) who hardly owned any land and 8% agricultural labourers who had no land. With initial industrialisation in coastal cities, a nascent working class emerged; yet its population was 'no more than 1 million in a land of 400 million people' (Meisner, 1999; cited in So, 2013: 12).

Influenced and funded by the Soviet Union, the CCP at first followed the orthodox Marxist view of social struggle by organising industrial workers to fight against compradors and foreign capitalists in big cities. Most of these movements were violently cracked down on by the Nationalist government which not only aligned itself with foreign capitalists but also started to suppress communists nationwide from 1927. Mao Zedong, who gradually assumed leadership in the outlawed CCP, argued that the principle class confrontation in Chinese society was between peasants and landlords. Still insisting on a proletarian revolution, Mao nonetheless considered the class of proletariat (*wuchan jieji*) in China as including both industrial workers and landless peasants. His notion of 'class' integrates socio-economic conditions with possibility of mobilising different classes sharing similar conditions of living to take collective actions via ideological educations (cf. Mao, 1925). In his essay on the 'New

Democratic Revolution'[16] (*xin minzhu zhuyi geming*) where he summarised his thoughts on the CCP's strategy, Mao (1940) writes: 'the fundamental problem of China's revolution lies in the problem of peasants; the power of peasants is the major driving force of China's revolution.' He called for a route of 'strengthening rural villages to encircle cities'. That is to establish socialist regime first in rural areas via armed fighting and land revolution so as to eventually surround major cities and to reunite the whole country.

A critical component of the CCP's struggle was mobilising rural women into social production. Against the backdrops of economic blockades and warfare, the Communist government sought to achieve self-sufficiency by creating a community of labour where 'everybody participated in production' (Dong, 2017). *Funü* became a buzzword that was repeatedly used in the party's propaganda discourses which underlined equality between men and women as well as women's liberation from the shadow of family and kin. While literally meaning 'women', the term *funü* has revolutionary and socialist connotations. As Tani Barlow (1994: 345) summarises from the writings of Kang Keqing, Deng Yingchao and Cai Chang, three of the highest level women cadres of the CCP, '(1) *funü* are a revolutionary force, (2) their liberation is a condition of proletarian revolution, and (3) productive labour is the basic condition of women's liberation.' Despite initial hesitation and confusion, a great number of rural women in the CCP territories joined the productive force and the cooperative economy by, for example, 'weaving for the collective' (Dong, 2017). 'Men farming and women weaving'—the traditional division of labour—was endowed with new, collectivist meaning. Through interacting with other women and earning revenue, they received a sense of dignity which is essential for the liberation of the underclass (Perry, 2002).

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[16] As distinct from the 'Old Democratic Revolution' led by the Nationalist party

Writing on the history of China's socialist feminism, Wang Zheng (2017: 9) records that while the first cohort of women Communists 'were urban-based educated feminists' of the May Fourth generation, the second cohort 'was mainly composed of rural women' who participated in the Revolution and guerrilla wars when the CCP established its rural military base in the 1930s. During the Sino-Japan War (1937-1945) and the Civil War (1946-1949), the CCP continued to attract women from diverse backgrounds, including urban students, factory workers, professionals, rural women and even urban celebrities. As a number of historians have emphasised, women played a key role in the Chinese revolutions and continued to contribute to building the new-born socialist China after 1949 (e.g. Wang, 2017; Hershatter, 2011).

3.4 The Mao Era (1949-1976)

When the People's Republic of China (PRC) was founded in 1949, the CCP government initially described the new regime as shared by four classes—workers, peasants, the urban petty bourgeoisie (including intellectuals) and the national bourgeoisie who had formed patriotic alliance against the 'three mountains of feudalism, imperialism and comprador capitalism' in the Chinese revolution (Mao, 1940). It also emphasised that the revolution was led by the working-class and based on the alignment between workers and peasants, while the CCP positioned itself as the 'vanguard' of the working class and the peasantry. The *Common Program of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference*[17], which served as the first constitution of the PRC, allowed private ownership of both national capitalists and self-farming peasants. But hostility from the West, the constant possibility of warfare and China's forced withdrawal from the world economy all made Mao determined to accelerate economic collectivisation and industrialisation from 1953 (So, 2013).

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[17] See its shortened version in English via http://www.lawinfochina.com/display.aspx?id=13212&lib=law

3.4.1 Land reform, collectivisation, and industrialisation

As its major initiative to win the support of the peasantry, the Communist government had launched the land reform in its rural military base before 1949. The slogan 'fighting landlords and allocating the land' (*datuhao fentiandi*) epitomised its target and content. Interestingly, the term *tuhao*, which meant old landlords who were the 'enemy' of the socialist revolution, is again widely circulated in contemporary China via online wordplay. Connoting the 'vulgar rich', *tuhao* in the meaning system of Chinese Internet discourse refers to someone to be mimicked, to 'make friends with' (see chapters 5 and 6). The land confiscated from old landlords was distributed among 'poor and lower-middle peasants' (*pinxia zhongnong*) according to their family size. The tag *pinxia zhongnong* was regarded as two of the five progressive 'class origins' alongside soldiers, cadres and workers.

This initial privatisation of land ownership was replaced by land collectivisation from the mid-1950s, which eventually took the form of a three-level system: commune (3000-3500 households), production brigade (a village or cluster of hamlets, 200-250 households) and production team (30-40 households) (Oi, 1989; cited in So, 2013: 125). Earning work points by farming for the collective became the only legitimate way of making a living (cf. Hershatter, 2011). The collectivisation of land, on the one hand, elevated agricultural productivity and assured subsistence for the vast majority of the rural population, with the exception of the Great Leap famine years (cf. Yang, 2008). On the other hand, it also facilitated the government's drive to 'extract surplus from the countryside to promote rapid industrialisation in the cities' (So, 2013: 28).

In the Mao era, particularly before the Cultural Revolution, the CCP government followed the Soviet Union by giving priority to developing heavy industry such as arms and machinery, which resulted in an enormous expansion of the industrial workforce. Accounting for about 80% of the urban population (Goodman, 2014:

35), workers were highlighted in the official rhetoric as the most progressive class and as representing the most advanced force of production. Accordingly, they enjoyed permanent employment, known as the 'iron rice bowl' (*tiefanwan*), and had access to a wide range of welfare benefits' ranging from medical treatments and child cares, to food subsidies (cf. Jia, 2009). As the primary industrial zone, Northeast China was compared to the 'eldest son of the Republic' (*gongheguo de zhangzi*) (Wang Xiangxian, 2016). This metaphor not only indicated the gendered identity construction of workers (see more in section 3.4.3) but also the uneven distribution of resources in the Mao era. In the patrilineal system, the eldest son is granted the most privileges within a family. As Andrew Walder (1984) puts it vividly, it was the revolution that made the Chinese working class rather than the other way around. This kind of top-down empowerment also meant that when the party changes its developmental model, the high status of workers and manual labour can be easily wiped out (Wang Xiangxian, 2016).

While workers in urban state-owned enterprises enjoyed both protection of Labour Law and various social welfares, peasants who were temporarily hired by work units for seasonal jobs were not protected by the Labour Law and strictly prevented from becoming formal workers (Huang, Z., 2013). These temporary workers from the countryside were called *mingong* (peasant workers), a derogatory term still being widely used by the urban population to name rural migrant workers nowadays (see chapter 6 and also Lin, 2013). With the party's prioritisation of urban heavy industry, the long existing urban/rural divide in China continued to be sustained in the Mao era. As the 'eldest son', many urban workers felt entitled to look down upon rural peasants, which is recorded in the memoir of former industrial workers in northeast China (Jia, 2009). This kind of urban/rural distinction immanent in the identity construction of workers in the Mao era has to be borne in mind when we reflect on class-related identities in

contemporary China. Moreover, the distinction has been further institutionalised by the *hukou* system.

3.4.2 *Hukou* system and urban-rural duality

The *hukou* (household registration) system, which has long historical roots in Imperial China, was revived in the centrally planned economy of the 1950s (Wang, F., 2010). As Wang Feiling (ibid: 337) puts it, 'only in the PRC did the *hukou* system achieve an unprecedented level of uniformity, extensiveness, rural-urban duality, effectiveness and rigidity.' In a nut shell, the *hukou* system severely limited one's opportunities for moving somewhere else because, similar to a kind of 'domestic' visa, one cannot acquire legal status, citizenship and numerous community-based rights and benefits outside the place of the household one registers (Cheng and Selden, 1994). For almost five decades, Chinese people's *hukou* was categorised into two types—rural and urban (non-agricultural). Until 1998, a person's *hukou* location and categorisation of type were determined by his/her mother's *hukou* instead of one's birth place (Wang, F., 2010). While this *hukou* inheritance was less an identity problem in the Mao era as internal migration was restricted, it has led to a liminal status of self-identity among hundreds of millions of young migrant workers who were neither born nor grew up in their *hukou* locations (see more in section 3.5.2).

According to Wang Feiling (2010), the PRC *hukou* system performs three more functions in addition to the routine use of household registration for personal identification and information collection of the populace found in other countries. First, it forms 'the basis for resource allocation and subsidisation for selected groups of the population' (ibid: 339). In the Mao era, the *hukou* system heavily favoured the urban population which only accounted for 20% of the total population (Goodman, 2014: 35). While the number of casualities of the Chinese famine in the 1960s is heavily contested by historians, people who starved to death were almost all rural residents having no access to urban-*hukou*-based

food rations (Yang, 2008). Second, *hukou* files enable the police to monitor and control a small population of targeted people, which has contributed 'effectively and significantly to China's political stability' (Wang F., 2010: 339). Third, the *hukou* system allows the government to restrict internal migration, especially rural-to-urban migration.

Under the stringent restriction of rural-urban movement in the Mao era, only 329,000 rural residents in total were ever permitted to 'elevate' their *hukou* to urban (Wang C., 2012). The kind of reverse 'downward' mobility was more common. In the late 1960s, the 'Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages' Movement (*shangshan xiaxiang*) sent millions of urban 'educated youth' (*zhiqing*) to the countryside. In these cases, they were provided with a new household registration that largely prevented their return (Bernstein, 1977). In post-Mao China, numerous TV serials, novels and memoirs based on the *zhiqing* theme depict this urban generation's tragic fate of losing urban *hukou* and their various attempts to regain it. *Zhiqing* becomes a name that symbolises the rural-urban duality and the *hukou* system underpinning this hierarchy. Moreover, if the *shangshan xiaxiang* movement instantiated Mao's attempt to integrate urban and rural China, the *zhiqing* genre forms an important part of the 'allegory of post-socialism' (Rofel, 1999) which rejects the Mao era as suppressing human nature in contemporary China. Apart from the theme of forcing urbanites to live in the backward countryside, another two major references of the post-socialist allegory lie in the 'hyper-politicisation' of class struggle and the 'masculinisation' of women, to which the next two sections respectively turn.

3.4.3 The 'hyper-politicisation' and 'behaviourisation' of class struggle

Although the collectivisation of land and nationalisation of factories turned both the rural and urban parts of China relatively egalitarian in the Mao era, the country was nonetheless becoming hierarchical and characterised by status stratifications. Apart from the stringent *hukou* system, the status stratifications

were instantiated in 'bureaucratically assigned class labels' that identified every individual (Davis and Wang, 2009: 15).

Starting in 1950, every Chinese citizen was assigned a class descriptor (62 in total) which appeared in the form of code on their *hukou* files; this coding system was officially abolished in 2005. Each individual had two labels: 'class composition' (*jieji chengfen*) and 'family background' (*jiating chushen*): 'class composition' was determined by a person's activities during 1946-1949 and 'family background' by the father's activities when the individual in question was born (Goodman, 2014: 13-14). As David Goodman noted, the dual perspectives again indicated 'Mao's understanding of class for many years' as integrating 'socio-economic conditions and political attitudes' embodied by behaviour (ibid: 14). Yet, the distinction between 'class composition' and 'family background' was ambiguous. In reality, the former tended to be over-determined by the latter, resulting in a combined identity—'class origin' (*jieji chushen*), as if it was not possible for one to change the class position that he/she was born into. 'Class origin' not only became the main determinant of an individual's and his/her family's life chances, such as education, career and even marriage partner, but also an 'overloaded tool…licensed to explain, target, and attack everything', particularly during political campaigns (So, 2013: 28, 30). Such an over-emphasis of one's class background when the country was relatively egalitarian appears in sharp contrast to the constant downplaying of class in contemporary China which is becoming increasingly unequal. But the distrastrous consequences caused by the previous emphasis on class conflict and class struggle came to justify the present avoidance of the notion, which constitutes an integral part of the 'allegory of post-socialism' (Rofel, 1999).

Among the 62 labels of 'family background', five labels were considered especially progressive—cadres, soldiers, workers, lower-middle peasants and poor peasants. In 1967—the early stage of the Cultural Revolution, the central

CPC government gave guidance that 'Red Guards should mainly consist of revolutionary students born in the family of labouring people (workers, peasants, soldiers, revolutionary cadres and other labourers)'[18]. As a widespread term in the Mao era, 'labouring people' (*laodong renmin*) indicates the great importance attached to manual labour. The juxtaposition of the five progressive labels with 'Red Guards'—the major force of the Cultural Revolution—led to a buzzword the 'red five' (*hong wulei*). Another corresponding buzzword during the Cultural Revolution was the 'black five' (*hei wulei*), which refers to 'landlords, rich peasants, anti-revolutionists, bad influencers, and rightists'. Although these buzzwords are no longer in use nowadays, both this kind of lexical form and the practice of group-labeling continue to exist in contemporary China, exemplified by online terms such as 'second-generation of the rich' (*fuerdai*).

Some historians and political scientists studying the Cultural Revolution seek to go beyond the lingering Cold War paradigm which views Mao as a unpredictable dictator of the 'totalitarian Communist party-state' (cf. Perry and Li, 1997; Wang H., 2008; Wu, 2014; So, 2013). According to them, the Cultural Revolution was initiated both top-down and bottom-up by workers and students to challenge the bureaucratisation of the party-state and the new ruling class of cadres. There existed certain essential discussion about which road the party-state should take at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. But this kind of discussion was soon overwhelmed by life-and-death struggles more 'on the basis of personal animosities or ambitions' (So, 2013: 28) which were largely beyond Mao's control as such (Wu, 2014). Following Mao's call to 'seise power from those in authority taking the capitalist road', tens of millions of 'Red Guards' joined mass revolts targeted at certain CCP cadres, intellectuals, teachers and other authority figures (Goodman, 2014: 22). Instead of being property-based, class became 'behaviourised' ((So, 2013: 26) in the sense that individuals were prosecuted

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[18] See the guidance in Chinese via http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_73767cad0100w7s3.html

according to their 'class behaviour' and 'class origin' which always left room for arbitrary interpretation and personal revenge.

Rehabilitations of the victims who had been brutally treated, killed, or committed suicide in the Cultural Revolution are still going on in contemporary China. The post-Mao government constantly avoids and bans serious discussion about the period, merely naming it as 'a decade of turmoil'. The Cultural Revolution was a 'hyper-politicised' era when Chinese people attempted to re-establish political struggle against a bureaucratic regime (Wang, 2008). In contrast, the post-Mao government, initially led by Deng Xiaoping who was purged out of the core Party leadership during the Revolution, has been eschewing ideological debates and adopting 'depoliticised politics' (Wang, 2008). The once heated notion of 'class struggle', alongside other buzzwords such as 'labouring people', now appears as old-fashioned, belonging to the hyper-politicised Mao era (Rofel, 1999). What also seems to be peculiar to that period is the imagery of androgynous women.

3.4.4 Socialist state feminism and (rural) women's double shifts

Following its gender policy in the revolutionary era, the CCP government continued to emphasise participation in economic production as the basic condition of women's liberation. As one of the three national organisations, All-China Women's Federation (*quanguo fulian*) was established alongside the Youth Association (of students) and the Trade Union (of workers), to 'vertically reach all women down to the rural villages and urban neighborhoods nationwide' (Wang Z., 2017: 12). The CCP government also authorised the ACWF to draft the 1950 Marriage Law which not only ordained free-choice, equal and monogamous marriage but also allowed divorce. The new Marriage Law, though encountering ferocious resistance in its implementations, enabled numerous rural women who were sold to men or endured abusive marital life to escape from such predicaments (Wang Z., 2017). From the 1950s to the 1960s, the ACWF utilised

films, drama plays and other forms of cultural production (cf. Guo, 2016; He, 2017; Wang Z., 2016) to popularise gender equality and to set examples of liberated 'new women' (*xinfunü*). It was also during this period that Mao raised the famous slogan 'women hold half of the sky' to underline women's equal right to work and to get equal payment.

All these measures further transformed the sociospatial construction of the inside/outside dichotomy. Through her ethnography on three generations of female workers in a Chinese silk factory, Lisa Rofel (1999) argues that the CCP's Marxist discourse on women and labour served to delineate a new dichotomy between the 'feudal constraints' of domestic dependency and the liberation of 'work' outside home. This was particularly empowering for those women who had already worked in factories during the revolution as it shifted their self-perception from shame to pride (see also Rofel, 1994). The construction of new womanhood was so tied to labour that many women understood gender equality as 'whatever you men can do, I can too' (Hershatter, 2011: 236). This was reflected in a propaganda poster of the slogan 'women hold half of the sky' which represents Chinese women as worker, farmer and pilot (see figure 3.1). The same logic appeared in the story of 'iron girls' (*tieguniang*). In 1963, a group of 23 young women who joined in farm work in Dazhai, Shanxi Province, refused to go home when the male village head told them to given the extremely cold weather. These women insisted that 'since the men do not go home, we will not go home, either' (Wang Z., 2017: 222). The village head's compliment 'you girls are made of iron' gave birth to the buzzword 'iron girls' circulated nationwide via radio, newspaper and songs; and the 23 young women were highlighted as great example of socialist new women. The contemporary online buzzword 'masculine woman' (*nvhanzi*), while apparently resonating with 'iron girls', connotes much more ambivalence over women's independence and strength (see more in chapter 5).

Figure 3.1: a propaganda poster of 'women can hold half of the sky' in the Mao era

The contribution of 'state socialist feminism' (Wang Z., 2017) to elevating women's status during the Mao era cannot be easily dismissed. But its various limitations provide historical references for understanding the backlash against gender equality in contemporary China (Meng and Huang, 2017). First and foremost, while the party-state underlined women's equal participation in social production, it remained mostly silent about the 'productive and affective activity taking place in the domestic realm' (Hershatter, 2011: 185). The differentiation between valued labour in the public domain and unrecognised labour within the family was indicated by the two wordings *laodong* (labour) and *jiawu* (housework). Consequently, many women in the Mao era, particularly rural women, had to take 'double shifts' by working for the collective during the day and for the family during the night (Eyferth, 2018; Hershatter, 2011; Jacka, 1997). In effect, the socialist dichotomisation of 'public' and 'private' resulted in 'a

further devaluation of women's work' inside the household (Jacka, 1997). Moreover, a great number of rural men were drawn off to temporary industrial work *outside* their home villages while the feminisation of agriculture appeared as a new kind of *inside* work. This new form of inside/outside dichotomy continues to play out in gender relations in rural China nowadays. The dichotomy was also associated with others dyads, such as 'light', 'unskilled', 'women's work' and 'heavy', 'skilled', 'men's work' (Jacka, 2017). They served not only to legitimate gendered remuneration of work points in the Mao era, but also to justify laying off female workers first in urban state enterprises with the beginning of China's marketisation (cf. Honig and Hershatter, 1988; Rofel, 1999).

ACWF cadres were well aware of Chinese women's double burdens, proposing to establish childcare centres, public canteens, etc. to relieve their household chores (Gao, 1994; Hershatter, 2011). These forms of social welfare were better carried out in cities under the work-unit system, so that urban women in Mao China saw marked improvements in their lives (Eyferth, 2018). But as Wang Zheng (2017) notes, female cadres had to fight for women's interests and rights 'from an internally structured disadvantaged position' by concealing gender-related agendas under the national projects of modernisation and economic development. Throughout the Mao era, gender politics was subsumed under class politics and the deep-seated patriarchy within the party leadership as well as the cadre system. Any discussions of gender issues located outside the CCP's statist projects tended to be dismissed as a 'struggle between the two sexes' if not being accused of 'bourgeois feminism' (Evans, 2008). Harriet Evans (1997) argues that the CCP's standards of gender equality were implicitly masculinist. This, on the one hand, was illustrated by the masculinised construction of the working class—the 'eldest son of the republic'. On the other hand, it was instantiated in the 'gender-neutral clothing covering the female body' which functioned to reinforce a representation of sexual order that

depended on the women's denial of potential interests of her own in favour of those defined by external agencies' (Evans, 2007: 29).

With the marketisation of economy and commodification of gender, the imagery of 'iron girls' was transformed from symbolising liberated women to epitomising the suppression of femininity and human nature in the Mao era (Wang Z., 2017). Women's employment rate dropped from nearly 90% in the 1970s to 64% in 2014 (Eyferth, 2018). Yet, many urban women born in the reform era are willing to retreat to the family and take domestic roles (Rofel, 1999; Zuo, 2016). To understand this tendency, we have to look at the new entanglements of class, gender and the rural-urban divide in contemporary China.

3.5 Contemporary China

After Mao died in 1976 and Western countries lessened their hostility, in 1978, the party-state launched China's ecoomic reforms that 'would reduce the role of government in economic management, introduce marketisation to the domestic economy and open the domestic economy to global interactions' (Goodman, 2014: 23). The new socio-economic system has been officially named as the 'socialist market economy' with the new developmental route being called 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'. The post-Mao government, led by Deng Xiaoping between 1978 and the early 1990s, underlined the idiom 'restoring order from chaos' (*boluan fanzheng*), as if the whole country was entering a brand new era. Although many scholars consider China's current economy as a localised form of neoliberalism (e.g. Harvey, 2005; Rofel, 2007; Sun, 2014; Wang H., 2008; Wang Z., 2017), the CCP government continued to play a central role in deciding the direction and the scale of marketisation (most obvious in the media industry) as well as in resource allocation. Its interventionist role is manifestly reflected in the birth control policy which has profoundly affected Chinese people's life.

3.5.1 The concurrence of birth control and ecoomic reforms

China's birth planning policy was initiated in the 1950s to promote the use of contraceptive measures and to relieve rural women of childcare (White, 1994). The policy was voluntary before 1970 and unevenly conducted before 1978 (Fong, 2002). It became strictly enforced as the One-Child policy under Deng's government which related China's development and modernisation to its size and *quality* of population (Croll, 1985). As we shall see below in section 3.5.4, the notion of population quality is also entailed by the widespread *suzhi* discourse in post-Mao China.

Concurring with the economic reforms, the execution of the One-Child policy received divergent reactions from urban and rural residents which can again be attributed to the urban-rural duality regarding resource allocation. During the Mao era, rural households continued to perform a number of socio-economic functions, such as side-line income and support of the elderly. Patrilocal marriage was still common. So were both men's and women's preference for sons and the ideal of the extended family (Croll, 1985; Davin, 1985). Yet, most rural families had been able to and willing to bring up their girl-babies since 1949 (Davin, 1985).

From the early 1980s, the government introduced the responsibility system to rural China. It enabled rural households to 'contract' land from the collective production team or brigade and to be responsible for their own gains and losses. Delia Davin (1985: 60-61) notes that the responsibility system reinforced the patriarchal authority in rural China since each household was required to select a 'head of household' (*huzhu*) who was almost always 'the eldest working male'. Moreover, boys became not only culturally but also economically more favoured. Many rural peasants thus strongly resisted the One Child policy, insisting that 'as long as they farmed their own contracted land, their children were their own business' (ibid: 59). Their resistance, on the one hand, resulted in a *de-facto*

two-child policy in rural China as those couples whose first-born were girls were allowed to give another try (Davin, 1985). On the other hand, it resulted in a distressing renewal of female infanticide, malnutrition, and baby trafficking (Croll, 1985; Davin, 1985). Rural peasants' resistance against birth control and preference to sons were represented by a comedy skit in 1990 Spring Festival Gala of China Central Television Station (CCTV), titled as 'extra-born guerrillas' (*chaosheng youjidui*). Without explaining any economic factors, the comedy depicts a rural couple who attempt to hide their illegal son after having three daughters. The name of 'extra-born guerrillas' ridicules the backward gender notions of the rural population from an urban perspective. As we shall see, this theme is also picked up in Chinese Internet discourse. Furthermore, the naming utilises revolutionary rhetoric and associates it with the rural population. I would argue that this kind of association is central to the post-socialist allegory as it takes the backwardness of rural China to metaphorise the Mao era which should thus be rejected and reformed.

By contrast, the One-Child policy has inadvertently empowered urban daughters (Fong, 2002) on the basis of the Mao-era legacy. In cities, the birth rate had already dropped before 1978 with the separation of production from the urban household and the increasing costs of raising children. Parents were also less reliant on the next generation because of secure incomes and the introduction of a pension system (Croll, 1985: 18). As Vanessa Fong (2002: 1098) points out, urban women's low fertility and paid work enabled them to demonstrate their equal capability to support their old parents. All these weakened the economic foundation of the preference for sons, and facilitated the enforcement of the one-child policy in urban China. Although there were also adopted or unregistered daughters, the majority of urban women born after 1980 enjoy unprecedented parental support and investment in their education (Fong, 2002). Urban girls have also outperformed boys in school, so much so that the popular saying 'the female to wax and the male to wane' (*yinsheng yangshuai*) has been

echoing for decades since the 1980s. Despite implicit or explicit gender discriminations, numerous urban young women born after 1980 have become educated career women with strong purchasing power.

What also seems to be privileging Chinese young women is the disproportionate sex ratio in China (Wong, 2016) as an unintended consequence of the family planning policy. At present, the country's sex ratio is roughly 118 males for every 100 females (Goodman, 2014: 37). This great disproportion contributes to widespread male anxiety particularly among rural young men with their continuous gender obligations of marriage and patrilineage (Lin, 2013). These conventional gender norms are now articulated with new socio-economic relations. The next section sketches out the changing class structure in contemporary China.

3.5.2 Class structure in contemporary China

China's ecoomic reforms started with the opening of several special zones and major cities for foreign trade. This has led to highly unbalanced development. For example, the average disposable incomes of residents in Shanghai and Beijing in the first quarter of 2018 were 4 to 5 times higher than those in Xinjiang and Tibet, while the urban-rural income gap within each province ranges from 2 to 6 times (Lin, 2018). The widening inter-regional and urban-rural gaps, coupled with the entrenched *hukou* system, have created powerful internal labour drains and capital drains (Wang F., 2010) in contemporary China, as embodied by the hundreds of millions of rural migrant workers.

Meanwhile, the decentralisation of the CCP government (Lin, 2006) grants local governments autonomy over a variety of affairs, such as taxation, land disposal, foreign investments, *hukou* policy, as well as 'the unprecedented right to dispose of the revenue they retained' (So, 2013: 134). This has led to the rise of a 'local predatory state' and cadre-capitalists who embezzle revenue extracted from selling land for industrial use or for real-estate development. According to Zhang

Jing (2009: 126), a scholar on land disputes in contemporary China, about 7 million acres of farmland were lost to agricultural use while 60 million rural residents lost claims to the land they had previously farmed between 1978 and 2001. Most rural residents, or to be more precise, people holding a rural *hukou*, now merely have 1 to 1.5 *mu* (1/6 acre) of land which has more symbolic meaning (Wang H., 2014). In contrast, there exists a small population of the rural rich mostly along the coasts or in the suburban areas of top-tier cities (So, 2013). They capitalise on township and village enterprises (TVEs) or renting houses to migrant workers from other parts of China. The old label *tuhao* which once meant "landlord" during China's land reforms (see section 3.4.1) has now been revived, connoting the poor taste of these rural 'nouveaux riches' when showing off their wealth. Despite its initially negative tone, the term, as I shall illustrate in chapters 5 and 6, exemplifies the discursive mimicry of the rich in Chinese Internet discourse.

To improve their conditions of living, a growing number of rural peasants started to seek jobs in cities from the 1980s. Guided by the inside/outside dichotomy (Jacka, 1997), the first generation of rural migrant workers were mostly men who worked as manual labourers in the sectors of construction, transportation and auto maintenance. Due to their illegal status under the *hukou* system, they were not protected by the Labour Law, thus prone to hyper-exploitation and wage arrears (Huang Z., 2013). Rural migrants engaged in informal economy are also vulnerable to urban police and administrative harassment, struggling with fines or bribes (Liang, 2016). In the 1990s, urban mass media frequently named rural migrants as the 'blind flow' (*mangliu*) and highlighted both their harsh life and the risks they brought to the cities. As we shall see in chapters 5 and 6, this simultaneous abjection and compartmentalisation of rural migrants from an urban perspective continues to underpin how this social class is represented in Internet discourse and perceived by urban youth. Meanwhile, the *wen/wu* dyad became articulated with the urban-rural duality as rural migrant men were

depicted as embodying 'illegitimate, irrational (masculine) primitive strength' distinct from the literal and civilised urban masculinity (Lin, 2013).

A growing number of rural women joined the migrant workforce from the 1990s. Rural young women's 'docility and nimble fingers' were believed to well suit the assemble line of foreign electronic factories that burgeoned in South China (Pun, 2005). Cities were also in high demand of service workers (Otis, 2012) and domestic workers (Sun, 2010). According to China's National Bureau of Statics (2018), the total number of rural migrant workers reached 286 million in 2017 accounting for almost a quarter of China's population; about one-third of them were women (34.4%). Notably, the proportion of new-generation migrant workers born after 1980 for the first time surpassed 50%. While the first generation of rural migrant workers in post-Mao China both had farmed in their home villages and generally identify themselves as peasants, many young migrant workers' self-identity is more liminal (Sun, 2014). Having left their *hukou* villages at a very young age (mostly around 16), they have no interest in farming; yet their chances of establishing a stable life in major cities are also small. The central government has attempted a series of *hukou* reforms since the late 1990s. Most notably, it has replaced the old duality of rural (agricultural) and urban (non-agricultural) *hukou* with 'permanent *hukou*' versus 'temporary *hukou*' duality (Wang F., 2010). However, the duality continues to serve as a floodgate preventing the majority of rural migrants from accessing public resources and from being equally treated in major cities.

With the help of labour NGOs, rural migrant workers, especially those working in the manufacturing sector in South China, have organised a number of strikes to fight for better working conditions and more rights over the past decade. Nonetheless, their actions are not only violently cracked down on by the local police[19] but also rarely mentioned in mainstream media (Sun, 2014). Through

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[19] See the documentary *We the Workers* (2017, dir. Huang Wenhai).

being shamelessly and often illegally exploited, the huge population of rural migrant workers evidently contributes to the prominent status of China as a 'world factory'. Accompanying their emergence as de-skilled and cheap manual labour was the disappearance of the privileged working-class and the demise of life-long employment in urban China.

It is estimated that between 1993 and 2006, 60 million people were laid off with the introduction of labour market and reforms of state-owned enterprises (Goodman, 2014: 128). Meanwhile, cadres and their family member capitalise on the corporatisation of the SOEs, becoming large shareholders of strategic industries, such as oil, telecommunications and banking (So, 2013: 57). As So (2013: 75) summarises, the cadre-capitalist class has been formed 'through the processes of embourgeoisement of cadres and the patronisation of capitalists'. This fusion of political, economic and social/network capital, has led to great intergenerational transfers of power and privilege or otherwise poverty and the improbability of upward mobility in contemporary China (Goodman, 2014). In the late 2010s, there emerged a series of online terms criticising the intergenerational transfer of power and wealth, as well as the complicity between cadres and capitalists, such as 'second generation of the rich' (*fu'erdai*), 'second generation of cadres' (*guan'erdai*) and 'competing on father' (*pindie*). These kinds of online comments were mostly made by young urbanites born after 1980, known as *80-hou*. As I pointed out in chapter 1, this social group has so far appeared most vocal and active in Chinese cyberspace. The next section discusses their class position and Wang Hui's (2014) categorisation of two types of 'new poor'.

3.5.3 The angry and anxious new middle class and the two types of 'new poor'

As single children, the post-1980 urban generation received both great support and high expectation from their parents who were mostly workers of state-owned enterprises in the Mao era. This kind of family is known as a

'wage-earning family' (*gongxin jiating*) which connotes an ordinary family background. However, even though a wage-earning family appears ordinary in urban China, its urban *hukou* already means a variety of advantages and resources that are simply inaccessible to rural residents and migrant workers. Many parents of the urban-wage-earning family grew up around the Cultural Revolution when book knowledge was denigrated. After being laid off from the SOEs in the 1990s, they attended adult college as a way to elevate their value in the job market. They thus firmly believed that 'knowledge changes fate', trying every means to help their children excel in school, get into prestigious universities, and eventually surpass the 'ordinariness' of the parent generation. One important means is the provision of digital technologies which were believed to help developing children's intelligence (cf. Wang H., 2010).

The prominent role played by the 80-*hou* in various online incidents (Wang H., 2010, 2016) hence becomes understandable as this social group was among the first to become digitally connected and techno savvy in China. Through receiving higher education and becoming white-collar workers, most post-1980 urbanites, economically speaking, belong to an emerging new middle class in contemporary China (Li Cheng, 2010). The average monthly salary of white-collar workers in 37 major cities was 7789 RMB in 2017, which more than doubled that of rural migrant workers (3485 RMB) (Guo, 2018). Meanwhile, rural migrant workers have already occupied an intermediate position among the rural population, given that a quarter of China's population are still engaged predominantly in agricultural production and other informal economy with even lower income (Davis and Wang, 2009; Goodman, 2014). Nonetheless, many young white-collar workers, instead of identifying themselves as 'middle class' (cf. Li Chunling, 2010), emphasise their underprivileged status and improbability of climbing the social ladder. Anxiously, they bemoaned the soaring housing prices and medical costs, the increasingly competitive job market, and their inadequate income disproportionate to their long working hours and the expensive city life. Angrily,

they condemned corrupt cadres who abuse their power and create complicity with the rich.

But as Wang Hongzhe (2010) observes, since the post-1980 urban generation grew up with the deepening of China's marketisation and the growing influence of Western values, their social critiques have less to do with the market economy *per se* but more with factors that impede 'fair competition' in a market setting. In other words, they care less about social 'inequality' than 'inequity' (Lee, 2009). The authoritarian party-state, embodied by corrupted cadres and stringent control of freedom of speech, is perceived as a key factor hindering China's economic equity. What underpin 80-*hou*'s intuitive critiques are thus both a distrust of the political authority and an acceptance of prevailing social norms oriented towards market economy and consumerism (Wang H., 2010). This point is critical for understanding the ambivalent class orientation of Chinese Internet discourse which tends to construct an intermediate position different from both the economically dominant and the truly subordinate classes in contemporary China.

In his essay on the CCP's rupture from the working class and its failure to build a worker state, Wang Hui (2014) categorises two types of 'new poor' in contemporary China. He refers 'new workers' to those migrant manual workers mostly from China's *rural* areas, who are differentiated from the comparatively empowered 'old' workers in the Mao era. Meanwhile, he defines the urban 'new poor' as an *urban* population with high education and yet an inadequate capability of consumption due to their lack of disposable income. Wang Hui (2014) observes that the 'highly educated new poor' albeit do pay attention to social changes and express consciousness of political participation, rarely relate their thoughts and fate to the future of the other new poor'—new workers.

By contrast, at a time when media is highly developed and saturated with consumerist culture, many 'new workers' share the same aspirations with 'the

new poor' (Wang, 2014). The next section turns to two prevailing social norms in contemporary China—the middle-class aspiration and the *suzhi* discourse—which respectively integrate and separate the urban new poor and new workers.

3.5.4 The aspirational middle class and the *suzhi* logic

Although contemporary China has witnessed intense class polarisation, the notions of class and class struggle have been stifled by the party state which views Maoist class politics as over-politicised and self-destructive (Anagnost, 2008; Lin, 2015). Corresponding with the official will, Chinese academia and media deploy a gradational model (Guo, 2009) to address social stratifications and use concepts such as 'stratum' (*jieceng*) and 'groups' (*qunti*). Rural peasants and migrant workers are named as 'bottom stratum' (*diceng*) or 'vulnerable groups' (*ruoshiqunti*). The gradational model is now so predominant that, for example, one's qualification for a major city's *hukou* is graded according to a series of indicators such as education, employment and real-estate ownership. But as Guo Yingjie (2009) highlights, the CCP government bids 'farewell to class, except the middle class'. At the 16th Congress of the CCP in 2002, Chairman Jiang Zemin (2002) announced the party-state's goal to build an 'olive-shaped' society where the 'middle stratum' or 'middle-income group' constitutes the majority of a harmonious and well-off (*xiaokang*) society. As Goodman (2014: 27) comments, Jiang's speech initiated 'a state-sponsored discourse' and 'fetishisation' of middle class. Although there lacks sociological certainty in its identification, the growth of the 'middle class' has become a national aspiration and an indicator of China's development (ibid: 27). It was also at the beginning of the 2000s that national bourgeoisie, being named as 'people's entrepreneurs' (*renmin qieyejia*), received official recognition and served as representatives of National People's Congress. These entrepreneurs are glorified as exemplifying China's economic success and contributing to national prosperity.

Lisa Rofel (2007) argues that aspirations for a consumerist middle-class lifestyle piece together disparate experiences of Chinese people at multiple levels, giving birth to a 'desiring China'. The aspirational middle class, on the one hand, integrates the national imagination of modernisation with individual imagining of success and 'true' liberation of human desire. On the other hand, it draws attention away from the extremes of inequality and class conflicts, encouraging active economic behaviour and consumption even amongst migrant workers and the poorest section of the society (Anagnost, 2008). The notion of *suzhi* functions similarly.

The notion of *suzhi* (素质) appeared in official discourses from the 1980s; it was inked to raising 'population quality' for the sake of national development (Anagnost, 2003; Yan, 2003). Yan Hairong (2003: 494) argues that *suzhi*, 'for which "quality" is in many respects an inadequate translation', implies 'a sense and sensibility of the self's value in the market economy'. Permeating official as well as everyday speech throughout the first two decades of the reform, the notion of *suzhi*, according to Ann Anagnost (2003: 190), appears particularly relevant to two figures. The first is the body of the rural migrant 'which exemplifies *suzhi* in its apparent absence'; the second is the body of the urban only child, 'which is fetishised as a site for the accumulation of the very dimensions of *suzhi*' (ibid).

Analysing various policy documents and media texts in the 1980s, Yan (2003) observes that the frequent application of *suzhi* to the peasantry was central to the production of 'new peasants' who featured more forward-looking 'commodity consciousness'. The notion of *suzhi* thus served to shift the government's responsibility of relieving rural poverty economically to rural population's own desire to leave poverty (Yan, 2003: 500). Anagnost (2003: 193) suggests that '*suzhi* is not something that naturally inheres in the body but is rather something that must be built into the body'. The migrant body, which

lacks quality or *suzhi*, is therefore derogated as lacking value, legitimate for exploitation and disavowal. Yan argues that in the official rhetoric, urban China is where rural grown-ups can ideally accumulate their *suzhi*, just as the first world is what China, as a third-world country, should develop into. In this way, the notion of *suzhi* articulates the transformation of individual subjectivity, culture and consciousness with development at the national level. It also functions to 'hide the politico-historical processes that have produced the *differences* between…the First World and the Third World' (Yan, 2003: 496) as well those between urban and rural China. Hence, *suzhi* has been by no means merely related to rural peasants and migrants, but has cut across the whole Chinese population. It is 'Development's phantom child', while Development has become 'the "indisputable truth" that reorients post-socialist China toward global capitalism' (Yan, 2003: 496).

For the urban single child, schools and universities started to emphasise *suzhi* education at the beginning of 1995 even though 'what *suzhi is* eludes precise definition' (Yan, 2003). Encompassing multiple aspects which range from from cultural, psychological quality to the quality of consciousness, *suzhi* signifies 'a play between plenitude and lack' (Anagnost, 2003: 190), a sense that one's level is 'too low' and needs to be elevated. While the popularity of the *suzhi* discourse has been declining, it served to symbolically compartmentalise the urban and rural population in China. Moreover, as I will illustrate in chapter 6, its signification of lack and plenitude is picked up by the online buzzword *diaosi* and integrated with middle-class aspirations.

The national project of remaking social norms and public culture also entails the dimension of gender and sexuality. As Evans (1997: 82) notes, young people hold out hope of sexual gratification and liberation, imagining it as 'one of the greatest bonuses of the reform programme'. The last section addresses the

emergence of a new sexual culture and a new language of love and marriage in post-Mao China.

3.4.5 A new sexual culture, a new language of love and marriage

The transformations of gender relations and sexuality in contemporary China surround two inter-related axes: the re-emphasis and commodification of gender differences; and the party-state's retreat from providing for gender equality in work and employment. These double trends had already become manifest in the 1980s. With the ecoomic reforms, urban women started to be blatantly discriminated on the grounds of their domestic duties and childrearing burdens (Honig and Hershatter, 1988). They were guided to return to the family or kept 'in a transient, lower-paid, and subordinate position in the workforce' (Honig and Hershatter 1988: 321). During the reforms of state owned enterprises in the 1990s, women were more likely to be laid off than men (Ding et al., 2009). Moreover, they faced more obstacles when re-entering the job market since urban enterprises stopped providing subsidised child care service (ibid: 167-168).

Alongside the increasing disadvantages of Chinese women in the labour market is the re-emphasis of femininity and its articulation with consumerism (Croll, 2006; Evans, 2006; Yu, 2014). As Meng and Huang (2017: 662) point out, 'when women are targeted as consumers, the structural inequalities between male and female earning power go unnoticed and unchallenged.' In contrast to the Mao era when women's empowerment was framed in terms of social production, now women's power is linked to feminine beauty and desirability channelled through individual consumption (Yang J., 2011). The seemingly limitless quantities of advertising and fashion that foreground young women's sexualised bodies both contradict and disavow the androgynised womanhood in the Mao era (Croll, 2006; Evans, 1997, 2006). The socialist term *funü* is also in decline (Barlow, 1994) and being replaced by other words connoting women's sexed and consumerist subjectivities. While Women's Day used to be called 'March-8th

Funü Festival', it is now renamed by some corporations and younger generations as 'girls' festival' or 'queens' festival', highlighting women's consumption not liberation.

Meanwhile, with the demise of China as a worker state and its integration into the global capitalist market, the *wen/wu* dyad defining hegemonic masculinity in China has again shifted its priority. The prevailing model of working masculinities has transformed from the muscular and macho imagery of Maoist workers to the 'self-centred, materialistic, consumerist', and 'transnational business' types in contemporary China (Song and Hird, 2014: 24). Louie (2015) argues that although the ideal image of 'the educated gentleman' is still esteemed in certain circles, men with money are 'winning the ideal masculinity stakes' and becoming 'the pinnacle of successful manhood in China'. In addition, China's traditional valorisation of young beautiful men appears to fit seamlessly the Western metrosexual images, leading to the notion of 'urban stylish man' (*dushi xingnan*). The hegemonic masculinity in contemporary China foregrounds wealth accumulation, cosmopolitan tastes and a well-groomed body (Song and Hird, 2014).

Based on ethnographic research conducted in Nanchong, a third-tier city in Southwest China, Wong (2016) argues that ideal masculinity is not only defined by financial capacity but also by men's family-centered responsibility. The commodification of social life, increasing family and community fragmentation, and moral crisis have led to a strong purchase of male responsibility in both government and popular discourse (Wong, 2016) with women's 'emotional expressivity' being highlighted (Evans, 2012). Zhang Li (2010) observes that in post-socialist China, a new language of love emerges and comprises two sets of concerns—romance/emotion and property/material ownership. There are tension and articulation between the dual aspects which 'co-exist and transform each other' (Zhang, 2010: 164). For example, real-estate ownership has now

constituted 'a necessary condition for (Chinese) men to talk about love and marriage, as well as demonstrating their manhood and dignity' (ibid: 170-171).

A gender order which relegates men to be the bread-winner and women to the domestic domain in charge of consumption is thus re-emerging in contemporary China. While urban young women have been empowered by the birth control policy, their sense of autonomy and independence is constantly questioned. Based on their interviews with 414 young mothers in the city of Nanjing—the capital of Jiangsu Province—between 2006 and 2007, Vanessa Fong and her colleagues (2012) conclude that the respondents, despite class divergence, share a similar ambivalence both in terms of their toddle daughters' future independence and excellence. These mothers, on the one hand, encourage their daughters to attain a certain degree of independence and school achievements; yet on the other hand, they largely concede that a too independent and well-to-do woman will not be marriageable, thus remaining vulnerable and unhappy. The plethora of reasons they give range from cultural ones—for example, Chinese society's discrimination against daring girls who have too much pre-marital sex and abortion, its general expectation for women to fulfill their wifely and motherly duties—to institutional ones, such as the lack of provision for maternal leave and baby caring so that 'accomplished women have to give up too much' (Fong et al., 2012: 104). The two dimensions resonate with the cultural re-emphasis of gender difference and the party-state's economic repeal of its welfare services in post-Mao China. Since the new millennium, Chinese women's employment rate has been declining, with a growing domestic-role orientation among young urban women (Zuo, 2016). In later chapters, I will illustrate how Chinese Internet discourse contributes to sustaining the prevailing gender order in contemporary China, as well as the kind of confrontation between male anxiety and female fantasy instantiated in both online wordplay and different social group members' interpretations of online terms that connote masculinities or femininities.

3.6 Conclusion: from 'Comrades' to 'Consumers'

This chapter sketched out the historical transformations of class and gender relations in China. In terms of class, I illustrated how Chinese society has changed from an agricultural society based on the major relation of production between landlords and peasants, via a relatively egalitarian socialist state yet with stark urban-rural duality, to the current status permeated with market practices and social stratifications. In terms of gender, I showed how Chinese patriarchy remains to be deeply entrenched throughout the history while its core components—patrilineage, patrilocal marriage, the *wen/wu* dyad, the inside/outside dichotomy of gender separation—have been contested and reshaped in different historical periods crosscutting the class and urban-rural lines. A major thread running through these changes is both Chinese governments' and individuals' struggle for and imagination of modernisation and liberation. Class and gender politics are framed, emphasised or downplayed according to this major narrative of national revitalisation, which is epitomised by the naming 'people's entrepreneurs' (see section 3.5.4).

As the new prevailing ideology (Yu, 2014), consumerism underpins class and gender politics in contemporary China. The allegory of post-socialism (Rofel, 1999), which denigrates Mao's socialist experiments as impeding China's national growth and suppressing human nature, is essential for understanding the prevalence of consumerism at present. As Elisabeth Croll (2006: 23) puts it, consumption not only symbolised the new freedom but also gave rise to an important shift in self-perceptions—'from comrades to consumers'—with advertisements taking the place of political slogans. It is precisely compared with the 'backward' and 'alienating' Mao era that various consumerist and sexist discourses, including those in online wordplays, come to be viewed as 'liberating' or as 'resisting' the authoritarian party-state.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

4.1 Overview

This chapter delineates the methodological steps of this project. As I elaborated in chapter 2, my approach to Chinese Internet discourse is informed by Bakhtin (1994) who views language as operating via a constant interplay between its centripetal and centrifugal forces. For him, language is underpinned by the dialectics between its temporary 'verbal and ideological unification and centralization' and the ever-lasting room for social groups and individuals to imbue their own meanings when using words and signs (Bakhtin et al., 1994: 74-75). The centripetal force of Chinese Internet discourse lies in the conventional meanings of online terms which, forming a linguistic structure, may shape its users' cultural schema regarding gender and class relations. The centripetal force is manifested by users' various forms of agency to inhabit, reformulate, contest or disengage from the norms, aspirations and *doxa* signified by Chinese Internet discourse (RQ3).

My notion of Internet users is broad, including the market and the party-state who are agentic in co-opting and re-inscribing online wordplay. I ground the meaning and sense of an individual's agency to one's social positioning which is 'laden with collectively produced differences of power' (Sewell, 1992: 21) and thus conditioned by the social groups s/he belongs to. Addressing the dialectics between the centripetal and centrifugal forces of Chinese Internet discourse enables me to answer how Internet discourse, via its use by institutional forces as well as individuals, draws on and contributes to the history of class and gender relations in contemporary China (RQ2). Nonetheless, I acknowledge that online wordplay can appear irrelevant to some social groups or can be made in a whimsically meaningless or shallow manner. I am thus also interested in

exploring what, if anything, motivates people to use or disengage from online wordplay in their daily lives (RQ1).

My aim in studying the dialectics between the centripetal and centrifugal forces of Chinese Internet discourse led me to combine discourse analysis with in-depth interviews and focus groups. I conducted discourse analysis and ideological analysis to map out how those online terms I am interested in have been discursively constructed, and the ideologies and identities written into these constructions (Fairclough, 2001a, 2001b; Fowler, 1991; Matheson, 2005; van Dijk, 1995, 2001). To explore different forms of motivation and group agency, I combined semi-structured face-to-face interviews (Gaskell, 2000; Kvale, 1996, 2007) with focus groups (Morgan, 1996; Lindlof and Tylor, 2002). I conducted 31 individual interviews and 10 focus groups between April and July 2016, to uncover the ways in which respondents from different social groups interpret the 'invitations of meaning' (Banaji, 2006) of online terms according to their lived experiences, and in some cases, their spontaneous use of Internet discourse in interview conversations. In addition, I revealed insights into corporations' and party media's respective co-option of Chinese Internet discourse via interviews with production professionals who worked in media, PR, advertising and marketing sectors.

Below, I present the methodological rationale, research design and procedure of the thesis in detail.

4.2 Initial Methodological Considerations

4.2.1 Sampling and term selection

In section 1.6.4, I categorised two types of online parody in Chinese cyberspace— 'issue-related' parody and 'banal' wordplay. The former is directly related to specific social issues, appearing more in the form of Internet memes that toy with power in a carnivalesque manner. The latter comprises

meme-based buzzwords which are not directly related to a specific social issue yet used by both individuals and institutions in offline as well as online contexts. Given that issue-related online parodies have both drawn much academic attention and been on the decline, the thesis takes interest in 'banal' online terms which connote class and/or gender meanings and which are or were popular among Chinese Internet users. I relied on two major sources for selecting the terms: existing literature and lists that review the most popular 'web buzzwords' each year. In terms of the existing literature, the buzzword *diaosi* has captured most academic attention (e.g. Cao and Xu, 2015; Li Mingjie, 2016; Szablewicz, 2014; Yang et al. 2014). In addition to *diaosi*, researchers who write in Chinese have addressed several other online buzzwords, including 'straight-men cancer' (Chen, 2015; Liu, 2016), 'little fresh meat' (Chen, 2015), 'masculine women' (Tan, 2014) and 'green-tea bitch' (Cao et al., 2015). I include these terms into my sampling frame given their theoretical importance.

Yet, I hoped to deal with a key point that most researchers have so far either neglected or downplayed—the 'intertextuality' between online terms: certain online terms frequently appear together in a text; their connotations are interrelated, forming a kind of mini-narrative. Also, the meanings of some 'later' terms both draw on and diverge from those of 'earlier' ones. For example, while the imagery of 'tall-rich-handsome' is related to that of 'second-generation of the rich', the two terms respectively connote ideal masculinity and class sentiments, indicating a transforming trend in Chinese Internet discourse from criticising cadre-capitalists to mimicking the male rich (see more in section 5.3.2). I thereby grouped online terms into clusters and treated these clusters as the analytical unit.

I started the first stage of data collection in February 2016. Apart from the existing literature, I referred to annual lists of the most popular online buzzwords between 2008 and 2015, as 2008 is the earliest year for which a full list is

available. With online buzzwords becoming increasingly topical in Chinese media over the years, the making of annual lists has also been increasingly institutionalised. While individual bloggers took the initiative to review annual buzzwords, major portal websites, party media and even national institutions later joined in, underlining their 'scientific' methods such as surveys and algorithms. Although these lists help to shed light on the popularity of most online terms, some scatological and discriminatory terms are excluded despite their wide circulations amongst Internet users. The sexist naming 'black wood ear' and the few online terms related to the rural population, such as *shamate*, are never mentioned in any annual list from 'authorative' sources. Given my theoretical interest in the social implications of online wordplay regarding class and gender relations, I include these terms in my sampling frame. My strategy of term selection is thus a combination of 'typical-case sampling' and 'theoretical sampling' (Deacon et al., 2007: 54-55). On the one hand, I selected online buzzwords whose popularity is supported by statistical data; on the other hand, I enriched this sample by including online terms of great theoretical interest.

I selected in total 37 terms which form six overlapping clusters: the *diaosi* narrative, a patriarchal perspective of men, urban/rural gaps, (urban) women's aspirations for and contestations of masculinities, mimicry of the rich, and gendered consumerism. Appendices 1.1 and 1.2 respectively illustrate the interconnections of the six clusters and provide a brief explanation of these terms. When grouping terms to clusters, I had already begun the preliminary discourse analysis to which the next section turns.

4.2.2 Preliminary discourse analysis

The majority of online terms in China do not have dictionary definitions.[20] Compared to that of established vocabulary, the signification of Chinese Internet discourse is more fluid. This fluidity has to do not only with its implication in

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[20] *Xinhua Zidian*, China's official dictionary, included several online terms in its 2011 revised version.

constantly evolving social relations, but also with its co-option and reformulation by institutional forces. My attempt to map out the conventional meaning of selected terms thus comprises three parts. First, I referred to *Baidu Baike*, the Chinese version of Wikipedia, and a quasi-dictionary of online terms published by Tsinghua University (Ma and Chen, 2014). The two sources sketch out both the origins of the terms I selected and their common usage by Internet users. Searching suggestions of *Baidu Baike* informed me of certain terms' intertextuality as well. Second, I tracked and read texts containing these terms at their initial stages of circulation. Third, I sampled and analysed influential texts containing some of these terms which were produced by commercial and party media, such as news reportage and online serials. In this way, I grasped the spectrum of meanings that a given term may invite people to subjectify, as well as its changing connotations. To be sure, some terms such as 'black wood ear' have rarely been co-opted; and their conventional meanings are relatively stable. For the preliminary discourse analysis, I collected a set of texts ranging from memes, parody MVs, news articles, advertorials, to online serials and films. Some of the memes became the visual and interactive materials I later used for interviewing.

Given the diversity of strands under the umbrella of discourse analysis (Wetherell et al., 2001; Yates et al., 2001) and its ongoing development, researchers are encouraged to adapt the ideas and techniques of these strands in ways which best suit specific analytical tasks and materials (Deacon et al., 2010: 151). I adopted intertextual analysis as an over-arching approach as it helps to highlight how the making of new meanings is achieved through drawing on prior ideas and texts (Matheson, 2005). Critical discourse analysis (CDA), developed by Fairclough (cf. 2001a, 2001b) and van Dijk (cf. 1995, 2001), largely informed my analysis of texts produced by commercial and party media. The focus of the CDA approach, as Teun van Dijk (2001) points out, is 'top-down' elite discourses and the various ways in which these kinds of texts embody relations

of power, authority and dominant ideology in society. With regard to memes and film posters, I deployed semiotic analysis (Barthes, 2009) to tease out their codes, conventions and myth. As for online series, films and parody MVs, I referred to the Barthesian structural analysis of narratives (Barthes, 1977) complimented by Gergen's (2001) analytical framework of self-narrations. All these approaches of discourse analysis acknowledge the ideological role of language and signs, though not merely tying the concept of ideology to class relations. Lastly, I also borrowed ideas from transitivity analysis (Halliday, 1994) to specifically address the 'engendering' of identity by some texts. My overall aim was reading into the ideological presuppositions, values, categories and identities that texts set limit on and invite their ideal readers to take.

Having selected the term clusters and grasped their conventional meanings, I designed the topic guide for interviewing based on the research questions.

4.3 Research Design

4.3.1 Operationalization of the research questions and the topic guide

When preparing the topic guide for interviews, I mainly focused on operationalising the first and the third research questions: different social groups' motivations to use or disengage from Chinese internet discourse in their daily life, and their various forms of agency to inhabit, negotiate, resist or disengage from the class and gender orders signified by Chinese Internet discourse.

Adopting the approach of embodied agency, I sought to understand the meaning and sense of agency in light of the temporal-relational contexts where respondents of different social groups are situated. I thus started an individual interview or a focus group with respondents introducing their daily routines and uses of both digital media and 'old' media. My attention to 'old' media aimed to confront the myth of the digital (cf. Banaji, 2017) and to shed light on the continuously important role of non-digital media in certain social groups' lives.

The basic questions about everyday lives also helped me to build rapport (Spradley, 1979; Patton, 1990) with respondents and to ease their initial uncertainty. On that basis, I encouraged them to further depict their life trajectories. This probing into respondents' personal world is built on my self-introduction, briefing of the research, confidentiality, and their freedom to reject my questions at the beginning of each interview (see more in section 4.4.3)

The second part of the topic guide operationalised the first research question on motivations. I asked respondents to recall the last time, or if ever, they use online buzzwords in online and offline settings. With the help of my follow-up questions, the recollection led respondents to describe their general understanding of online buzzwords and the roles that these terms play in their daily lives. With media practitioners, I also probed into their reasons for appropriating or avoiding online terms in their writing.

The third part of the topic guide operationalised the third research question on agency. Here, the list of 37 selected terms comes into use. Based on the term list (see appendix 2.2), I first invited respondents to elaborate on those terms that they most frequently use, identify with or strongly dislike—namely, those terms they were most eager to discuss. Then, I enquired into their understanding of the rest of the terms which they were familiar with or had heard of. As for media practitioners, I also asked them to give examples of the possible ways in which they utilized some of these terms in their work.

By asking respondents to make more attentive descriptions of their largely habitual and pre-reflexive engagement with online wordplay, my aim was to understand the multiple ambivalences implicated in their mimetic identifications with Internet discourse. From preliminary discourse analysis, I extracted a number of ambivalences in Chinese Internet discourse, such as the relationships between *diaosi* and migrant workers, the intertextuality between

'tall-rich-handsome' and 'second-generation of the rich', the existence of sexist namings only concerned with women, just to name a few (see details in chapter 5). After gaining respondents' spontaneous descriptions, I 'intervened' and 'pushed' them to elaborate their reflections on these ambivalences.

With respondents who were familiar with just a few terms, I encouraged them to describe their understanding of these terms, the channels through which they got to know these terms and most importantly, the reasons for their disengagement from online wordplay. I also prepared visual and interactive materials which consist of memes and parodies collected from the first stage to trigger more discussions. The key textual ambivalences of Internet discourse are embodied in these visual materials.

Lastly, I intermingled the six clusters of terms on my list in order to get more spontaneous responses regarding the intertextuality of online terms from the participants. I also designed two tiny tricks both of which helped me to obtain more interesting insights when respondents were reading through the term list. First, I invited respondents to fill in '____makes one do one's whims' instead of directly using the online expression 'money makes one do one's whims'. This served both to see how online wordplay could, as it were, 'colonise' people's values and imaginations and to draw respondents' attention to this kind of 'colonization'. Second, I juxtaposed the two terms 'leftover men' and 'leftover women' together, putting the former first as opposed to the conventional association of women with 'being leftover' in both media and official discourses (Fincher, 2014). This arrangement led to distinct reactions between the white-collar respondents and the migrant workers I interviewed. The contrast indicates how gender politics is implicated in class relations and urban-rural duality in China (see more in section 7.4.2).

I adopted the format of semi-structured interviewing (Gaskell, 2000; Kvale, 1996, 2007). While the three major parts of the topic guide structure the overall flow

of an interview, the specific questions and the order in which I asked them depended on my interactions with respondents. Appendix 2.1 illustrates the topic guide with the typical questions that I asked for each part. I now detail my methodological decisions for interviews.

4.3.2 Interview design

4.3.2.1 Combining focus groups and individual interviews

Since this research aims to uncover the various ways in which respondents from different social groups interpret and engage in online wordplay, the method of focus groups enables me to interview a wide range of respondents in a relatively short time. It also gives me opportunities to record participants' use of Internet discourse in a relatively spontaneous setting. Moreover, the 'group effect' (Carey, 1994) can lead to 'complementary interactions' and 'argumentative interactions' (Lindlof and Tylor, 2002: 182). Via 'complementary interactions', I could observe how respondents reach a certain consensus, their 'subtle shades of interpretations to the shared view' (ibid: 182), and what kind of common narratives, norms and categorizations underpin their meaning-making. Through 'argumentative interactions', I gained insights into how respondents justified and adhered to their own points of view in relation to other perspectives (Kitzinger, 1994).

However, as this project seeks to understand respondents' meaning-making with regard to online terms connoting gender and class, it inevitably touches upon respondents' personal lives. This kind of self-disclosure can make respondents feel apprehensive in focus-group settings. Media practitioners may also be more open with discussing strategies and regulations regarding the co-option of Internet discourse in individual interviews. Based on these considerations, I decided to combine focus groups and individual interviews so that I could both utilize the 'greater breadth' of the former and the 'greater depth' of the latter (Morgan, 1996: 134).

The next section explains my sampling strategies and criteria to recruit four social groups of respondents in this project.

4.3.2.2 Sampling and recruitment

In the past two decades, class and social stratification in China have been analysed mainly through three criteria: income, education and occupation (e.g. Bian, 2002; Li Cheng, 2011a, 2011b). Other criteria raised by scholars include the urban/rural *hukou* (household registration), consumption and self-identification (Li Chunling, 2011), path dependence and inside/outside the party-state system (Lu, 2002; Goodman, 2014). These criteria form empirical grounds on which I could operationalise Wang Hui's (2014) theoretical categorization of two types of 'new poor'. As mentioned in chapter 3, his conceptualisation is useful for understanding one major ambivalence of Chinese Internet discourse—its emphasis on an underprivileged identity and its *de facto* orientation towards the nascent middle-class in urban China which has nonetheless appeared anxious and angry in cyberspace.

To recap, Wang (2014) defines 'new workers' as rural migrants who constitute the majority of manual labourers in contemporary China and whose conditions of living are distinct from those of empowered 'old' workers in the Mao era. Drawing on Bauman (2005), Wang defines the 'urban new poor' as the urban population with high education and yet an inadequate capability of consumption due to the lack of disposable income. The two types of new poor comprise the majority of employed population among the youth in China.

Informed by Wang (2014), I intended to analyse and compare how the two types of new poor in contemporary China respectively engage in and interpret online wordplay. But this class categorization had to be integrated with gender. Another key ambivalence of Chinese Internet discourse lies in the kind of inner tension between men's anxiety and women's fantasy. The gender perspective is also essential for addressing the heterogeneity of new workers (Choi and Peng, 2016;

Du, 2017; Jacka, 2006; Lin, 2012; Pun, 2005). For interview purposes, I thus categorized four social groups of respondents: white-collar men, white-collar women, new-worker men and new-worker women.

I set the age threshold for all respondents as being born between 1980 and 1995, namely the whole post-1980 generation and the first half of the post-1990 generation who had already entered adulthood when I conducted the interviews. This decision was made on the following grounds. First, this age group is in general most familiar with Chinese internet discourse and most vocal online, as illustrated by the interconnected notion of *wangmin* (netizens) and the post-1980 (urban) generation (see section 1.3.3). Under the dual pressure of climbing the social ladder and getting married, they are also most likely to identify with and engage in online wordplay. This age group covers university students and young white-collar workers, thus forming a great proportion of the 'urban new poor'. In the rest of the thesis, I will use the term 'white-collar respondents' to name both the university students and the white-collar workers I interviewed[21]. The reason is that Wang's term 'urban new poor' is both too theoretical and too long to name a group of respondents. Meanwhile, according to National Bureau of Statistics[22], new-generation migrant workers born after 1980 now account for more than half of the overall population of rural migrant workers. Following Wang (2014), I use the term 'new workers' to name this social group.

I differentiated new-worker respondents and white-collar respondents through three indicators: *hukou* (household registration), educational level and occupation. I looked for 'new-worker respondents' who are manual workers with rural *hukou* (or temporary *hukou* in big cities) and whose educational level is no

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[21] The majority of these students have become white-collar workers, with just a few still studying as post-graduate students.

[22] See the report via http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/201804/t20180427_1596389.html (last access: 17/07/2018).

higher than high school or vocational school. I sought to recruit 'white-collar respondents' who are office workers with urban *hukou* (or permanent *hukou* in big cities) and who have received higher education. I also summarized a series of indicators from the existing literature to ensure that the respondents' social positions range from lower class, lower-middle class to middle class:

- Coming from ordinary family background, i.e. not having rich parents.

- Working outside the party-state system (*tizhiwai*).

- Owning no more than one house estate.

- Earning no more than 10,000 RMB in top-tier cities and no more than 5000 RMB in smaller cities per month.

Given the power asymmetry between new workers and white-collar workers, I decided to separate them in focus groups. Yet, I organized mixed-gender, all-male and all-female groups within the two categories so as to create different types of group effects. Since my topics demand a relatively high degree of self-disclosure, I did not adhere to the common practice of recruiting 6 to 10 strangers to form a focus group (Morgan, 1996; Lindlof and Tylor, 2002). Instead, I set the number of participants as 4 to 6, and seeking to recruit familiar acquaintances or participants of the same occupation. This kind of methodological approach to studying popular consciousness was pioneered by William Gamson (1992) who investigates working-class Americans' understanding of political issues (see also Yuan, 2014). My decision is also informed by the fact that some online terms are frequently associated with specific occupations, such as *diaosi* with programmers and *shamate* with hairdressers.

My fieldwork started in late April, 2016. I utilized the first three interviews and focus groups as pilots (Holloway, 1997) to check the topic guide and the term list.

4.3.3 Pilot study

Corresponding with my intention to recruit three types of respondents, my first three pilot interviews consisted of two focus groups respectively with 'new worker respondents' and 'white-collar respondents', and an interview with an advertising professional. The group of white-collar respondents was formed of four final-year master students in Shanghai. After the focus group, the participants suggested that I avoid using video clips as visual materials because these clips not only prolonged the focus group unnecessarily but also appeared offensive to some of them. This was a suggestion that I incorporated into my final study.

One of the participants introduced me to his younger brother Limi[23] who worked in a garment factory in the city of Changshu (常熟), Jiangsu Province. This led to the second focus group that I conducted with Limi and his co-workers in their dormitory room. Given the respondents' limited familiarity with the sorts of online terms involved in this project, I deemed it better to interview new workers via focus groups as they could then query and explain to each other when terms arose (Morgan, 1996). I also observed their habit of communicating via local dialect. I thus added one more question to the topic guide: whether there exist equivalent expressions to certain online terms in local dialects. Lastly, I acknowledged the great difficulty in recruiting female new workers due to my positionality and the method of this research. I reflect further on this issue in section 4.4.2.

I interviewed an advertising professional, Zee, who is married to a friend of mine. Though I initially hoped to interview Zee individually, I ended up conducting a couple interview. From this accidental couple interview I gained insights into

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[23] I use pseudo names to guarantee all my respondents' anonymity. Before each interview, I asked respondents to write down their preferred names; few of them let me do the job. As we shall see, most new-worker respondents came up with pseudo names formed of Chinese characters, while many white-collar respondents used English names.

their gender dynamics regarding online wordplay which is in fact relevant to my project. I thus deliberately conducted another two couple interviews in my later fieldwork. After seeing my term list, Zee commented that these terms were 'rather too out-dated' to use in her copywriting. I asked Zee to add several 'updated' terms (bracketed in appendix 2.2) to the list so that it could maintain the interest of those interviewees sensitive to the trendiness of online terms. Yet, these added terms tended to be only known by respondents who worked as PR/marketing practitioners. While I do not treat these terms as keywords in this project, I will discuss different social group members' perception of the trendiness of online terms in chapter 6.

Overall, the pilot study suggested no major flaw of my methodological design but resulted in several minor revisions. As some scholars argue against the necessity of separating pilot studies from the main body of fieldwork (e.g. Holloway, 1997), I included the three interviews in my final data corpus. With the revised topic guide and the term list, I conducted the bulk of focus groups and individual interviews simultaneously between late April and mid-July in 2016. If a suitable respondent was not able to attend a focus group, I scheduled another time to interview him/her individually. I would also follow up by email or WeChat afterwards if I observed a respondent's reservation to elaborate further on certain point in a focus group. Before presenting the fieldwork information, I first elaborate my epistemological approach to the interview data.

4.4 The Fieldwork

4.4.1 Epistemological considerations

Following the 'interpretive turn' in social research, I consider the interview as an inter-subjective process where researcher(s) and respondent(s) co-construct meaning on certain topics in a temporal-relational context (cf. Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Kvale, 1996, 2007; Silverman, 2014). Rather than imagining myself as a 'miner' who seeks to 'dig out' certain 'uncontaminated truth' from a

respondent's answers (Kvale, 1996), I acknowledge my contribution to the answers both in terms of the questions I asked and the social positionality that I carried in relation to the respondent. Steinar Kvale (1996: 3-5) compares one type of interview to an interaction between 'travellers' and 'the local'. This epistemological metaphor well fits my project because I was, to a large extent, asking respondents to articulate something they had taken for granted just as a traveller asks the locals about their social conventions. The locals' elaboration on the convention can vary according both to their social positions and to the relationality between the locals and the traveller. As Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein (1997: 127) put it, '[t]he focus (of the interview) is as much on the assembly process as on what is assembled.'

I thus treat my interview data more as 'constitutive' than 'referential' (Taylor, 2001: 6-7). That is to say, I am less concerned with respondents' 'real' understanding of certain online terms or their established notions of gender and class. Acknowledging the fluidity of their discursive constructions, I am more interested in how their understandings and notions are constructed—the norms, narratives, values and categories that they draw on, and the 'functions and the consequences which arise from different discursive organizations' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 178). Following Kvale (2007: 38), my ultimate aim is to 'get beyond the self-presentations of the subjects and (to) critically examine the personal assumptions and general ideologies expressed in their statements'. Given the qualitative approach of this thesis, I do not claim the representativeness or generalizability of any respondent's answer to the entire social group that he/she belongs. Nonetheless, I do attempt to relate the 'patterns of variability and consistency, differences and shared features' between accounts (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 168) to the living conditions of different social groups' respondents and the nexus of power relations that inform their agency. I also pay attention to the manifest repetition or absence of certain discursive construction among certain group's respondents. While

interviewing media practitioners regarding their strategies of co-opting online terms in work is closer to Kvale's (1996) metaphor of digging out knowledge like a miner, I was reflexive on how these interviewees construct themselves and their work in front of a media researcher, as well as the common assumptions underpinning their constructions.

Although the thesis is largely based on qualitative methods, I acknowledge the necessity of rejecting 'academic apartheid' (Deacon et al., 2007) and that certain aspects of data can better be captured by quantification. One part of my interview analysis was counting and comparing the total times that each term on the list was mentioned by respondents from different social groups. Since I conducted all the interviews based on the same topic guide and term list, respondents' total times of mentioning each buzzword can be considered as 'skewed' in the same way. While this quantification by no means suggests any statistical inference, I consider stark differences between distinct social groups as illustrative, which indicates certain trends to be further confirmed or contested by future research.

4.4.2 Fieldwork information and limitations

I conducted most of the fieldwork in Shanghai, my home city, where my social networks enabled me to recruit respondents efficiently. Catering to some respondents' locations, I also travelled to other top-tier cities—Beijing, Guangzhou and Shenzhen, provincial capital cities—Hangzhou (Zhengjiang Province) and Nanjing (Jiangsu Province), prefecture-level cities—Changshu and Fuyang (阜阳, Anhui Province), and Buqianzhuang (埠前庄), a rural village belonging to the prefecture of Yishui (沂水) in Shandong Province. In this way, I contacted a cross-section of the urban and rural youth population working in different parts of China, which is particularly important to address the heterogeneous composition of new workers.

In total, I conducted 10 focus groups (34 men and 19 women) and 31 individual/couple interviews (18 men and 19 women) (see Appendix 2.4 for their demographic information). When recruiting focus group participants, I gave equal weight to new workers and white-collar workers. The five groups of new workers include a mixed-gender group of restaurant workers in Shanghai, an all-female group of industrial workers in Guangzhou, three all-male groups who worked respectively as hairdressers in Shanghai, garment factory workers in Changshu and broadband installers in Fuyang. The five groups of white-collar workers include one mixed-gender group of university students in Shanghai, one mixed-gender group of miscellaneous white-collar workers in Shanghai, one mixed-gender group of miscellaneous white-collar workers in Fuyang, one all-female group of media practitioners in Shanghai, and one all-male group of programmers in Shanghai.

The number of female new workers I managed to interview (11) is disproportionate to that of male new workers (22). Although this sample proportion is similar to the overall gender ratio of rural migrant workers (34.4: 65.6 in 2017[24]), lack of access to female new workers is admittedly a major limitation of this project. During fieldwork, I attempted to tackle this issue by seeking help from several female scholars who had previously conducted ethnography with rural migrant women. They introduced me to their former informants, some of whom kindly recruited focus-group participants for me. I also hung out with some new workers in Shanghai before inviting them to become my respondents, a strategy that worked better for recruiting male new workers. I recognize that my positionality as an urban middle-class male researcher largely limits my possibility of interviewing female new workers between whom and me exists the dual power asymmetry of class and gender. This power asymmetry proved difficult to negotiate given the short period of my

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[24] http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/201804/t20180427_1596389.html

fieldwork and my main method of qualitative interviewing instead of ethnography. However, when presenting the interview analysis, I give equal space to the four social groups of respondents.

The gender ratio of my white-collar respondents (30 men and 27 women) is balanced. The overall disproportion of white-collar respondents (57) to new-worker respondents (33) is due to my extra recruitment of media professionals and LGBTQ respondents. My positionality, combined with the continuous invisibility of LGBTQ people in China particularly among the rural population, led me to end up with interviewing five gay men and one lesbian woman, all of whom happen to be middle-class. Given this small sample and middle-class orientation, I do not treat LGBTQ respondents as a separate social group. Nonetheless, I pay particular attention to their meaning-making of the online terms connoting sexuality.

Three respondents do not meet my recruitment criteria, but I include them in the sample because of their illustrative responses. One is a beauty salon owner who started off as a female new worker in Shanghai and after 15 years managed to establish her own business. Her 'misrecognition' (Althusser, 1971) of the buzzword *diaosi* exemplifies the middle-class orientation of the *diaosi* wordplay (see section 6.5.2). Another one is a young man who does steel trade after inheriting the business from his father-in-law. As the richest respondent, he also, tellingly, most enjoys discussing the buzzword 'spendthrift chicks' and the kind of bourgeois family ideal it signifies (see section 7.3.2). The third is a farming man born in 1976 who mentions the socialist rhetoric 'labouring people' when discussing the online term 'moving bricks'. As we shall see in section 8.1.3, he is one of the few respondents who relates the social groups of manual workers and office workers, or two types of 'new poor' (Wang, 2014), to each other in his aspiration for a fairer society.

Kvale (2005: 94) argues that even though qualitative interviewing builds on an epistemology that recognizes the co-construction of meaning between researchers and respondents, this recognition does not exempt researchers from reflecting on 'power, conflicts and hierarchical relationships' between them and interviewees. A neglect of these aspects can lead to exploitative interviews under the masquerade of 'dialogue'. The next section presents the measures that I took to deal with the ethical issues of my fieldwork.

4.4.3 Ethics and reflexivity

Before each interview or focus group, I first introduced myself, explained the aims of the project and its full guarantee of respondents' confidentiality. I also emphasized their freedom to refuse to answer any question and to drop out at any point of the interview. All the interviews proceeded after the respondents had read through and signed the consent form (see appendix 2.3). Some new-worker respondents read the consent form slowly and aloud, apparently finding this kind of earnestness a new experience. Sadly, many of them had not even had a chance to sign their contracts of work. While the majority of respondents permitted me to record the interview, two individuals asked me not to. I wrote down their responses in shorthand and immediately did the transcribing afterwards.

I transcribed all the interviews by myself and sent transcripts to the respondents via either their QQ or WeChat accounts. I asked them to check the accuracy, to point out any part that they would prefer not to be included in my thesis, and to add any further comments. I told them that I would consider no response as acquiescence. The recordings are only saved in my personal laptop in a password protected folder while the printed transcripts were either stored in my room or in my locker of the Department's PhD study room during my thesis writing. No third person – other than my doctoral advisers and myself – has access to these data.

Feminist scholars (e.g. Patai, 1994 Pillow, 2003; Sultana, 2007) insist that a critical understanding of reflexivity goes beyond narcissistic personal confession or justification for a failure of 'finding the truth', requiring a researcher to reflect on one's positionality, assumptions, and power relations with respondents throughout all the stages of fieldwork. While I have mentioned some limitations of the thesis brought about by my positionality, here I further report my attempt to negotiate my positionality and assumptions, and to reciprocate the respondents' participation.

Acknowledging the urban middle-class orientation of Chinese Internet discourse, I reassured my respondents, particularly new workers, that my interview was not a quiz with any standard answer; instead, I was eager to acquire different understanding from all walks of life. With new workers, I also underplayed my status as a PhD student studying abroad, introducing myself as a university student researching online wordplay. From the bottom of my heart, I confessed to them that my urban background had largely limited my horizon and that I sought to see a broader picture of China by interviewing people doing different kinds of jobs. During each interview, I acted as a listener open to any kind of interpretation of Internet discourse. I also encouraged respondents to challenge my questions; a number of them, both new-worker and white-collar, did. For example, my presupposed meaningfulness of Chinese Internet discourse in youth population's lives was challenged as several respondents emphasized their total indifference to online terms or shallow usage with no motivation.

As a way of reciprocating, I explained the meaning of those terms unknown to the respondents if they asked me to at the end of the interviews. In a friendly yet assertive manner, I also discussed with them my own take on some sexist and discriminatory online terms. Many respondents expressed their enjoyment in participation as they obtained a deeper understanding of online terms by talking through and reflecting on their previously habitual uses. Several white-collar

respondents and I acted together and achieved a kind of 'emancipatory knowledge' (Kvale, 1996: 51-52; see also Pillow, 2003: 187) as they changed their notions of gender or became more attentive to the conditions of rural migrant workers after the interviews. I left my personal information with all the respondents, welcoming them to contact me at any time for any reason. While quite a number of white-collar respondents kept in touch with me afterwards, only several new-worker respondents did so. This again testifies to my positionality which proved difficult to negotiate via the rapport I temporarily built with new workers during the interviews. Yet, on a more basic level of reciprocation, I invited respondents to drinks or meals; or in those cases where I conducted interviews in their workplaces, I brought them gifts.

Having delineated the fieldwork information, I now turn to the last stage of my data collection where I quantified some of the interview data and constructed the corpus for final discourse analysis.

4.5 Corpus Construction for Final Disourse Analysis

After transcribing all the interview data, I counted the total times that each term was mentioned by all respondents, by new-worker respondents and by female respondents (see appendices 3.1-3.3). Based on these quantifications, I narrowed down the number of the terms studied in this thesis and constructed the corpus for final discourse analysis. Out of the terms mentioned most by my respondents, I summarized four overlapping 'major axes' of term clusters—'the *diaosi* narrative', 'male anxiety and homosociality', 'masculinities in aspiration and contestation', and 'controversial femininities', complemented by two minor clusters formed of earlier online terms representing the rich and the rural population (see more in section 5.2). I treated these clusters as the sampling units for corpus construction.

I integrated my discourse analysis of 'the *diaosi* narrative' and 'homosociality and male anxiety' together because of their interconnections. My analysis is based on

two texts created by individual Internet users at the end of 2011 and two online mini-series produced by corporations in 2013. It was between 2012 and 2013 that the *diaosi* wordplay appeared particularly popular[25] (Li Mingjie, 2016). The two texts created by individuals are a parody MV titled 'a story of *yisi*[26] (毅丝) and black wood ear' based on Hong Kong singer Eason Chan's love song *Beneath Mt. Fuji*, and a parody verse titled '*diaosi* Odes' (*diaosi fu*) based on *The Ballad of Mulan* (*Mulanci*). The two online miniseries are *The Legend of Deities* (*Tianshen zhuan*) produced by a gaming company in 2013, and three episodes of the online serial *It Never Occurs to Me* (*Wanwan meixiangdao*), which I regard as comprising a complete *diaosi* narrative altogether[27]. I applied Barthes's (1977) framework of structural analysis to these texts, teasing out the *diaosi* narrative from three analytical levels—indices and functions, actions and narratives. I also referred to transitivity analysis (Halliday, 1994) to underline the gendered construction of actions between the main characters. To illustrate the changing connotations of the buzzword *diaosi*, I also conducted semiotic analysis on a poster of the online series *Diors Men* (*diaosi nanshi*), paying attention to the connotations of its codes as well as their intertextuality with other texts I analysed. *It Never Occurs to Me* and *Diors Men* are the two most popular cultural products based on the *diaosi* theme.

For the minor cluster of 'representing the rural population', I selected a widely circulated commentary on the *shamate* phenomenon from qq.com—a major Chinese portal website. Adopting the framework of critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2001a), I was attentive to the selection of words and pronouns, the overall organization of the text, the presuppositions it draws on, and the hegemonic social order it may help to reinforce. I also conducted the CDA on an advertorial which is concerned with the two online terms 'national husband' and 'second-generation of the rich'.

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[25] For a detailed explanation of the term's origin, see Yang et al., 2014.

[26] *Yisi* (毅丝) equals *diaosi* as an earlier version of the latter.

[27] The three episodes I analyzed are EP3 and EP15 of Season 1, and EP 9 of Season 2.

'National husband', together with 'warm men' and 'straight-men cancer', are the three key buzzwords I analysed for the major axis of 'masculinities in aspiration and contestation'. With the term 'warm men' and its synonym 'economical men', I collected a series of texts ranging from a newspaper article, a blog article to an online saying mentioned by numerous white-collar female respondents. By teasing out the gender and class presuppositions of these texts as well as their intertextuality, I aimed to understand the ambivalent construction of 'warm men' which is both idealised and contested in Chinese cyberspace. With regard to the buzzword 'straight-men cancer', I conducted the CDA on a popular online post summarizing 'nine typical symptoms of straight men's cancer'. I paid particular attention to the class orientation of this apparently feminist text and the ways in which it represents male chauvinism. In a similar manner, I addressed the discursive construction of another 'urban feminist' term 'phoenix men' which has been, on and off, catching people's attention for more than a decade via online forums[28] and popular TV serials[29].

Popular cultural products were also sampled when I analysed the axis of 'controversial femininities'. For the theme 'masculine woman VS green-tea bitch', I again applied Barthes's framework of structural analysis to a controversial comedy in 2015 CCTV gala and a blockbuster film *Women Who Flirt*[30] (*sajiaonvren zuihaoming*) which earned 230 million RMB in 2014. I conducted semiotic analysis on two widespread Internet memes of 'masculine woman' regarding the codes they draw on to construct ideal and abject femininities as well as women's autonomy. Lastly, I mainly referred to a paper (Meng and Huang, 2017) that I co-authored for a textual reading of the term 'spendthrift chicks'.

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[28] For example, the online hot topic at the beginning of 2016, 'Shanghainese daughter-in-law escapes from a rural village in Jiangxi Province' (cf. Meng, 2018).

[29] They range from *New Age of Marriage* (*xinjiehunshidai*) broadcasted in 2006 to the recently popular TV serial *Ode to Joy* (*huanlesong*) which draws on the theme of 'phoenix women'.

[30] The film's IMDB page: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3313908/

4.6 Conclusion and Remarks on the Issue of Translation

In this chapter, I specified the thesis's four stages of data collection. For the first stage, I explained my decision to group online terms given their intertextuality and to take 'term clusters' as the analytical units. My selection of the clusters adopts a combination of 'typical-case sampling' and 'theoretical sampling', based on the existing literature and annual lists reviewing popular online buzzwords in Chinese cyberspace from 2008 to 2015. To grasp the 'invitation of meaning' (Banaji, 2006) of these clusters, I adapted various approaches of discourse analysis according to the different types of texts I collected for textual analysis. I narrowed down the number of terms studied in this thesis and constructed the text corpus for final discourse analysis after quantifying the interview data. For the second stage, I detailed the operationalisation of my first and third research questions in the topic guide, my categorization of four social groups of respondents and the corresponding recruitment criteria, as well as my decision to combine focus groups and individual interviews. For the third stage of interviewing, apart from detailing the fieldwork information, I also elaborated my constructivist approach to the interview data and reflected on my positionality as an urban middle-class male researcher. This positionality, combined with the short period of my fieldwork and the main method of qualitative interviewing, largely limited my possibility of building rapport with female new workers and female, working-class LGBT interviewees. Lack of access to these social groups as well as the unaddressed issue of Chinese Internet discourse and ethnicity constitutes the major limitations of this thesis to be addressed by future research.

Another difficulty that I have been attempting to deal with throughout this project is translation. Many online terms in Chinese are tricky to translate into English due to their complex connotations and the subtle wordplay entailed, which are even worsened by the distinct grammar of Chinese. For example, the

online buzzword *Nvhanzi* (女汉子) literally means 'female guy' which makes no sense in English. While some Chinese Internet users propose to translated it as 'tough girl', this translation loses the buzzword's ambivalent connotation for it oscillates between praising a 'masculine' young woman regarding her capability and mocking her 'masculine' appearance. I therefore translate it as 'masculine woman' to maintain its original ambivalence. In addition, nouns have no distinction between singular and plural forms in Chinese. In this thesis, I use the plural form when referring to an online term *per se*, such as 'masculine women', 'straight-men cancer', etc; but I adapt it to singular form if necessary to make a sentence grammatically correct. Through discussing with my supervisors, looking up to authoritative resources[31], and reflecting back and forth on their subtle meaning in Chinese, I have come up with relatively satisfactory translations of most online terms studied in this thesis. Yet, I directly use the Japanese term *Otaku*, which has become well-known in the West, to translate its Chinese equivalent *zhainan* (宅男). Moreover, I consider two key terms as impossible to translate without damaging their original meanings in Chinese—*diaosi* and *shamate*. The next chapter fully presents their complex connotations.

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[31] I owe my translation of the online expression 'having money is to do one's whim' (*youqian jiushirenxing*) to Lu Gusun, an expert in Chinese-English translation, who proposes to translate *renxing* (任性) in this context as 'do one's whim'. I adopt Szablewicz's (2014) translation of *heimuer* (黑木耳) as 'black wood ear'. I'm grateful to my PhD advisor Meng Bingchun for her help with translating a variety of online terms, such as 'spendthrift chicks', 'competing on father', just to name a few.

CHAPTER 5: CHINESE INTERNET DISCOURSE: A TEXTUAL APPROACH

This chapter presents an original discourse analysis of texts that contain the online terms mentioned most by my respondents and overlapping with the comprehensive term list (see chapter 4) compiled for this study. Here, the discourse analysis aims to illustrate the spectrum of meanings that a given term may 'invite' people to recognise and subjectify. As we shall see in this chapter, although these terms were initially created and circulated by Internet users, they have gained further popularity via 'old' media such as TV products, films and newspapers. The 'invitations of meaning' (Banaji, 2006) that I lay out in this chapter can then be compared with respondents' various interpretations of these terms in accordance with their lived experiences (see chapters 6 to 8).

Before moving on to the main parts of the chapter, let us first take a closer look at the notion of 'grassroots' (草根) in the Chinese context. By illustrating the dynamics of this naming, I set the basic tone of the chapter.

5.1 Can the Grassroots Speak?

Borrowing the title of Spivak's (1988) polemical article 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' I aim to highlight the potential 'epistemic violence' of silencing the truly subordinated classes when researchers studying Chinese cyberspace take for granted the notion of 'grassroots'.

The Chinese translation of 'grassroots'—*caogen* (草根)—connotes the common or the ordinary as opposed to elites. This connotation came into existence in mainland China around 1987 (Gao, 2000) when ecomic reforms had just taken off. The connotation of 'grassroots' as 'ordinary people' perfectly fits into the Chinese language where the character *Cao* (草) connotes villages and common people. However, one may notice a subtle semantic difference between the notion of 'grassroots' connoting 'ordinary people' and the one connoting rural areas. As we have seen in chapter 3, China's modernisation trajectory has been

paved on a manifest urban/rural duality epitomised by the *hukou* (house registration) system. Since the naming of 'grassroots' is defined as an opposition (to elites), what it refers to depends on a person or a group's position within a system of differences. In this sense, as pointed out by Spivak (1988) with regard to the notion of 'subalterns', grassroots identity is relational. Wen Tiejun (2010), a scholar specialising in rural China, distinguishes the 'grassroots' and the 'grass-tips' (*caojian*) within the rural population. For him, young labour—the grass-tips—is driven to the cities, leaving behind women and old people—the grassroots—in rural China.

According to an article published in 2000 on *Yaowen Jiaozi* (咬文嚼字)—an official journal dealing with the semantics of Chinese, the use of 'grassroots' as connoting rural villages was 'comparatively few' (Gao, 2000: 25). In contrast, its connotation of 'ordinary people' appeared in a variety of combinations, such as 'grassroots strata', 'grassroots culture', 'grassroots movement', 'grassroots literature', 'grassroots citizens', etc. One noticeable example from the article is as follow: 'The grassroots strata that possess no social background and status flock into the stock exchange with plenty of notes (*piaozi*).' (*Jiefang Daily*, Nov. 7th, 1999; cited in Gao, 2000: 24)

As I mentioned in chapter 3, stratum analysis has replaced class analysis in contemporary China whilst the party-state sponsors the aspirational middle class. The notion of grassroots in the quote above serves as a convenient signifier for the aspirational middle class who manage to become well-off from their ordinary family backgrounds. Yet those Shanghainese who could afford to dabble in the stock market around 2000 were clearly not 'ordinary' in the eyes of many laid-off workers, not to mention the huge population of rural migrants and peasants who struggled for subsistence. At the turning point of 2000, all these subordinate classes were discursively condemned to oblivion in the notion of 'grassroots strata' of a party-organ newspaper.

Around 2006, 'grassroots' became a buzzword in the Chinese media with the great success of various reality TV shows and the emerging Chinese Internet (Ai, 2008). Since then, numerous media scholars have appeared to adopt phrases such as 'grassroots participation' and 'netizens' in their writing to emphasise a sense of confrontation or opposition between 'common people' and elites. The following excerpt comes from the preface of a volume (Ma and Chen, 2014) about the origins and conventional meanings of online buzzwords in China:

> The widespread uses of the Internet and smart phone provide a free and broad stage for the birth of new words and expressions. But the main agents this time, instead of being traditionally intellectual elites, comprise numerous grassroots people situated at the margins of society; they are young netizens who lack discourse power in real life. As a subculture distinct from the mainstream culture, language of hybrid style is their flag for self-identification. (Ma and Chen, 2014: 9).

In a slightly techno-centric tone, this excerpt maintains the prevailing analytical framework for researching online wordplay in contemporary China (see section 1.5.1). The two authors view Chinese cyberspace as 'free', empowering the socially marginalised—'grassroots people'—to construct their own 'subculture' via the 'hybrid style' of web language. The following sections contest this analytical framework and two key assumptions underlying it. First, we will see hierarchy and othering, inclusion and exclusion, naming and being named within the so-called 'grassroots' Internet users who are in fact heterogeneous and symbolically hierarchical. Second, I will illustrate that elites and institutional forces are never absent away from the stage of online wordplay. So-called non-mainstream online culture is becoming the new mainstream, constructing an intermediate position (Wang, 2010) that constantly 'looks upward'.

5.2 Chinese Internet Discourse in Texts: an Overview

As discussed in chapter 4, after transcribing all the interviews, I counted the total times that each online buzzword on my term list was mentioned by respondents in focus groups and individual interviews. To compare different social groups, I came up with three top 15 lists illustrating the terms most mentioned respectively by all respondents, by new-worker respondents and by female respondents (Appendixes 3.1-3.3). These buzzwords can be regarded as clustering around four overlapping axes, complimented by two minor clusters[32]. Figure 5.1 illustrates the discursive connections between these 'buzzword clusters'.
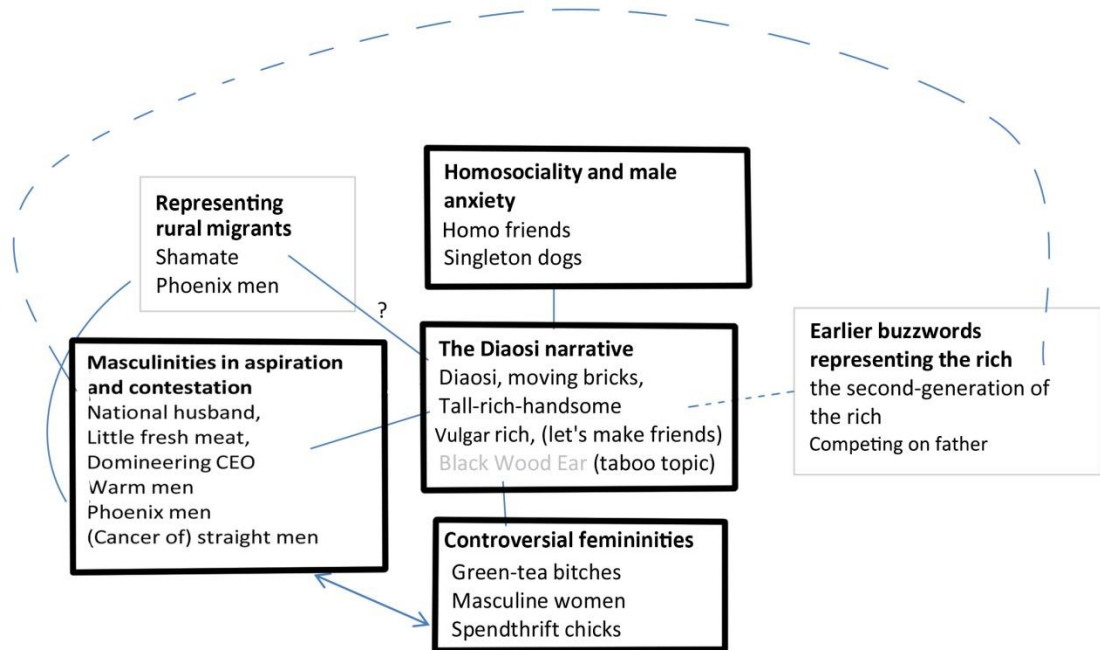
Figure 5.1: An illustration of the buzzword clusters studied in this thesis

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[32] 'Major axes' comprise online buzzwords mentioned more by my respondents generally speaking, while 'minor clusters' consist of online terms which both emerged earlier (before 2010) and discussed less by respondents. The differentiation of my wording between 'online buzzword' and 'online term' is also based on this logic.

The first axis is the *diaosi* narrative. It includes *diaosi,* the buzzword mentioned most by both white-collar and new-worker respondents, its discursive oppositions—'tall-rich-handsome' and 'vulgar rich', and its metaphoric work content—'moving bricks'. It is noticeable that while 'moving bricks' ranks as the 13th most mentioned term overall, it is hardly known by my new-worker respondents, neither men nor women. This suggests that the *diaosi* narrative is in fact oriented towards university students and white-collar workers, a point which I clarify further in section 5.3.1. Another key term in the *diaosi* narrative—'black wood ear', which stigmatises those women having sex with many men before marriage—is nonetheless a kind of taboo topic in most interviews.

Another two online buzzwords often associated with *diaosi* are 'singleton dogs' (*danshen gou*) and 'homo friends' (*jiyou).* Both terms are discussed more by male respondents. As will be further shown in chapter 7, young male migrant workers express particularly manifest anxiety for marriage, and identify most with the buzzword 'singleton dogs'. 'Homo friends' discursively and playfully displaces this kind of male anxiety with a sense of brotherhood, or in Sedgwick's (1985) term, homosociality (see section 5.3.1). 'Singleton dogs' and 'homo friends' constitute the axis of what I call 'homosociality and male anxiety'. The apparent opposition between *diaosi* and tall-rich-handsome is also related to this axis.

'Green-tea bitch' (*lücha biao*), another online term that stigmatises some women as being calculating in an effort to win men's affections ranks as the 14th most mentioned term overall. While none of the female new workers mentions this term even once, white-collar female respondents discuss it most enthusiastically. They either identify with the term's conventional meaning or negotiate it via the logic of 'girl power' (cf. McRobbie, 2007). Another two online buzzwords that signify femininities —'masculine women' and 'spendthrift chicks' —are among the top 10 most mentioned terms in all the three lists. Their popularity indicates

young women's liminality between becoming autonomous subjects and remaining sexually desirable in contemporary China. The three terms comprise the axis of 'controversial femininities' to which the 'black wood ear' also belongs.

The last major axis that I identify is called 'masculinities in aspiration and contestation'. It includes a series of online buzzwords signifying different types of masculinities and overlap the first axis—the *diaosi* narrative. Alongside 'tall-rich-handsome', there are another two online terms connoting a kind of hegemonic masculinity: 'national husband' (*guomin laogong*) and 'domineering CEO' (*badao zongcai*). The term 'national husband' conventionally refers to Wang Sicong, who is the son of Wang Jianlin, one of the richest businessmen in mainland China. In this sense, Wang Sicong is a typical 'second generation of the rich' who 'compete on father'. These two earlier online terms stemmed from Chinese cyberspace before 2010, connoting critiques of the intergenerational transfers of power and wealth in contemporary China. However, from 'second-generational of the rich' to 'tall-rich-handsome', from 'competing on father' to 'national husband', *a gradual transformation in online wordplay from criticising the collusion between cadres and capitalists to mimicking the rich* has become increasingly clear. I argue that this transformation is related to the idealisation of rich and heterosexual masculinity as well as the displacement of class confrontation with official-civilian confrontation in Chinese Internet discourse (see section 5.3.2).

Alongside online terms signifying ideal masculinity, there are others that connote more 'ordinary' and even contestable masculinities. The three terms I shall elaborate more in this regard are 'warm men', 'straight-men cancer' and 'phoenix men' (*fenghuangnan*). While the buzzword 'straight-men cancer' is among the top 5 most mentioned terms by female respondents and all respondents, it is hardly recognised by any new-worker respondent. Neither is 'phoenix men', a negative term referring to men with rural background who have

made a success of life in the city. The gender politics of aspiring for and contesting masculinities in contemporary China is implicated both in class structures and in the urban/rural divide.

The four major axes comprise online buzzwords and terms which loom large, to a more or lesser extent, in my respondents' meaning making in accordance to their different positions in gender and class relations. The major themes of 'male anxiety', 'controversial femininities' and 'masculinities in aspiration and contestation' thus guide my textual analysis below. Alongside these themes, I will also analyze the two minor clusters in Chinese Internet discourse with regard to the rich and rural migrants. In section 5.3.3, I illustrate how the online term *shamate* has been discursively constructed as an abject figure through which young rural migrants can be mimicked (Bhabha, 1984). In addition, almost all the respondents report knowing or having heard of the term 'appearance value' (*yanzhi*). Its meaning is straightforward: namely, having 'high appearance value' refers to someone who is good looking. Although this term seems too straightforward to discuss in length for many respondents, appearance and body image in general, alongside money, constitute the two interrelated threads around which individual lack or plenitude is signified and emphasised by various online buzzwords. Let us start with a closer look at men's anxiety in texts which is first and foremost exemplified by the *diaosi* narrative.

5.3 The *diaosi* Narrative

To tease out the *diaosi* narrative based on the texts that I collected (see section 4.5), I adopted Barthes's (1977) framework of structural analysis (see Appendix 4 for an illustration of the analysis) which encompasses three levels—indices and functions, actions and narratives. In a typical *diaosi* narrative, there are three main characters, namely a *diaosi*, a 'black wood ear', and a 'tall-rich-handsome'.

5.3.1 Male anxiety in an erotic triangle

The First level: indices and functions

On the first level, each character is endowed with certain descriptive traits (indices) and characteristic of certain acts which serve as seeds planted to grow later in the narrative (functions). At a first look, a *diaosi* figure appears very much like an *Otaku* (see section 1.3.3) who is fond of ACGs (anime, comics and gaming) and spends most of his time facing the computer at home. Notably, the setting of a *diaosi* figure's home is either a university dormitory or a bachelor apartment. Although he might be IT savvy and excel at playing DOTA[33], he has difficulty in finding a girlfriend. This leaves him somewhat addicted to jerking off and watching pornography. Both a *diaosi* and an *otaku* are said to appear 'sleazy' (*weisuo*). What differentiates the former from the latter is the emphasis on male anxiety for marriage—as if the *otaku* who has been playing computer games, eating instant noodles and over-masturbating suddenly realises that he *has to* marry someone.

A *diaosi* figure has low self-esteem due to his perceived lack of money and decent appearance. To underline his poor living conditions, some texts describe a *diaosi* as owning neither house nor car—the conventional gender expectations for a man to get married in contemporary China. His job is described as 'moving bricks', which is nonetheless more a metaphor since a *diaosi* figure connotes more a university student or a white-collar male worker. The kind of 'cheap' and 'leftover' food a *diaosi* figure eats serves the metaphoric function of connecting him to the one who will later marry—a 'black wood ear'.

In contrast to the *diaosi* character, 'black wood ear' is endowed with few indices describing her traits. Instead, the character comprises a variety of functions with regard to her body—a very detailed depiction of her sexual performance in bed.

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[33] A popular online game among Chinese youth.

The two key seeds planted for the narrative development are her abdomen (indicating pregnancy) and her clitoris metaphorically signified as 'wood ear'. Being pretty and materialistic is the only manifest trait of a 'black wood ear'. The third character, a 'tall-rich-handsome', comprises even fewer indices and functions. What 'tall-rich-handsome' refers to is just the opposite to the various sources of lack in a *diaosi*. 'Tall-rich-handsome' appears like an 'absent centre', an ideal which never needs to be defined since it is naturally assumed (Pajaczkowska and Young 1992). The contribution of 'tall-rich-handsome' to the *diaosi* narrative is via his actions.

The second level: actions

As the analytical unit on the second level of a narrative, 'action' is defined by Barthes (1977: 107) as 'the major articulations of praxis (desire, communication, struggle)'. A typical *diaosi* narrative consists of three actions between the three characters. The first action is a *diaosi* figure's confession of his affection towards the female, but she declines. Instead, she turns to the 'tall-rich-handsome' who is also pursuing her, but she eventually gets abandoned after 'being played too much' (action 2). The final action is when the female character returns to the *diaosi*, seeking to marry him and gets accepted. A typical *diaosi* narrative ends in a tragic tone, as the *diaosi* marries the female character whose 'wood ear' (clitoris) has turned from 'pink' to 'black' because of too much sex, and who, in some texts, also carries a child left by 'tall-rich-handsome'.

All the three actions comprising the *diaosi* narrative objectify the female character as a symbol primarily defined by her body and clitoris. In the first action, she is a receiver of the *diaosi*'s affection; in the second, she is an object to be taken, penetrated and then abandoned; in the third, she is accepted and helped but despised.

The third level: narratives

The overall structure of the *diaosi* narrative can thus be seen as constructed on an 'erotic triangle', a notion raised by René Girard. Reading major European fiction, she observes that the bond between the two rivals in an 'erotic triangle' is 'as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved' (cited in Sedgwick, 1985: 21). The Japanese feminist scholar Chizuko Ueno (2015: 227) connects this bonding between male rivals in a patriarchal society to Lacan's theorisation of desire and others: one's desire stems from that of others with whom one identifies. In a patriarchal society, men share their position as subjects, while women are exchangeable objects who serve as symbolic properties to 'consecrate' men—to prove someone is or *becomes* a man (Ueno, 2015: 225; see also Rubin, 1975).

In the *diaosi* narrative, a *diaosi* figure cares less about the characterless 'black wood ear' than about his inability to own her body. The male prerogative of possessing women's body is shared between *diaosi* and tall-rich-handsome. The *diaosi* narrative, instead of picking on 'tall-rich-handsome' who fools around with girls, presupposes women as being materialistic, in pursuit of men's wealth. It also constructs women's value as increasingly depreciating through their vagina being penetrated just like an object being used too much. This obsession of female virginity resonates with the Chinese patriarchy in imperial era where women's chastity was a metaphor of social morality (see section 3.2.2). But it also exemplifies a new form of interplay between money and sexuality in contemporary China. The 'black wood ear' appears as a symbol to pass the male status from the tall-rich-handsome to the *diaosi*. Yet this passed male status is depreciated; and this depreciation is accepted and naturalised in the symbolic order of the *diaosi* narrative.

Distortion and expansion

There is some noticeable 'distortion and expansion' (Barthes, 1977: 117) of the *diaosi* narrative in the online miniseries of *It Never Occurs to Me* and *The Legend*

of Deities. They both contain minor plots where a *diaosi* figure is represented as engaged in male-male intimacy. But such representations, by appropriating certain online memes such as 'picking up the soap', appear too hilarious and performative to indicate serious homosexual relationships. The concept 'homosocial', as Sedgwick (1985: 1) puts it, is 'obviously formed by analogy with "homosexual", and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from "homosexual"'. But she argues for an unbroken continuum whose visibility is nonetheless 'radically disrupted' in a society where patriarchal heteronormativity prevails (ibid: 1-2). Sedgwick (1985) believes that homophobia directed by men against men goes hand in hand with misogyny, since homosexuality poses threat to men's position as a subject in the gender system. It thus becomes understandable that in the *diaosi* narrative, the major structure of an 'erotic triangle' is juxtaposed with a minor expansion of some 'homo-friends' plots. A kind of male bonding or brotherhood is playfully represented between men of the lower-middle classes who share the predicament of being unable to find girlfriends. As we shall see further in section 5.5.1, the growing impact of 'rotten-women' (*funÜ*) culture also fosters this type of performative discourse of male-male intimacy. Marking a clear distinction from homosexuality, it seamlessly fits the misogynistic presuppositions of the *diaosi* narrative and the male bonding between *diaosi* and tall-rich-handsome—a bonding based on shared identification with male prerogative.

Instead of signifying a kind of confrontative masculinity, as argued by some scholars (e.g. Cao and Xu, 2015), the *diaosi* narrative represents a type of complicit masculinity that shares the gender dividend of heterosexual men (Connell, 2005). As Ma and Chen (2014: 42) observe: while *diaosi* curse tall-rich-handsome, they also aspire to become tall-rich-handsome. One of the primary avenues for 'becoming' the *other* is through mimicry, as discussed below.

5.3.2 From resenting cadre-capitalists to mimicking the male rich

In fact, the conflicts between *diaosi* and tall-rich-handsome which exemplify enlarging social inequality in contemporary China are naturalised by the patriarchal ideology underpinning the *diaosi* narrative. On the one hand, a *diaosi* figure is constructed as manifestly distinct from tall-rich-handsome; and this differentiation is constantly highlighted in the light of their distinct status in the gender order. On the other hand, there is a sense of resemblance. What a *diaosi* figure disavows is his own perceived poverty that prevents him from possessing female body. The *diaosi* narrative is thus characterised by mimicry in the sense that it constructs an identity that is simultaneously distinct from and in a constant process of *becoming* the *other* (Bhabha, 1984). As the *other* being mimicked, tall-rich-handsome is rarely constructed as an object of class sentiments in the *diaosi* narrative.

The best example illustrating the discursive mimicry of the male rich in Chinese Internet discourse is the term 'national husband' and its continuous reference to Wang Sicong. In an advertorial[34] apparently generated by Wang Sicong's own PR team, he is described as follows:

> …If you are attentive, you will find that he (Wang Sicong) is never hated by people as other second generation of the rich. He has instead become the 'public lover' (*dazhong qingren*) and the 'national husband'. It is because Wang Sicong knows what people want, catering to the online sentiments at present. Online sentiments have accumulated so long that they need an outlet. Wang Sicong is that outlet…

The excerpt hides nothing with regard to Wang Sicong's identity as 'second generation of the rich'. It also acknowledges the negative association that the label 'second generation of the rich' carries in Chinese cyberspace. The term 'second generation of the rich' became widely circulated around 2010 when a young drunk driver committed hit-and-run in a university campus in Hebei

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[34] http://money.163.com/14/0914/10/A63L1TRN00253G87.html

Province. According to news coverage[35], when the perpetrator was confronted afterwards, he boasted that his father was a police official by saying 'my father is Li Gang'. This sentence then became viral online, igniting the circulation of a serial of 'second-generation' expressions, such as 'second generation of the official' and 'second generation of the red' vis-à-vis 'second-generation of poverty' and 'second-generation of peasants'. The online term 'competing on father' also gained popularity in this period. The online incident 'my father is Li Gang', as many others around 2010, fed on Chinese Internet users' collective resentment towards the collusion between party cadres and the rich. In these incidents, the collusion is typically represented as rich youth's privilege in driving luxurious cars[36], speeding and escaping the rule of law after committing crimes.

As Wang Hongzhe (2010) observes, the majority of participants in these online incidents were post-1980 university students—or 80 *hou*. As a generation growing up with China's marketisation and increasing Western influence, they embrace the prevailing norm of individual striving and economic success (Wang, 2010). Therefore, they are less indignant over the widening social inequality brought about by market economy than corrupted cadre-capitalists who are regarded as hindering equity and rule of law. Online sentiments in China are characterised by an emphasised confrontation between the 'official' and the 'common' (*guanmin duili*). The derogatory term 'second generation of the rich' was frequently juxtaposed with its couplet—'second generation of the official' in various online incidents around 2010.

Interestingly, a tall-rich-handsome figure does drive luxurious cars to hook up with girls in some texts built on the *diaosi* narrative. But this is not depicted as an

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[35] See, for example, a news story from China Daily via
http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-10/20/content_11431705.htm
[36] Another case took place in the city of Hangzhou in 2009 where a young rich man hit a young engineer to death. The Hangzhou police initially claimed that the perpetrator was not speeding—he was driving at 70 km/h. This claim caused huge reaction from the Internet and led to an online parody 'lying horse' (*qishima*) which is homophone of '70 km/h' in Chinese.

act one clearly resents, as in online incidents such as 'my father is Li Gang', but one for mimicry. As if the ideal masculinity embodied by a tall-rich-handsome figure helps to soften class sentiments and to legitimate the wealth of a rich heterosexual man. In other words, the gender order presupposed by the *diaosi* narrative serves to naturalise the social stratification that the narrative draws on.

This point helps us understand how come Wang Sicong, the most typical 'second generation of the rich', nonetheless appears as a kind of 'public lover', known as 'national husband' in Chinese cyberspace. Wang Sicong's father, Wang Jianlin, owns Wanda Group, a conglomerate that invests in real-estate, commerce, entertainment and finance. He was ranked as the richest man in China in 2015. Wang Sicong's apparent popularity is built on a blatant demonstration of both wealth *and* male privilege. The two aspects mutually legitimate each other. On the one hand, Wang has been famous for showing off his wealth in the boldest way. For instance, he is said to claim that 'I don't care if my friends have money, since they can never be richer than me'[37]. This claim is intertextual with the popular online expression 'vulgar rich, let's make friends' apparently uttered from a *diaosi* position. It plays directly into this logic since the richest now claim to make friends regardless of wealth. On the other hand, Wang Sicong caters to the collective online sentiments by 'muck-raking' the entertainment industry. These scandals are part mostly related to female celebrities and their utilisation of the body to achieve various purposes. Wang also invests in games and web stars. All of these make Wang Sicong an ideal type for *diaosi* to identify with. He likes games and sexual female body, and most importantly, joining, if not leading, *diaosi* in attacking 'black wood ear'.

Since the emergence of the term 'national husband', there have been circulating other terms mimicking the male rich in Chinese cyberspace. They include 'Ma Father' (*Ma baba*)—a nickname for Jack Ma, and 'Wang Richest' (*Wang shoufu*)

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[37] http://money.163.com/14/0714/13/A14BGJ2L00253G87.htm

which refers to Wang Jianlin who is also known as 'National Father-in-law'. From 'second generation of the rich' to tall-rich-handsome, from 'my father is Li Gang' to 'Ma Father', Chinese Internet discourse seems to have undergone a transformation from criticising cadre-capitalists to mimicking male billionaires. What underpins this transformation is the discursive displacement of class conflicts with gender-related narratives that build on a patriarchal and misogynist symbolic order. Moreover, as shown by the advertorial on Wang Sicong in this section, commercial forces play a central role in enhancing the image of the super-rich by directing them towards the category of 'common' in 'official-common' confrontation. In chapter 8, I will illustrate the ways in which corporations co-opt Internet discourse.

Yet there exists another level of discursive mimicry in the *diaosi* wordplay—an ambivalent association between this apparently 'underprivileged' or 'grassroots' identity and young rural migrants.

5.3.3 Mimicry and abjection of young rural migrants

As mentioned in section 5.3.1, the term 'moving bricks' (*banzhuan*) is a metaphor for the perceived low status of a *diaosi* figure. 'Moving bricks', on referring to one part of construction work, connotes recognition of the similarity between white-collar workers' life predicaments and those of manual workers, the majority of whom are rural migrants. But at the same time, this similarity is disavowed since the term is used in a highly performative way for self-mockery, or self-deprecation.

This second dimension of mimicry is particularly clear when we look at how the online term *shamate* has been constructed in Chinese Internet discourse. At the end of 2013, a commentary titled 'It is not necessary to treat "*shamate*" too earnestly' (Huang J., 2013) appeared at qq.com, one of China's major portal websites. A question followed the article: 'do you think "*shamate*" culture is

vulgar?' Almost 30,000 people participated, more than 70% chose 'yes'. The commentary describes *shamate* as follows:

> Transliterated from the English word 'smart'…'*shamate*' are tens of thousands of migrants who come from unknown villages and towns spreading all over China. These men and women are generally around 20 years old. They mostly just have an educational background of middle school, with few skills, doing low-paid jobs, such as hair-dressers, couriers and waiters. The most manifest (also most often mocked) feature of '*shamate*' is their exaggerated hairstyles…with various colors and hair wax. Their clothes are from street vendors; and copycat cellphones draw the finishing touch. '*Shamate*' often hang around the bottom of big cities—small barber shops, cybercafés with foul atmosphere and street vendors. They appear incompatible with bright office buildings and luxurious shopping malls that surround them.

This paragraph exemplifies three aspects based on which the naming of *shamate* is constructed in urban media. The first one is using this label as a metonymy. Later in the commentary, the author cites survey results to compare new-generation migrant workers with their parent generation. Here, *shamate* apparently refers to *all* young migrant workers. While some researchers accept the existence of the so-called '*shamate*' group and differentiate them from other 'new workers' (e.g. Teng, 2016), I reflect on how this metonymic naming, with all its negative connotations, impacts on the representation of Chinese migrant workers in general. A focal point in various textual constructions of *shamate* is hair salons and hair-dressing. Young white-collar workers meet rural migrants most directly via service industries, such as hair-dressing, catering and express delivery. A *shamate* figure is unsurprisingly imagined as taking these jobs.

Corresponding to this over-determination of *shamate* as young rural migrants, the second aspect is a continued (mis)representation of migrant workers by judging and mocking their consumer tastes from an urban perspective. Exaggerated, colorful hairstyles and cheap clothes constitute the most 'visible' features of a *shamate* figure, with 'a final touch' of copycat cellphones. The commentary goes on to claim that 'although their (second-generation rural migrants) salary is low, they still want to dress up in a smart way'. This is said to

be different from the parent generation who generally appear 'rugged, slovenly, (their body being) full of wrinkles'. In other words, the commentary acknowledges young rural migrants' attempts to 'elevate their tastes' and to 'get closer to the mainstream'. But at the same time, *shamate*'s 'imitations' are considered as constantly failing to catch up with the trends. As the commentary puts it in a harsh tone, *shamate* appear 'incompatible with' (*gegeburu*) urban surroundings.

The third axis is then a further 'abjection' (Tyler, 2013) of young rural migrants. The descriptions above underline *shamate* as a wretched *other*: they come from 'unknown villages and towns', hanging around the 'bottom of society' with 'foul atmosphere'. A key geographic metaphor for constructing *shamate* is 'urban outskirts' (*chengxiang jiehebu*). This geographic metaphor, together with the underlined backward tastes, low educational level and low income, all contribute to constructing a *shamate* figure of aversion and disgust in urbanites' eyes. A white-collar worker who claimed to join in the 'mysterious' inner circle of *shamate* for one year gave his serialised blog article a title 'Risking death to uncover the *shamate* families you don't know'. *Shamate* as it were became an exotic object for urbanites to gaze at from a distance. Imogen Tyler (2013: 24) maintains that '[w]hen we approach disgust as symptomatic of wider social relations of power, we can begin to ascertain why disgust might be attributed to particular bodies'. Urbanites have long been discriminating against migrant workers, regarding them as embodying a lack of various qualities or *suzhi* (see section 3.5.4) that includes consumer quality. *Shamate* do consume, but their consumption is still considered inadequate and inappropriate.

In the later sections, the commentary (Huang J., 2013) makes it clear that this judgment is made from a *diaosi*'s perspective. *Shamate* is thus different from *diaosi*:

> Although they (*shamate*) and *diaosi* are both located at the lower-middle level of the cities, they and *diaosi* belong to two kinds of people. Although

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diaosi often mock themselves as the underclass, the majority of *diaosi* are those who have received higher education. Without power and social background, they start as low-level white-collar workers after graduation. *diaosi* don't really belong to the urban lowest class…their starting point is higher than *shamate*'s…The term *shamate* is in fact invented by *diaosi*…*diaosi* use '*shamate*' *to mock the culture of new-generation migrant workers* (my emphasis).

While according to some reportage,[38] the term *shamate* was originally invented by Luo Fuxing, a young migrant worker who wanted to describe his unorthodox style in English, its prevailing negative connotations for mocking young rural migrants are largely imbued by urban media and young urbanites, many of whom identify with the *diaosi* identity. As underlined by the quotation above, there is a discursive difference between *diaosi* as a self-mocking naming and *shamate* as an imposed naming mocking the *other*. This discursive differentiation categorises 'us' as young university graduates and white-collar workers 'who have received higher education' from 'them' as young migrant workers. Chinese Internet discourse thus tends to construct an intermediate position with double discursive mimicry of both the rich and the real underclass in contemporary China. The second level of mimicry is achived in Chinese Internet discourse through exclusion. The next section discusses this point.

5.3.4 A constructed intermediate position looking 'upwards'

I have so far illustrated how Chinese Internet discourse is constructed around two levels of ambivalence oscillating between recognition and disavowal. The first level lies in the mimicry of the (male) rich. Discursively speaking, a *diaosi* figure's differences from tall-rich-handsome are simultaneously recognised and disavowed—*I am a diaosi, but I do not want to be a diaosi; although I do not want to be a diaosi, I am still a diaosi*. Such discursive subtlety is achieved through the performative of self-mockery (see more in chapter 6). But as

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[38] See a feature writing titled '*shamate* by the sea' via http://chuansong.me/n/840428031330

indicated by the metaphoric term 'moving bricks', self-mockery needs an abject position to depreciate or 'dwarf' oneself, while at the same time knowing 'I am not that bad'. To a large extent, the construction of a *diaosi* figure who marries a 'black wood ear' and accepts this 'depreciated femininity' operates in the same vein.

The necessity of an abject position of self-deprecation then leads to the second level of discursive ambivalence—mimicking the real underclass, such as rural migrants. The discursive distinction between a *shamate* figure and a *diaosi* figure is constructed around a simultaneous recognition and disavowal of the similarities between the two: *shamate* might be as underprivileged as *diaosi*, but with little educations and skills, they are even more hopeless; they imitate urban tastes—our tastes—but they constantly fail to be like us. This constructed failure of young migrant workers to be like 'us' resonates with our 'failure' to be like the rich. In this sense, *shamate*'s hairstyles *must be* 'exaggerated', their clothes 'cheap', their cellphones 'copycat' so that the perceived inadequacy of *diaosi*'s efforts to imitate the rich is projected onto *shamate*'s inadequacy in their imagined efforts to imitate urban tastes. *shamate*, along with all young migrant workers metonymically signified by this term, are hence included in Chinese Internet discourse through exclusion (cf. Tyler, 2013).

Signifying and underlining an apparent underclass identity which is characteristic of double mimicry, the *diaosi* naming constructs an intermediate position looking 'upwards'. An emphasised sense of inadequacy and lack goes through this double mimicry, indicating fetishism. As Bhabha (2007: 106-107) points out by referring to Freud, fetishism is always a '"play" or vacillation between the archaic affirmation of wholeness/similarity...and the anxiety associated with lack and difference'. The *diaosi* narrative points to the fetishisation of the nexus of heterosexual masculinity and wealth.

Since the buzzword *diaosi* emerged at the end of 2011, its connotations have increasingly expanded with various social groups embracing this identity. Li Mingjie (2016) observes that when even the middle-class and the 'vulgar rich' start calling themselves *diaosi*, the buzzword is approaching over-expansion, risking meaning nothing at all. Commercial forces, such as video websites and e-commerce corporations, have arguably contributed to the expansion and bourgeoisification of the buzzword's connotations. The online series *Diors Man* (*Diaosi nanshi*) exemplified this point. Figure 5.2 is a poster of the series.

Figure 5.2: a poster of Diors Man

Dapeng (大鹏), the main character, faces the audience in a masculine manner, which is signified by the protruding veins on his left hand and a proactive expression. He appears as a plain-looking guy, but presents a metrosexual style, with well-groomed hair, a purple shirt and a brightly-colored bow-tie. While such an image is different from that of 'tall-rich-handsome', it is also much more middle-class-oriented compared with a *diaosi* figure playing DOTA in student dormitory and caring little about his appearance. This middle-class orientation is also reflected in the English name of the series. Instead of directly using *diaosi—pinyin* for the buzzword, it coins 'Diors', which reminds people of the international brand Dior. In fact, a number of new workers I interviewed

encountered the buzzword *diaosi* via this online series. They resonate little with the *diaosi* naming due to the series' orientation towards office workers.

While Li (2016) notes that the over-expansion of *diaosi*'s connotations risks the term meaning nothing at all, I argue that the sense of inadequacy and lack continues to be registered by this buzzword. A serial of annual '*diaosi* criteria' were widespread on Chinese cyberspace between 2013 and 2015[39]. Now gendered, the criteria differentiate male *diaosi* and female *diaosi*. Those for men give priority to men's lack of income, while those for women emphasise women's lack of consumption.

I now turn to the axis of 'controversial' femininities exemplified by buzzwords 'masculine woman', 'spendthrift chicks' and 'green-tea bitch'. By reading through texts containing these namings, I will show how consumerism, emphasised femininity (Connell, 1987) and the kind of 'girl power' (McRobbie, 2007) are entangled in Chinese Internet discourse.

5.4 'Controversial' Femininities

In chapter 3, I pointed out two interrelated tendencies regarding gender politics in post-Mao China. On the one hand, gender essentialism accompanies the rise of a consumption-oriented economy, celebrating a type of femininity that integrates youth, 'aesthetic sensitivity and intrinsic sexuality' (Yang Jie, 2010: 352). On the other hand, the CCP government has retreated from providing subsidised child care and other economic means for gender equality in work and employment. In contrast to the Mao era when women's liberation was framed in terms of their participation in productive, public labour, women's sense of autonomy is now frequently associated with their choices as consumers (Yu, 2014: 137) and their capability to capitalise on individual 'female qualities' such

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[39] See '2015 *diaosi* criteria' via http://news.sina.com.cn/s/2015-02-26/192031546161.shtml

as a feminine and sexualised body (Evans, 2008; Yang Jie, 2011; Zhong, 2006). Meanwhile, different from the situation in rural China, the majority of urban women born in post-Mao China were empowered by the one-child policy (Fong, 2002). Many young urban women have received a high level of education and have become white-collar workers with strong purchasing power. Nonetheless, they continue to encounter gender discriminations both in the job market and in the symbolic realm. For example, female doctoral students are mocked as the 'third kind of human being' distinct from men and women because few men can match their educational level.

Against this backdrop, three notions loom large: femininity, consumption and the legitimacy of women's autonomy. The complex connotations of the buzzword 'masculine women' capture these intertwining notions.

5.4.1 'Masculine woman': young women's autonomy in question

Figures 5.3 and 5.4 constitute a widespread meme of 'masculine women' in Chinese cyberspace. Similar to 'female doctoral students', this meme plays on categorising a 'third gender' which is seen as an *Oth*er. Captioning 'there are three kinds of human being', figure 5.3 illustrates a hyper-feminine anime figure with long and curly hair, fringe, big eyes and a tiny mouth, dressed in pink, as well as a boy with blue short hair and small eyes. Through the conventional colour codes of pink and blue, it represents two stereotypical figures of 'girls' and 'boys' who are apparently in love. The girl in figure 5.4, captioned 'masculine women', is nonetheless dressed in blue. She appears to be playing at a computer, her bra hanging on the back of her chair. In contrast to the 'soft girl' in figure 5.3, the masculine woman behaves in a vulgar way—signified by her big speaking mouth[40], her aggressive expression and dark circles around her eyes. Following the caption in figure 5.3, figure 5.4 goes on saying 'there is also a (third) type of

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[40] A traditional gender norm about femininity in Imperial China goes as 'smile without showing one's teeth' (笑不露齿).

alien being'. The masculine woman recognises this 'interpellation' (Althusser, 1971) by answering 'what, are you talking about me!'

人类分成三种
女生
男生
还有外星来物:
女汉子
什么!
你是在
说我吗!

Figures 5.3 and 5.4: a meme of 'masculine women'

This meme of masculine women entails multiple overlaps with the construction of a *diaosi* figure analysed above. She is depicted as spending lots of time in front of a computer screen and caring little about her appearance as opposed to the normativity of being soft and feminine. If the girl and boy in figure 3 seem to be attracted by each other's masculinity and femininity, the masculine woman is doomed to remain single as a 'third gender'. This point is even clearer in figure 5.5, another widespread meme of masculine woman. A young woman who wears little make-up and in a T-shirt is carrying a bucket for a water dispenser; she appears to be interviewed in front of a microphone and says 'do you think I need a boyfriend?'[41] This meme is intertextual with a popular online saying that 'those who cannot open bottle lids when dating have all got married, while those who can are still opening lids for themselves'. Here, the reason for a woman to remain single is attributed to her over-independence.

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[41] It can be told that this sentence is added rather than the woman's original words.

你觉得我需要男朋友吗

Figure 5.5: another meme of masculine woman

Similar to the *diaosi* narrative, these memes and popular sayings about 'masculine women' are constructed in a highly performative manner, particularly suitable for self-mockery. They construct an exaggerated stereotypical figure with which one can feel free to identify with while at the same time knowing 'I'm not that bad'. What defines a masculine woman is her 'abnormal' refusal to dress up in a way which caters to a male gaze (Mulvery, 1975) and to be taken care of as a passive object. A sense of women's autonomy is exaggerated in order to be mimicked. A masculine woman is frequently constructed against a type of femininity emphasising beauty, passivity and sexuality.

The best example in this regard is a comedy skit titled 'Goddess and Masculine Woman' performed in 2015 CCTV (China Central Television) Spring Festival Gala. Accompanied by two male supporting characters who serve as commentators, two female characters—a 'goddess' and a 'masculine woman'— keep exhibiting contrasting behaviors and articulating completely different sensibilities in relation to gender norms. While the goddess performs a variety of hyper-feminine acts, such as showing her S-curve, the masculine woman mimics these acts in a distinctive and hilarious manner (see figure 5.6 for a still). While the goddess claims that 'when my boyfriend feeds me at the dinner table, I feel

really shy', the masculine woman says that 'before my boyfriend has a chance to feed me, I've already finished my meal'. This comedy skit caused huge controversy as some Chinese feminists accused CCTV gala of gender discrimination. A number of scholars have pointed out that the post-Mao government is in effect complicit with, if not sponsoring, gender essentialism to encourage more consumption and to adjust women's employment in marketisation (e.g. Meng and Huang, 2017; Yang Jie, 2011; Otis, 2012).

Figure 5.6: a still of the CCTV comedy skit 'Goddess and Masculine Woman'

Yet this type of 'masculine woman VS hyper-feminine woman' theme differentiates from a typical *diaosi* narrative in two key ways. First, the two types of femininity are often juxtaposed with the *presence* of men and their gaze, while a 'black wood ear' in a *diaosi* narrative only serves as a sexualised carrier of male status. Second, a masculine woman tends to *win* in the apparent confrontation with a hyper-feminine woman, rather than merely mimicking the latter. This is true in the case of the CCTV gala comedy, as well as a blockbuster film *Women Who Flirt*[42] (Dir. Peng Haoxiang, 2013). The next section turns to a

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[42] The film's IMDB page: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3313908/

brief structural analysis of the film as well as the theme of 'masculine woman VS hyper-feminine woman'

5.4.2 'Green-tea bitch' VS 'masculine woman'

The film *Women Who Flirt* is based on an erotic triangle where two women—one a tomboy, the other hyper-feminine—fight to win a man's heart. The film's trailer articulates its theme as 'an elder unmarried masculine woman fighting a coquettish green-tea bitch'. The hyper-feminine character is depicted as a typical antagonist: she is calculating, jealous, fooling with the male protagonist via her young, sexy body and her exaggerated feminine performance. Instead, the masculine woman is innocent, straightforward and full of integrity. She initially tries to imitate hyper-feminine acts but then gives up. In the end, she wins back the male protagonist by stoping acting as his 'brother' (*ge'ermen*). She appears to reach a kind of comprised femininity, which is distinct from the hyper-feminine type. But at the same time, she learns when and how to soften herself, to put on a feminised masquerade, so as to be identified as a lovable woman. Compared to the masculine-woman figure of the CCTV comedy skit, she is manifestly easier for audiences to identify with.

The imagery of 'green-tea bitch' resonates with those alluring female figures in ancient Chinese novels. Known as 'foxy spirits' (*hulijing*), they are simultaneously desired and *othered* as non-human since they go wild beyond men's control (Meng and Dai, 1989: 17). Ranging from 'little three' (*xiaosan*, the third party), 'sugar daddy' (*bangdakuan*) to 'green-tea bitch' and 'black wood ear', contemporary China never lacks neologisms to name young temptresses. The aforementioned term 'black wood ear' is constructed more from a man's perspective and concerned with a foxy woman's clitoris which metonymises depreciated sexuality. Meanwhile, the connotations of 'green-tea bitch' can also involve a female perspective on women's competition for the desirable men and

the contempt toward those who fake innocence and naivity in order to appeal to men's macho 'nature'.

In her book on misogyny in Japan, Ueno (2015: 179) observes that different from the single criterion for evaluating men—wealth and power—women constantly struggle between two sets of values. The first one is winning men's recognition through female beauty. The second is winning other women's recognition through one's capability, such as scores at school. In patriarchal Japan, the first one dwarfs the second. An intelligent woman is prone to be mocked and *othered*. The aforementioned stigmatisation of female doctoral students in contemporary China resonates with this point. But a good woman in men's eyes—namely a hyper-feminine woman—often incurs jealousy or even resentment from other women (Ueno, 2015). A reassuring femininity in women's eyes entails a sense that 'she does not appeal to men' (ibid: 158). Reflecting on how misogyny is subjectified by women, Ueno argues that women avoid self-disavowal by treating themselves as exceptional, thus projecting misogyny onto other women (ibid: 197). She sees two kinds of strategies. The first one is a 'strong-women' strategy: that is becoming an elitist woman so as to be treated like men. The second one is an 'ugly-women' strategy: that is stepping outside the category of women, and to escape from being evaluated by a male gaze. 'If you are born ugly, study hard' is a popular saying in both contemporary Japan and China. The two strategies are in fact the two sides of the same coin.

Ueno's theory can help us to understand the complex construction of the buzzword 'masculine woman' for which 'green-tea bitch' frequently serves as a reference point. When it refers to *appearance and behaviour,* 'masculine woman' is constructed in a highly performative and amusing manner in men's eyes. It indicates a sense of 'performing ugly', paying little attention to men's judgment so as to reveal only a reassuring femininity. This dimension is more suitable for women's self-mockery, while the buzzword's signification of a *capable and*

uncalculating personality—an independent woman—is for self-identification in pride. The ambivalent connotations of 'masculine woman' symbolise young Chinese women's struggles between being recognised by men and positioning themselves as subjects. As embodied by the female protagonist in *Women Who Flirts*, an ideal figure of 'masculine woman' is capable and uncalculating on the one hand, yet also knows how to appear and behave as a woman on the other hand. That is, putting on a feminised masquerade for which consumption is essential.

5.4.3 'Spendthrift chicks' and the 'masquerade of consumerist feminism'

Looking at western societies, particularly the UK, Angela McRobbie (2007) observes that the government, alongside the fashion and beauty system, now treats young and capable woman as the ideal subjects of female success and autonomy. She views this visibility of 'girl power' as the provision of a new sexual contract where young women are attributed with capacity on the basis of putting on a 'post-feminist masquerade'—as though gender equality is already achieved. A key aspect of this masquerade, according to McRobbie (2007: 726), is to mask young career women's 'rivalry with men in the world of work (i.e. her wish for masculinity)'. Therefore, the fashion and beauty industry, displacing traditional modes of patriarchal authority, urges a successful young woman to endlessly dress her up to make sure that she remains sexually desirable. Meanwhile, as pointed out by McRobbie (2007), the UK government's encouragement of young women to achieve school success and then to become wage-earning subjects is implicated in other structural factors such as class and race in the UK.

In the case of China, both the legacy of state feminism in the Mao era and the birth control policy contribute to urban young women's entitlement to near-equality in education. Many have become white-collar workers with economic independence and strong purchasing power. In the previous two

sections, we have seen how the buzzword 'masculine woman' connotes young women's liminality between becoming autonomous subjects and remaining sexually desirable in contemporary China. With the essentialisation of gender and the recession of state feminism, a young career woman is now also urged to put on a feminised masquerade. The naming of 'masculine woman', by presupposing capability and independence as masculine traits, is already part of this masquerade. Another key part is what the buzzword 'masculine woman' mimics with regard to its lack—consumption.

Similar to the West, young women's autonomy has been individualised and related to personal consumption in contemporary China (cf. Yu, 2014). But the interpellation of young women as consumers tends to be articulated with a conventional gender norm that women are financially dependent. This is particularly clear in the discursive constructions of 'spendthrift chicks' (*baijia niangmen*), an online buzzword that mimics women as shopaholic and squandering men's money. The buzzword has become widespread with the outburst of China's e-commerce industry, such as the frenzy of 'Double Eleven' shopping festival since 2014 (Meng and Huang, 2017). In Meng and Huang (2017), my co-author and I provide a detailed analysis of texts constructed around 'Double Eleven' and 'spendthrift chicks'. We argue that the state, the market and the media co-produce a highly gendered consumer discourse which 'fixates women on the conventional roles' and promotes 'strong middle-class normativity' (ibid: 680). A noticeable parody that we analyzed is reproduced here (figures 5.7 and 5.8). This parody reprimands the perceived lack of femininity of rural women (captioned 'thrifty wives' in figure 5.7) so as to celebrate and legitimate the 'modernised' urban femininity channelled through consumption (captioned 'spendthrift chicks' in figure 5.8). The androgynous figures of rural middle-aged women resonate with 'iron girls' of the Mao era. In contrast, the imagery of 'spendthrift chicks' serves as metaphor to signify the liberation of human nature and the retrieving of female essence in post-Mao China.

Figures 5.7 and 5.8: 'thrifty wives' and 'spendthrift chicks'

In this sense, the discursive construction of the buzzword 'spendthrift chicks' is again characteristic of ambivalence. On the one hand, 'spendthrift chicks' are performatively disapproved of since they are constructed as spending men's money relentlessly. On the other hand, shopaholic young women are recognised or approved of since they embody beauty and 'liberated' femininity through consumption. Again, the online wordplay of 'spendthrift chicks' includes rural population through othering and exclusion.

Zhong Xueping (2006: 655) observes that feminism in post-Mao China faces 'the double-edged sword' of celebrating women's identification with the body while at the same time imaging the body 'as the only site for emancipation'. This double-edge sword of reifying the body in young urban women's sense of autonomy leads to an emerging trend of constructing women as *an objectified subject* in Chinese Internet discourse. For example, a popular online saying claims that the new criterion of good men is being a 'pile driver on the bed and an ATM machine off the bed (*chuangshang dazhuangji, chuangxia qukuanji*).' This saying underlines women's sexual desire and satisfaction, positioning women as subjects in the private realm. But at the same, women are constructed as objects in the public realm of social production.

Following McRobbie's argument and Shan Jiahui's (2016) term 'consumerist feminism', I coin the term the 'masquerade of consumerist feminism' to understand the provision of a new sexual contract by the state and market in contemporary China. Consumerist feminism celebrates young women's autonomy yet guides it to personal, private consumption. On attributing to urban young women a sense of autonomy limited to consumption, this masquerade conceals the political economy of gender, as if gender equality was no longer an issue since human nature and female beauty are now 'truly' liberated through China's marketisation. The new sexual contract is brought home by the song *Spendthrift Chicks*, which is created by an online singing duo. The song is about a married couple bargaining about the division of labour. In the end, the husband acknowledges his wife's status within the nuclear family and the fact that she does all the housework, raises children and dresses up to make him happy. He thus promises to be hard-working, to appreciate and support his 'spendthrift' wife's consumptions (see more in Meng and Huang, 2017). The masquerade of consumerist feminism is essential for re-instating urban young women into the symbolic order of patriarchy. It serves to reassure a sense that urban young women, despite their autonomy and capability, still cater to men's gaze and spend men's earnings, thus fulfilling their wifehood and motherhood.

Having addressed the theme of 'controversial femininities', I now turn to 'masculinities in aspiration and contestation' in Chinese cyberspace.

5.5 Masculinities in Aspiration and Contestation

5.5.1 East-Asian masculinities in popular culture

The conventional way of constructing ideal masculinity in China, as elaborated in section 3.2.3, consists of the *wen-wu* dyad (Louie, 2002) which emphasised both cultural and martial accomplishments yet prioritises book learning and the restraint of individual desire over bare violence. This preference for a kind of 'soft masculinity' developed to valorisation of young and effeminate masculinity

in late imperial China (Wang, 2003; Wu, 2003). The *wen-wu* dyad continues to shape the construction of masculinities in East Asia in modern times (cf. Aoyoma, 2003; Dasgupta, 2003). But as emphasised by Louie (2015), young women's increasing consumption power, together with the cultural influx between China[43], Japan and Korea, looms large in re-shaping the construction of ideal masculinities in East Asia nowadays.

Chinese Internet discourse includes a kaleidoscope of terms which signify, compare and contest masculinities (cf. Song and Hird, 2014). These terms mostly originate from Internet literature that is written by and for women (cf. Yang and Xu, 2015) and online discussions which address gender biases and discriminations in daily life from an apparently feminist perspective. Gao Hanning (2016) links these two interrelated aspects to the emergence of 'online feminism' in contemporary China. She observes that 'online feminism' is in a less sense inheriting the discussions of 'humanities' and 'womanhood' in the 1980s and 'women's literature' in the 1990s both of which took place among female intellectuals. Instead, it follows a commercial logic of consumer goods, inheriting three-decades popular cultures and youth sub-cultures accommodating (urban) young women, such as romance novels of Hong Kong and Taiwan, Japanese shōjo (young women) manga and idol dramas (*ouxiangju*) of different East-Asian countries (Gao, 2016).

Japanese manga constitutes a major site where conventional masculinities in East Asia such as 'salaryman' has not only been popularised and reinforced, but also parodied and subverted (Dasgutpa, 2003). An important genre in this regard is the BL (Boys' Love) manga and literature, which has developed in Japan since the 1970s and gradually spread to other parts of East Asia. Known in mainland China as *danmei* (耽美), the BL genre is generally created by young women for other young women (Louie, 2015). BL fans are called 腐女 (*funü*), a term

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[43] China in a broad sense that includes Taiwan and Hong Kong.

borrowed from Japanese which literally means 'rotten girls'. Accommodating young women's fantasy, the BL manga and literature tends to romanticise gay men as 'women's best friends, ideal partners and allies in the battle to win increased space for female subjectivity' (Mclelland, 2003: 64). As Mark Mclelland (2003) points out, a number of women's comics and TV dramas in Japan associate straight men with vulgar and abusive antagonists in opposition to gay protagonists, who are represented as middle-class, handsome, refined and supportive of female protagonists' problems. This convention of represenation in the BL genre is important for understanding the discursive constructions of the buzzword 'straight-men cancer' in Chinese Internet discourse (see section 5.5.3). While the BL genre and the naming of 'rotten girls' are quite well-known among my white-collar respondents, none of the new workers I interviewed have heard of them (see more in chapter 7).

Apart from the BL genre, a series of 'soft' and 'feminised' male characters have also appeared in Japanese manga. Although being named in various ways, such as *Otomen* (the pink boys) and 'herbivore men', these types of male characters share a beautiful appearance and an interest in 'girly things', such as shopping, cooking and sewing. Very attentive to personal image, they have 'few aspirations for wealth and career achievements' (Song and Hird, 2014: 95). Similar to gay male characters in the BL genre, these 'flowerlike' young men have intimate relationships with girls due to their gentle and sensitive personality. But as exemplified by the term 'herbivore', they are not particularly interested in dating girls and having sex. In many ways, they are just the opposite of conventional 'salarymen' who are career-driven and sex-obsessed.

Alongside Japanese manga, the young and beautiful male image has been further embodied and popularised by a variety of pop bands from Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and now increasingly mainland China. In fact, these bands frequently comprise members from different countries who yet share the 'pan-East Asian

soft masculinity' (Jung, 2009; cited in Louie, 2015: 127-128). The online buzzword 'little fresh meat' (*xiaoxianrou*) symbolises the great popularity of boy bands among urban young women in China (see more in chapter 7). While the aesthetic revival of young and effeminate masculinity resonates with late imperial China, its 'connoisseurs' have transformed from upper-class men to young middle-class women with strong purchasing power in East Asia (Louie, 2015).

Japan's changing historical conditions from industrial boom in post-war periods to economic recessions since the 1990s is accompanied by transformations of ideal masculinity in popular culture. In post-war Japan, the masculine ideal of 'competitive and conformist' salarymen was created and celebrated as corporate warriors (Louie, 2015: 126). In contrast, the imagery of 'herbivore men' and a kind of 'demonisation' of straight men in Japanese BL manga has increasingly contested the conventional masculinity of salarymen (Dasgupta, 2003). But the developmental trajectory of contemporary China is different. With its continuously fast economic growth in the past two decades and the government's retreat from the political economy of gender, China parallels post-war Japan where 'the distinction between private/male and public/male' was sharpened (Dasgupta, 2003: 123). Correspondingly, the consumer culture accommodating urban young women in contemporary China tends to welcome a 'partially softened' masculinity. Catering to urban young women's tendency of retreating to the private realm, this ideal masculinity is, on the one hand, caring and understanding of women's needs in personal relationships. On the other hand, it is wealthy, ambitious and career-driven. This type of ideal man is epitomised by the term 'domineering CEO' (see more in chapter 7)

Such an idealised setting indicates tensions attached to the masquerade of consumerist feminism. These tensions become clearer when we look at how the 'warm man' type has been both idealised and problematised in Chinese cyberspace.

5.5.2 The ambivalent 'warm man', the inner tensions of consumerist feminism

As indicated by the buzzword's composition, what defines a 'warm man' is primarily his warm-hearted and caring personality. This emphasis resonates with the Western notion of 'new man' which rose to prominence in the 1980s. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term 'new man' refers to those 'caring, sensitive and non-aggressive' men who 'reject sexist attitudes and the traditional male role, especially in the context of domestic responsibilities and childcare' (de Castella, 2014). Similarly, the buzzword 'warm man' has been constructed to celebrate a type of family-oriented and uxorious masculinity since its emergence around 2014. However, the connotation of 'warm men' also entails a sense of ordinariness in men's income and appearance, which is illustrated by its synonymy 'economical and practical men' (*jingji shiyong nan*). In fact, both terms have informed public discussions about young (urban) women's spouse-selecting standards. For example, *Chongqing Morning Post*, a metropolitan newspaper from the city of Chongqing, reports that more than 60% of young women (aged between 18 and 40) surveyed by the newspaper expressed their preference for 'warm men'[44]. It quotes an interviewee's response as follows:

> Wang Li (the interviewee) had been wondering why her 'goddess' Zhou Xun[45], aged 40, married a man who appears to be only 170cm tall. Then she saw Zhou Xun say that every time she shots for a raining scene, her husband will carry a dry bath towel and stand behind a camera. As soon as hearing 'cut', he will spring forward to Zhou, covering her like a kitten. Zhou Xun will also act in concert, nestling her wet hair (in her husband's embrace). Wang Li thinks a warm man instantiates his love with details. This embodies a real sense of responsibility.

The excerpt praises a type of romantic relationship in which men act as the care-giver. This mode of relationship, to some extent, corresponds with young urban women's high level of education and income in contemporary China.

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[44] http://www.chinanews.com/df/2014/08-01/6448622.shtml
[45] A famous female star from mainland China who coincidentally plays the female protagonist in the film *Women Who Flirt* mentioned above (see section 5.4.1).

Instead of expecting men to economically support them, urban young women are now said to give priority to men's willingness to share housework and their capacity to meet women's emotional needs. The excerpt yet also indicates a sense of gender performativity (Butler, 1990). Urban young women now come to perform a gender role of being cared for, if not pampered. An online saying goes as: 'when girls start dating, they stop being able to open bottle lids.' On idealising a form of gentle and understanding masculinity, the buzzword 'warm man' nevertheless tends to construct women as an objectified subject. That is, women's privilege is embodied in their enjoyment of meticulous care from men who appear to assume a lowly stance. Similarly, the online definition of 'economical and practical man' includes family-centric personality, cooking skills and 'unconditional submission of salary to his wives' (Ma and Chen: 2014: 54). The submission of income symbolises men's unconditional submission to women in the private domain.

However, a warm-man figure's caring personality has also become problematised in *Weibo* and online forums. A typical way is associating 'warm man' with 'central air-conditioner', as shown by figure 5.9, a widespread saying with regard to the two terms. The saying goes as: the definition of warm man is that he is only warm to you while being indifferent to others; this is real a warm man. Warming a bunch of people; that's called a central air-conditioner.

所谓暖男的定义，他只温暖你一个人，对别人冷若冰霜，这才是暖男。暖一堆人的那叫中央空调……

Figure 5.9: an online saying on 'warm man' and 'central air-conditioner'

According to this saying, 'warm man' entails an inner tension that tends to negate the buzzword's commendatory tone. If a man is only 'warm' to one

woman, he is not likely to appear as a 'warm man' because this kind of one-to-one caring is difficult to be discerned by others; if someone is noticeably 'warm', then he is a suspicious 'central air-conditioner'. The negation is exemplified by another widespread saying that 'a warm man is the male equivalent to green-tea bitch' since he keeps intimate relationships with many women under his soft and gentle surface.

Another common critique of the warm-man type is that men's horizons should be about more than just caring for women. Mimicking family-oriented men is hardly surprising in patriarchal society since this type of masculinity runs against the prevailing expectation for men to be the bread-winners. In China, for instance, while men in Shanghai have been praised for treating wives in a relatively equal manner and sharing housework, they have also been called 'Shanghai small men' (*Shanghai xiaonanren*). 'Small' here not only signifies a contrast with the imagery of 'big' macho men, but also a limited horizon contrary to a 'big' career-driven ambition. A blog article titled 'Are warm men the best choice for Chinese women?' (Feng, 2014) regards warm men's constant attention to caring women as a purposive performance. In this way, giving much attention to women's needs and feelings is linked to warm men's suspicious intimacy with more than one woman.

I would argue that the simultaneous idealisation and stigmatisation of 'warm man' illustrates the inner tensions of consumerist feminism. Gender politics in contemporary China is implicated in the hegemony of patriarchal capitalism on the one hand and urban young women's apparently rising autonomy on the other hand. As elaborated above, the masquerade of consumerist feminism serves to tame and re-instate the kind of 'girl power' back to a patriarchal order. It celebrates urban young women's empowerment in the private domain by their sexualised body and legitimated consumption. A key ambivalence lies in *who* pays for their consumption—men or women themselves. Resonating with the

discursive constructions of an empowered woman in the private realm, a 'warm men' is idealised for his caring and understanding persona towards women. But he is also problematised because men are continuously expected to be more than just 'warm' and devoted to family in contemporary China. According to a widespread online criterion of in 2014[46], an 'economical and practical man' needs to meet the most basic premise of marriage—affording the down payment on a house.

Furthermore, the over-determination of women's autonomy to the private realm leads to a constant necessity to emphasise monogamy. While China has been institutionalising and promoting free-choice monogamous marriage since the Mao era, extra-marital affairs become a particularly eye-catching topic, repeatedly discussed and represented in contemporary China. Western feminists have argued that institutionalised monogamy serves the interests of patriarchy and capitalism for it not only accentuates men's possession of women as a property, but also leads to women's over-investment in men both emotionally and physically (e.g. Robinson, 1997; Tsoulis, 1987). Instead of accentuating men's possession of women, the masquerade of consumerist feminism in contemporary China celebrates women's privilege within the private realm on being unconditionally and exclusively cared for by men. The discursive ambivalence between a 'real warm man' only caring for one woman and a 'central air-conditioner' warming many women epitomises the contradiction between women's over-attachment to men in patriarchal capitalist settings and their apparently privileged position in the private realm.

Although the buzzword 'warm man' and the online term 'economical and practical men' seem to signify a type of average masculinity, they are constructed from an urban middle-class perspective just as the apparent symbolising of a grassroots identity by the *diaosi* naming. The next section

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[46] http://society.people.com.cn/n/2014/1013/c1008-25821108.html

elaborates on this urban bourgeois feminist stance, which is brought home by the online buzzword 'straight-men cancer' and the term 'phoenix men'.

5.5.3 From misogynist outcry to consumerist feminism: displacing class by gender and sexuality

Evans (2008: 374) argues that in post-Mao China, explorations of different sexualities appear in media and public discussions 'as a series of acts or choices, little associated with notions of relational asymmetries and hierarchies that go beyond the biologically given or the morally acceptable.' Indeed, the online terms I have discussed so far signify a variety of masculinities and femininities as if one can freely identify with, compare and choose them from the marketplace of marriage and/or intimacy. Questions concerning social justice and gender hierarchy tend to be concealed by the various online terms that represent gender and sexuality in a highly individualised and market-based manner.

The online term 'phoenix man' illustrates how issues in relation to class inequality and rural/urban divide can be displaced and naturalised by an apparently 'feminist' stance of urban young women. 'Phoenix man' refers to men born in rural villages or underdeveloped towns who manage to live in big cities through their success in studies and careers. This naming originates from an encouraging old saying that 'a golden phoenix flies out of its grass nestle' (*caowo li feichu zhi jinfenghuang*). But 'phoenix man' has come to signify a kind of masculinity particularly unwelcomed by urban young women (Ma and Chen, 2014: 38). China's major online forums, such as *tianya.cn*, are full of stories depicting urban women's terrible experiences of dating 'phoenix men' (cf. Meng, 2018). News reportage and TV dramas have also picked up this theme, underlining drastic differences between urban and rural grown-ups' notions with regard to family, lifestyles and gender. A phoenix man and his family in rural China are often depicted as utilising a woman's body as a tool of reproduction and not allowing young women to have dinner with other family members. In

Ode to Joy (*Huanlesong*), a popular TV series since 2015, the stereotype of rural populations as being backward is even applied to the family members of a 'phoenix woman'—a young white-collar woman born in the countryside. Although the TV series absorbs multiple feminist elements—for instance, criticising men's obsession with virginity, it continues to essentialise rural backwardness which serves to underline urbanites' modernity and advanced gender notions.

If the stigmatisation of 'phoenix man', discursively speaking, entails a displacement of social inequality with the apparent gaps in gender notions, the online buzzword 'straight-men cancer' adds one more layer of sexuality to this displacement. In fact, most 'phoenix men' are said to have 'straight-men cancer' in online forums. As we have seen in section 5.5.1, the buzzword 'straight-men cancer' builds on the convention of 'demonising' straight men in the BL (boys' love) genre. In Chinese cyberspace, the term 'straight men' now connotes heterosexual men's perceived lack in consumption, taste and accommodation to women's needs. This kind of representation is similar to Western contexts where gay tastes are commercially accentuated and essentialised (cf. Sender, 2006). Through analysing a popular American TV show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* between 2003 and 2005, Katherine Sender (2006) notices that the long-existing expectations of women to hold responsibility for relationship maintenance and consumption are now turned to men as well. She quotes Goldstein (2003; cited in Sender, 2006: 141) and underlines the 'newfound power of the female gaze': now 'it's not just women who dress to please; everyone is subject to objectification.' The huge popularity of East-Asian boy bands, idol dramas and women's web literature all testify to this 'power of the female gaze' that partially feeds on urban women's rising power of consumption. Their resistance towards and imaginative critique of a continuously patriarchal society add impetus to the emergence of consumerist feminism and the increasingly powerful female gaze (see more in chapters 7).

Similar to the apparent 'crisis of masculinity' in the West where men experience greater competition with women for jobs and their growing economic independence in neoliberal economy (McRobbie, 2007; Sender, 2006), male anxiety permeates contemporary China. This is exemplified by the *diaosi* narrative as well as numerous media discussions regarding young Chinese men's mismatch with young women in multiple aspects. This kind of discussion adopts a highly individualistic stance, comparing men's and women's appearance, dress, body figure and earning power as if all these were out of free choice[47]. To a large extent, the *diaosi* wordplay illustrates lower-middle-class men's anxiety about meeting the multiple gender expectations to earn money, to dress smartly and to maintain relationships at the same time. But in a *diaosi* narrative, issues of social inequality and gender hierarchy are simultaneously raised and naturalised by a patriarchal ideology. It mimics the superiority enjoyed by rich men on the one hand and stigmatises women as materialistic sexual beings on the other. The tag of 'straight-men cancer' goes directly against this kind of thought and indeed a *diaosi* figure. A widespread post lists 'nine major symptoms of straight-men cancer'[48]:

> 1&2. Considering women who dress up sexually and share erotic content on social media as promiscuous.
> 3. Imposing the idea that women must get married and that leftover women are unwanted.
> 4. Assuming that women wear make up to cater to male tastes.
> 5. Blaming women for getting sexually harassed because they wear too little.
> 6. Assuming that women depend on men to become rich.
> 7. Idling around and being absorbed in computer games, yet feeling extremely good about himself.
> 8. (Holding the view that) non-virgins (before marriage) are bitches.
> 9. Men can cheat on their partners while women should be virtuous and loyal.

Since its emergence, 'straight-men cancer' has become a key buzzword for not only online users but also Chinese feminists to criticise misogynist and

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[47] See a related discussion on qq.com via http://view.news.qq.com/original/intouchtoday/n2863.html.

[48] http://www.joke98.com/gaoxiaowenzi/wangluoxinci/20160315/373692.html

patriarchal speech in everyday life. They emphasise women's freedom and choices in terms of dressing, sex life, marriage, media consumption, etc. These emphases undoubtedly challenge the patriarchal ideology deeply rooted in Chinese society and exemplified by the *diaosi* narrative. But the post above also illustrates the limitation of 'online feminism' which arguably constitutes a prominent component of consumerist feminism in contemporary China. By reifying the body and framing gender issues in terms of individual notions or attributes, this kind of feminist critique leaves untouched those broad structural questions. While young urban women, with their strong purchasing power and high level of education, may enjoy a degree of autonomy over their body and sexuality, what about the emancipation of other groups of women? Moreover, 'online feminism' hardly touches upon the gender oligations that men are expected to fulfil, such as the aforementioned capability to afford a down payment on a house; not to mention the gender hierarchy that underpins this kind of expectation.

If the *diaosi* narrative simultaneously reveals and conceals the intersectionality of class structures and the gender order, consumerist feminism dismisses the dimension of political economy in gender politics in the first place. The latter stance is akin to bourgeois liberal feminism which downplays the structural constraints of patriarchy to personal freedom and choice. As shown by the '7th symptom of straight-men cancer' above, men are now told to stop complaining about injustice and to work on improving themselves. Alongside its frequent appearance in feminist critiques, 'straight-men cancer' is also co-opted by numerous corporations for promoting products. In the latter cases, 'straight-men cancer' is curable if one improves his tastes and consumes more.

It is no wonder that online terms such as 'phoenix men' and 'straight-men cancer' have little resonance among new-worker respondents since these terms displace social inequality by the rhetoric of free choices in gender and sexuality. As will be

seen in chapter 7, for most new-worker respondents, homosexuality seems to be such a strange notion that linking macho and misogyny to straight men helps little to address gender politics among migrant workers. While my textual analysis in this chapter has made multiple comparisons with Western contexts, these parallels are in fact oriented towards youngsters who grow up, study and work in urban China. In Chinese Internet discourse, rural migrants and rural peasants are continuously othered and projected as embodying the variety of lack in terms of up-to-date tastes, consumption and gender notions.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter provides a discourse analysis of texts that contain the online terms mentioned most by my respondents to illustrate their conventional meanings and interconnections. I started with a brief genealogy of 'grassroots' (*caogen*) in the Chinese context, pointing out that the notion has been overloaded with urban orientation in post-socialist China despite its apparent signification of ordinary people as opposed to social elites. Therefore, if researchers studying the Chinese Internet take this notion for granted, we may risk neglecting the multiple ambivalences and internal hierarchies of 'grassroots' discourses in Chinese cyberspace. The *diaosi* narrative exemplifies what I called the 'double mimicry' of Chinese Internet discourse—the two levels of discursive ambivalence oscillating between recognition and disavowal. On the one hand, the *diaosi* narrative simultaneously recognises and disavows the *difference* between the gender privileged of rich men and that of lower-middle-class men. This first level of mimicry is also illustrated by a series of online terms connoting the super male rich, such as 'national husband', 'Ma father', etc. On the other hand, the *diaosi* narrative both recognises and disavows the similarity between the living conditions of the truly underclass—rural migrant workers—and those of office workers or university students who mock themselves as 'moving bricks'. If adopting Wang Hui's (2014) categorisation of two kinds of 'new poor', we can

say that new workers are constructed as a reference for the urban new poor to performatively depreciate themselves while knowing they are not that bad. In other words, new workers are included into online wordplay via exclusion. This logic is brought home by the online term *shamate* which constructs young migrant workers as attempting to catch up with urban trends but constantly failing due to their inappropriate consumer tastes.

The discursive ambivalence of mimicry also appears in the two online buzzwords connoting 'controversial' femininity—'masculine women' and 'spendthrift chicks'. The buzzword 'masculine women' oscillates between mocking a young woman who refuses to dress up and behave in a feminine manner and praising female independence and autonomy. Its complex connotations indicate young urban women's liminality between positioning themselves as subjects and catering to a male gaze. The buzzword 'spendthrift chicks' constructs women as squandering men's money while at the same time approving women's consumption for beauty, wifehood and motherhood. I argued that the buzzword's popularity symbolises and contributes to sustaining the emerging 'masquerade of consumerist feminism' in contemporary China. By celebrating women's autonomy yet guiding it to the private realm of consumption, consumerist feminism conceals the political economy of gender, as if gender equality was no longer an issue since human nature and female beauty are now 'truly' liberated with China's marketisation. But as illustrated by the meme in section 5.4.3, both the imagery of 'spendthrift chicks' and the masquerade of consumerist feminism are oriented towards the urban middle class.

Urban young middle-class women have also been contesting and reshaping masculinities with their strong purchasing power. This is instantiated in women's web culture, the BL (boys' love) genre, the popularity of East-Asian boy bands, TV dramas and online posts addressing misogyny and male chauvinism in everyday life. A label frequently utilised by 'online feminism' is 'straight-men cancer' which

draws on the convention of 'demonising' heterosexual men in the BL genre. While the *diaosi* narrative stigmatises some women as immoral and materialistic 'black wood ear', the term 'straight-men cancer' confronts this kind of stigmatisation, emphasising women's free choices regarding the body and sex life. This framing is compatible with consumerist feminism which underlines women's autonomy and privilege in the private realm yet being ambivalent with women's economic independence and other broad structural issues. The simultaneous idealisation and problematisation of 'warm men' illustrates the inner tensions within consumerist feminism as it fantasises men to be both bread-winners and care-givers. We can thus see a kind of confrontation in Chinese Internet discourse between men's anxiety and misogynist outcry from a stance of lower-middle-class men on the one hand, and women's fantasy and contestation of misogyny from a urban middle-class women's perspective on the other. In both stances, the issue of class inequality is downplayed and concealed by gender and sexuality, with rural populations serving either as the object for self-deprecation or the epitome of backward gender notions.

CHAPTER 6: CLASS, MEDIA USE AND THE *HABITUS* OF CHINESE INTERNET DISCOURSE

Based on interview data, this chapter addresses the topic of class and Chinese Internet discourse from two aspects. The first aspect is Internet discourse and everyday life. While in chapter 5 I laid out the conventional meanings of the various online terms mentioned most frequently by my respondents, I illustrate in this chapter that their 'invitations of meaning' are filtered by people's everyday lives and media uses, and that the *habitus* of engaging in online wordplay for self-deprecation is oriented towards urban white-collar workers. In the second part of the chapter, I present in detail different social group members' interpretations of the online terms signifying class connotations—the *diaosi* wordplay, *shamate*, and those mimicking the rich. In this way, I uncover how Internet discourse shapes my respondents' perception of social stratifications, class relations and urban-rural duality in contemporary China.

6.1 Chinese Internet Discourse in Everyday Life

Most media practitioners I interviewed assume digital media's central role in young people's daily life. Seeing my term list, they not only consider it as outdated, but also question the necessity of keeping the word 'web' when talking about 'web buzzwords' (*wangluo liuxingyu*). Juping, strategist of a digital media company makes the following claim:

> My work is immersed in a purely network environment. And the younger (post-1990) generation is born in the Internet era…For them, buzzwords are buzzwords. They don't care where these words stem from. (Juping.1/digital-media strategist)

Presupposing both a working environment immersed in network and a younger generation born into the Internet, Juping argues that online buzzwords are just buzzwords since online world is now part and parcel of young people's life. To what extent this view is true in the context of contemporary China? In section

1.3.4, I mentioned both some scholars' research and my own fieldwork experience to illustrate that Internet accessibility can be highly gendered in rural China, even among the younger generations. In the following sections, I draw on interview data to present young white-collar and new-worker respondents' respective descriptions of their lives in relation to digital media and online buzzwords.

6.1.1 'I feel my cellphone screen is never dimmed'

With a few exceptions, most white-collar respondents and university students not only use computers and go online when working, but also check their social media accounts via smart phones numerous times each day—after getting up, on the way to work, lunch break, on the way home, at home, before sleeping, etc. As Wangchen, a young engineer born in 1990 puts it in a slightly exaggerated manner: 'I feel my cellphone screen is never dimmed' (Wangchen.1/engineer). WeChat is the social media app all white-collar respondents report more or less using every day. On WeChat, they interact with friends, read news and other content generated by public accounts or shared by friends; some of them also share their companies' advertisements. A number of white-collar respondents report continuing to use Weibo. They access Weibo mainly to follow celebrities, to look for information or to read 'online jokes' (*duanzi*). Apart from the two major social media platforms, online forums such as Baidu bulletin boards, zhihu.com (China's Quora) and tianya.cn are also mentioned by quite a number of white-collar respondents. Binbin, a final-year Bachelor degree student who had got an offer for post-graduate study said he spent about 6 hours each day idling around Weibo to read online jokes and people's comments. He contested my inquiry into his motivations, insisting that it was merely a 'meaningless' act to kill time 'just like a postman sealing letters continuously' (Binbin.1/university student).

With so much time spent online, many white-collar respondents' online and offline worlds arguably mingle together and their work, social life and entertainment are all integrated into this online-offline mixture. Unsurprisingly, most white-collar respondents recall that they encounter trendy online topics and buzzwords mainly via digital media, particularly through friends' collective sharing of a topic—known as 'screen brushing' (*shuapin*). They also know the majority of the terms on my list. Binbin claimed that regarding the few terms that he had not encountered, he could easily figure out their approximate meaning based on his accumulated experiences with online wordplay. This kind of 'feel for the game' resonates with Bourdieu's conceptualisation of *habitus* (see section 2.1).

6.1.2 The *habitus* of Chinese Internet discourse

When I asked about their motivations to use online terms in daily life, a number of white-collar respondents reported a sense of performativity (Austin, 1962) as they would like to achieve certain effects via wordplay—'to please others', 'to lighten the atmosphere' and to 'avoid appearing too serious', etc. In this sense, just like (Western) pub talk, Chinese Internet discourse is a highly 'euphemised' form of speech because its participants anticipate profit by actively using exclusive jokes and jargon. However, Bourdieu (1991: 78-79) emphasises that the active usage of vulgar jokes in pub talk is not guided by conscious or rational calculation; instead it is a spontaneous act that participants have 'misrecognised' within a specific linguistic market or field. What he means by 'misrecognising' is embodying a certain habituated practice as if it has become natural. This resonates with many white-collar respondents' claim that various online terms on my list have entered their everyday vocabulary so that they use these terms without much deliberation. Since the majority of online terms are neologisms, white-collar respondents' adept and spontaneous use also resonates with the Aristotelian understanding of *habitus* which highlights one's active repetition of

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certain practice to such an extent that it becomes an integral part of the body (Mahmood, 2005). As elaborated in chapter 2, I argue for integrating the Bourdieusian and the Aristotelian approaches to analyse the *habitus* of Chinese Internet discourse. On the one hand, this integration acknowledges the interplay between pre-reflexive and attentive modes in human actions. On the other hand, it helps to highlight the middle-class orientation of Chinese Internet discourse while also acknowledging the room for different social group members to engage in and reflect on their habitual use of online terms (see section 2.9).

White-collar respondents generally assume that online buzzwords form a type of language, or in Bourdieu's term, a linguistic field, shared among the youth. As summarised by Xiange, a bank clerk: 'this has to do with age. For something we know, they (elders) will say "what on earth are you talking about!" They won't resonate with you.' (Xiange.1/bank clerk) Xiange, like numerous white-collar respondents, emphasises the demarcation between youngsters who are adept at using online buzzwords and elders who are assumed to have more power yet unable to resonate with them. He constructs online buzzwords as a sort of coded language that is comparable to Scott's (1990) notion of 'hidden transcripts'. Several respondents mention their use of online buzzwords to covertly criticise the government and a slight distaste for party media's co-option of online buzzwords. While such descriptions can to some extent be understood as respondents' performance to impress a media scholar studying online buzzwords, they also testify to the online sentiments of official-common confrontation that I elaborated in section 5.3.2. Many white-collar respondents deem online buzzwords as a common and informal form of language distinct from the formal and legitimate language of the elder, the official, and the powerful. This emphasised sense of confrontation and distinction again parallels Bourdieu's (1991) observations of pub-talk participants (see section 2.1).

The general informality of online buzzwords is rejected by several white-collar respondents as 'vulgar' and 'low'. But most white-collar respondents express their joy of participating in online wordplay. In particular, they report engaging in a kind of habitual and collective self-deprecation (see more in section 6.2), which corresponds to their emphasised identity as the young and 'powerless'. However, white-collar workers' heavy exposure to digital media such as WeChat, Weibo and online forums is rarely the case among new workers. The next section turns to new-worker respondents' reported media use.

6.1.3 'I feel weibo is used by someone like you'

While many new-worker respondents also report using WeChat, most of them regard QQ as their primary chatting tool in daily life (see also Qiu, 2013; Wang Xinyuan, 2016). The shared life course of young migrant workers born in the 1980s and the early 1990s sheds light on their continuous adherence to this social media platform.

Most new-worker respondents report quitting their studies at the age of around 16 and beginning a job far from home. The reasons for their early drop-out consist of two mutually reinforcing aspects. On the one hand, most of their parents had left to work elsewhere, while local village schools were poorly run. For example, a young woman born in a village of Gansu Province in Northwest China recalls that she dropped out of high school for fear of classmates' harassment. On the other hand, many rural grown-ups lacked interest in schoolwork, aspiring to earn money and leave their backward villages from an early age. Family poverty further contributes to their determination to become independent as young as possible. As pointed out by a number of anthropologists (e.g. Du, 2017; Hansen and Pang, 2010) working with young rural migrants, their respondents often bring up the notion of freedom and associate it with a drifting lifestyle. This sense of individual freedom is vividly captured by Yangbin who works in a garment factory in Jiangsu Province: 'it feels like I'm

roving the world with my sword'.[49] But he achieves his 'swordsman-like' life at a huge cost of working as manual labour. Yangbin remembers that his earlier years of *dagong* (laboring) were full of bitterness; that he almost fainted several times when working overnight (Yangbin.1/garment factory worker). A number of respondents make the same kind of reminiscent narrative that always mixes bitterness with a sense of excitement. They are willing to take unskilled and precarious jobs in big cities for the sake of 'earning as much as one can, and spending money as much as one wants to' (Du, 2017: 35). But with their initial excitement dying away, young migrant workers realise the various predicaments in their *dagong* life, such as extremely long hours of work, low income, alienation and isolation.

As one of the earliest digital chatting tools in mainland China, QQ gained increasing popularity in the 2000s when young rural migrants embarked on their drifting *dagong* life. During this period, young urban grown-ups typically went through a gradual transformation from using the two major chatting tools –QQ and MSN—to two SNS websites—Xiaonei.com and Kaixin.com. The latter two respectively catered to university students and white-collar workers. Since the 2010s, Weibo and WeChat have taken the place of these earlier social media. All these transformations, which are oriented towards young urbanites, resonate little with rural grown-ups who generally continue using QQ[50]. Notably, three white-collar respondents who grew up in rural villages report their continuous use of QQ alongside WeChat. Based on her ethnography in a factory town of South China, Wang Xinyuan (2016: 6) notes that QQ constitutes young migrant workers' online homeland in which to build and maintain connections with fellow workers, friends as well as the family in home villages. The following

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[49] This sentence comes from the lyrics of a popular folk song in 2004—*Once You* (*cengjingdeni*). It manifestly draws on the genre of swordsmen novels.

[50] Notably, three white-collar respondents who grew up in rural villages report their continuous use of QQ alongside WeChat, etc.

excerpt comes from the focus group of garment factory workers in Changshu: ('I' refers to me, the interviewer)

Excerpt 1

 I: Do you go to Weibo and online forums such as Baidu bulletin boards?
 Everyone: No.
 T: We don't understand (these). What is Weibo?
 I: You use QQ most?
 L: Yes, QQ.
 T: To check if someone has updated their status in QQ zone[51].
 W: I feel Weibo is not at our level.
 L: There is no necessity to use Weibo.
 Y: I feel Weibo is used by someone like you.
 C: Perhaps they have (more) time. After work, we just play with our phones for a while, checking if someone has sent us messages. (Focus group 2.1/new workers)

The excerpt illustrates not only these young workers' (mostly born in 1993) self-contained adherence to QQ, but also a sense of strangeness about Weibo and other major online forums. Yet these digital platforms tend to be assumed to represent 'grassroots' in the study of the Chinese Internet. The focus group demarcates a clear boundary between 'we' who use QQ and those who are on another 'level' of using Weibo. Yangbin (Y) expresses his understanding of Weibo as being for 'someone like you' (presumably a middle-class scholar). These respondents perceive that Weibo users are of a high educational and economic level. As Hansen and Pang (2010) observe, young rural migrants largely internalise the dominant perception of education as the major criterion with which to define different groups of young people.

For most new-worker respondents, access to the Internet is limited by both their daily schedule and the availability of wifi since they largely use smart phones for Internet connection. No matter whether it is alongside assembly lines, in restaurants or hair-salons, they can only take quick glimpses at their phones

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[51] QQ zone is the social media function of QQ where its users update status, share pictures and comment on others' posts.

when working. Their working hours are frequently more than 10 hours, six days a week or even more. But corresponding to the diverse composition of migrant workers, the respondents' reported usage of the Internet also varies to a great extent. For example, a focus group of restaurant workers report using the restaurant's wifi to go online during their afternoon break, and having little motivation to access the Internet after their evening shift. On the contrary, the aforementioned garment workers are eager to get online entertainment after a long exhausting day of work. But all workers in the dormitory building use the same wifi installed by a worker. 'It's extremely slow', Tingting says, 'so I sometimes get up at 2 am to stream online series.'

Given new-worker respondents' general adherence to QQ, their sense of strangeness regarding major online forums in China, and limited time as well as access to the Internet, they are unsurprisingly less familiar with online buzzwords than white-collar respondents. The next section presents their general understanding of online buzzwords.

6.1.4 New workers' literal interpretation of Internet discourse

Contrary to white-collar workers, the new workers I interviewed found most of the terms on my list quite new to them. Their familiarity is limited to the terms upon which I have conducted discourse analysis in chapter 5. They recall encountering these terms mostly via TV serials and news reportage. Some service workers report getting to know online terms via their conversations with customers. All these not only point to the penetration of online buzzwords into 'old' media and daily talk, but also illustrate how Chinese Internet discourse can reach people by offline means. New-worker respondents' knowledge and understanding of online terms can be seen as forming a continuum. At one end of the continuum, there are new workers who report online terms' total uselessness in their life. Even though they have heard of some online terms, they express no interest in finding out their meaning, let alone using these terms. At

the other end, some service workers who deal with young urbanites on a daily basis actively acquire the *habitus* of online wordplay. As will be further discussed in chapter 8, I relate this continuum to new workers' different forms of agency in relation to the insidious and omnipresent 'invitation' of Chinese Internet discourse.

Despite their divergence in engaging with or disengaging from online wordplay, the new-worker respondents generally interpret the meanings of online terms in a literal manner. In the focus group formed by five female respondents who are still working or once worked in electronic factories in the city of Guangzhou, I ran into the most literal and heartbreaking interpretation of the online term 'competing on father':

Excerpt 2

> H: My understanding is that if you family background is not good enough and if you want to achieve something, then you will need to 'compete on father'. For example, if my child wants to go to a local school in Guangzhou (not those for migrant workers' children), then we need collect enough points to get the *hukou*. Neither his father nor I is qualified. So we need to find our son a qualified father or mother.

> J: In my daughters' school, parents need to campaign for more votes from friends to support children's extra-curricular activities, such as dancing, drawing, etc. From day to night, other parents share their children's works on social media. But I can't afford so much data. I just can't afford this kind of game!

> H: this is not competence among kids, but among parents…This is 'competing on father' and 'on mother'… (Focus group 1.1/new workers)

Having been working and living in Guangzhou for more than a decade, Hongmei's and Jiajun's *hukou* (household), like numerous migrant workers', are still registered at their home villages. This institutional barrier obstructs their children's access to public education in major cities like Guangzhou. Therefore, they have to purchase a Guangzhou *hukou* from the black market[52] so that their

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[52] According to the respondents, a Guangzhou *hukou* costs 38,000 RMB (roughly 4000 RMB) while a Beijing or Shanghai *hukou* can cost 100,000 RMB (more than 10,000 pounds).

children are 'adopted' by local 'step-fathers' or 'mothers'. This enables their children to go to local schools which have better resources than those private ones accommodating rural migrant families, and to enjoy a variety of other benefits. Jiajun's words remind us that a digital environment that appears so 'natural' for the urban middle-class, including media scholars, cannot be taken for granted. The digitalisation of everyday life is intertwined with existing social structure, such as class and gender, and may reinforce the unequal distributions of capital instead of empowering the underprivileged (cf. Banaji, 2017; Wallis, 2015b).

In accordance with their own lived experiences, Hongmei and Jiajun understand the term 'competing on father' literally as children relying on their parents' resources to compete with each other. While the discursive construction of 'competing on father' entails this level of signification in the meaning system of Chinese Internet discourse, it also connotes another level—the 'official-common confrontation' (see section 5.3.2). As shown in chapter 5, many online buzzwords' and terms' connotations are characterised by discursive ambivalence, oscillating between at least two levels of meaning. In Barthes's (2009) terms, Chinese Internet discourse comprises a variety of myths in the sense that a second level of signification builds on and impoverishes the first level of signification—the more literal one. New workers' literal interpretation thus damages the 'felicitousness' of mystification in Internet discourse, which can lead to their disengagement. Furthermore, the rural population is sometimes represented in an online term's first level of meaning to be mystified and mimicked. The online wordplay 'moving bricks' epitomises this logic.

Although no new-worker respondents knew this term, numerous white-collar respondents report using 'moving bricks' for 'self-mockery' (*zichao*). The next section discusses this notion repeatedly brought up by white-collar workers. I

argue that the performativity of self-deprecation is essential for the *habitus* of Chinese Internet discourse.

6.2 The Performativity of Self-Deprecation

Many white-collar respondents highlight the suitability of online buzzwords for self-mockery. As put by Dolley, who works for a digital-media company in Shanghai:

> It feels like everyone is self-mocking, self-deprecating (*zihei*). This is now an attribute of people. Nowadays, no one is afraid of self-blackening. You cannot blacken me, but I can blacken myself. (Dolley.1/media practitioner)

My discourse analysis in chapter 5 illustrated that many online terms having class and/or gender meanings connote an ambivalent sense that 'I'm like that' but 'I'm not that bad'. Corresponding to such subtlety, white-collar respondents generally emphasise their usage of these terms primarily to mock themselves and sometimes to joke with close friends. Dolley's differentiation between 'self-blackening' and 'being blackened' indicates the different direction towards which the discursive ambivalence of Internet discourse turns when being used for self-deprecation and mocking others. For the former, it is a kind of harmless jest. For the latter, it becomes serious judging. As we shall see in section 6.5.3, this differentiation constitutes a key rationale for many white-collar respondents to *exclude* young migrant workers from their *diaosi* wordplay.

In addition, through words such as 'everyone' and 'people', Dolley underlines her perceived collectiveness of self-mockery via online wordplay. Numerous white-collar respondents make this kind of observation which resonates with the Williamsian concept—'structure of feeling' (Williams, 1977). They express a vivid feeling of predicament that ranges from heavy workload, pressing pace of life, low income, to inability to purchase house and other goods. The online term 'moving bricks' looms large in their collective discursive practice of

self-deprecation, as reported by Lanqiu who works in a brokerage firm and who graduated from a prestigious university in Shanghai:

> Moving bricks just means working. It is a phrase for self-mockery. And it is used to describe what you do as relatively low and cheap; yet it requires you lots of energy and physical strengths. (Lanqiu.1/broker)

Many white-collar workers use 'moving bricks' to refer to their tedious and 'mechanical' content of work which they perceive as 'low' in value and technique. These connotations form a second level of signification which builds on the literal meaning of the term—a part of construction work. The perceived low value of manual labour, for which 'moving bricks' is a metonymy, resonates with the perceived lack of *suzhi*/quality in the rural migrants' body and the corresponding legitimacy of unashamedly exploiting its surplus value. Some white-collar respondents compare their work, such as programming, to working on the assembly line due to their frequent necessity to work monotonously and overtime[53]. Often mocking themselves as *diaosi* who 'move bricks', the IT workers I interviewed are yet much better paid than industrial workers.

In Austin's (1962) terms, this kind of self-mockery is simultaneously 'constative' and 'performative'. 'Moving bricks' is used both to describe one's tedious work and to perform a kind of discursive ritual. In many cases, online wordplay has less to do with the specific meaning of a term than the kind of carnivalesque ambiance in which the term helps to immerse participants. As noted by several white-collar respondents, even though some online terms' meanings are difficult to pin down, they use these terms in certain 'settings' (*changjing*). From a sociological perspective (cf. Durkheim, 1995), what people particularly articulate and believe in ritualistic settings is less important than the collective practice of 'doing the ritual'—worshiping a same totem, chanting a song, uttering same words, etc. It is through rituals that certain collective categorisations and logics

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[53]Xiaoyang, a programmer working in Shenzhen says he sometimes has to work as many as 80 hours a week, receiving little wage for working overtime.

of life are constructed, naturalised and shared by the participants of these rituals. The discursive practice of self-deprecation via online wordplay can be understood as young white-collar workers' collective way to live out their perceived predicaments and a sense of inadequacy, which can in turn be further reinforced by their *habitus* of Chinese Internet discourse. Some white-collar workers, particular men, consider their work as lacking 'extra value' (*fujiazhi*). They aspire to stop 'working for others' and to become 'financially independent' (*caiwu ziyou*) via running their own business or investing in real-estate. Before reaching that status, they regard whatever work they do as 'moving bricks'. Here, 'moving bricks' becomes a self-deprecating signifier to constantly register one's gap from the aspirational middle class, if not the bourgeoisie.

While many white-collar respondents highlight that nowadays everyone is mocking himself/herself, this 'everyone' tends to exclude young migrant workers. In effect, the correlation between migrant workers and the variety of online terms apparently signifying an underprivileged identity had rarely occurred to them. I now turn to discussing the compartmentalisation of the urban new poor and new workers in contemporary China, as well as the contribution of online wordplay to further separating the two social classes.

6.3 The Compartmentalisation of the Two kinds of 'New Poor'

Hearing numerous white-collar respondents' describe their frequent self-mockery via online terms such as 'moving bricks' and *diaosi*, I asked: 'then do you think those who move bricks or do other manual work in real life can be regarded as *diaosi*?' In most cases, this question led to seconds of apparent puzzlement implied by silence or the respondents' questions like 'what', 'what do you mean'. White-collar respondents' reflection on this question indicates the lack of proper naming for young migrant workers in contemporary China.

6.3.1 The lack of a proper naming for young migrant workers

In her book *Subaltern China*, Sun Wanning (2014) notes the liminal identity of rural migrant workers, particularly among the younger generation. They are, in terms of *hukou*, the rural population even though 'they may no longer work—indeed, they may have never worked—as peasants' (ibid: 13). The ways in which urban media and the urban population refer to rural migrants have been transforming. In the 1990s, they were called 'blind flow' (see section 3.5.2) or *mingong*, a discriminatory term used by urban workers to name peasants who were temporarily hired by state-owned enterprises in the Mao era. In major cities, migrant workers also received various discriminatory namings in local dialects (see Pun, 2005; Liang, 2016; Lin, 2013), such as 'villagers' (*xiangxiaren*) in Shanghai. In the mainstream media, these kinds of terms have been replaced by more politically correct terms such as *nongmingong* (peasant workers), 'bottom strata' and 'disadvantaged groups' since the new millennium (Sun, 2014). Officially, the younger generations of rural migrants are named as 'new-generation peasant workers' (*xinshengdai nongmingong*). Both Sun's research and my own fieldwork testify to the fact that young migrant workers rarely identify themselves as *nongmingong* (peasant workers). They simply describe themselves as *dagongde* (people who labour). Correspondingly, a number of white-collar respondents express their confusion about young migrant workers' identity.

The following excerpt comes from a focus group formed of six female media practitioners in Shanghai. During the interview, some of them relate themselves to the naming *dagongmei* which refers to young female migrant workers (cf. Pun, 2005).

Excerpt 3:
    I: Do you think those who do move bricks in real life…are *diaosi*?
    J: Are you referring to *nongmingong* (peasant workers)?
    I: Yes.

N: I think our work doesn't have fundamental difference from theirs. It was previously said online that the white-collar in office buildings are those who used to work in textile factories.
P: Those blue-collar workers.
N: Female textile workers. I think this is exactly the case.
D: For me, I think migrant workers are those who are relatively old.
I: But there are also young migrant workers.
D: Young migrant workers…perhaps in terms of their clas..(unfinished word) life status, they are *diaosi*. But for those who are older, I won't use this term to describe them.
   (Focus group 7.1/white-collar)

Dolley's (D) impression that the naming of *nongmingong* connotes migrant workers of the older generations is common among urban white-collar respondents. Following their previous point that online terms form a type of language shared by the youth, they therefore deem online wordplay not relevant to rural migrants. I will argue that the void of a proper naming for young migrant workers in these white-collar respondents' meaning-making tends to be filled by the online term *shamate* with its complex connotations (see section 6.4).

What is most intriguing in this excerpt is both Nujing's (N) and Pony's (P) self-comparison to female textile workers in the Mao era. When we later discuss the online buzzword 'masculine women', they again call themselves *dagongmei* (labouring girls) which resonates with another participant's self-mockery as 'PPT peasant workers' (*PPT mingong*) since her content of work is mostly creating PowerPoint slides. These kinds of self-deprecation resonate with the wordplay of 'moving bricks' I mentioned in the previous section. The focus group participants refer to a popular online text[54] which claims that white-collar jobs nowadays are no better, and in fact worse, than the blue-collar jobs of the parent-generation who enjoyed securer employment and other social welfares in the Mao era. Here, the metonymy of 'creating PPT slides' for white-collar work and the metonymy of 'moving bricks' for blue-collar work are juxtaposed, implying a sense of historical transformation, dotted with romanticisation of the socialist past. However,

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[54]http://finance.sina.com.cn/roll/2016-03-23/doc-ifxqssxu8002810.shtml

'moving bricks' in the Mao era is totally different from 'moving bricks' in contemporary China in terms of the acknowledged value of manual labour and the social status of manual workers. Meanwhile, the variety of privileges enjoyed by urban manual workers was in fact inaccessible to the rural population (see section 3.4.2). In these young urbanites' self-comparison to manual workers, the rural population and the urban-rural duality continue to be neglected. The rural figure merely serves as a form of myth. It is a 'turnstile' alternating (Barthes, 2009: 141) between what the rural body signifies—the lack of value of manual labour in contemporary China—and what the rural body mythifies—the socialist past and the acknowledged importance of labour in the Mao era. As I argued in chapter 3, the 'backward' rural population and rural China often serve as a metaphor for the Mao era in the 'allegory of post-socialism' (Rofel, 1999).

Just like the socialist past, the rural population is an object to forget and to romanticise. When I 'push' white-collar respondents to reflect on the correlation between migrant workers and those online terms they frequently use for self-mockery, they tend to utilise the rhetoric of political correctness which integrates avoidance and romanticisation.

6.3.2. 'Rural blind discrimination' among the urban youth

My discourse analysis of the online term *shamate* (see section 5.3.4) illustrated its construction of young migrant workers as embodying lack of tastes and inadequate consumption. Correspondingly, white-collar respondents associate migrant workers with a variety of lack, such as using copy-cat cellphones, not going online, not knowing online terms, and thus not sharing their online culture. Julie, a member of focus group 7, told me that she was shocked one day seeing a young migrant worker ride on a phunkeeduck[55]: 'after our focus group, I started to pay more attention to migrant workers surrounding me. Maybe they are more

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[55]A personal transportation device.

carefree than us, and more willing to spend money on new gadgets' (Julie.1/white-collar). Julie's words exemplify a combination of avoiding and romanticising. These two constitute the two poles of a continuum where urban white-collar workers imagine what kind of life young rural migrants lead.

Those who romanticise imagine migrant workers as poor but easy to feel satisfied. Underlining the dignity and simple-mindedness of manual labourers, they thus see neither necessity nor possibility to care about migrant workers' life predicaments. As I pointed out in section 3.5.3, a gradational model which frames social stratifications as objective gaps between different social strata is prevailing in contemporary China while the notion of class relations is downplayed. In this sense, rural migrants and peasants situated at the 'bottom stratum' are not seen as related to other 'strata' but living in their own world. White-collar respondents rarely relate their life predicaments to those of the 'bottom stratum'; the latter are imagined to lead a self-contained and dignified life.

Some white-collar respondents admit their avoidance of rural migrants in everyday life. As shown by my individual interview with Sanshi, a PR practitioner.

Excerpt 4:

(I show six pictures and let the interviewee, Sanshi, choose which picture(s) refer to *diaosi*. One of the pictures is supposed to illustrate *shamate*).
   S: You know what, this is in fact the most most *diaosi* figure (pointing at the *shamate* picture).
   I: what is this picture about?
   S: I know what you want to say, *shamate* right? I just think, how to say, if using *Diao…*if you have to use a term…have to tell others that this person is that…I think it's a bit cruel. Sometimes, hm…human being, this kind of thing, I think it's like this. If I can't change his/her fate, I don't want to discriminate against him/her either. I can choose to avoid him/her…because their fate has determined their first half of life, and even the rest part of their life. This is no way to change it. They are restricted by their culture, their family backgrounds, etc. They can't change their fate. If you discriminate against them, it will be quite cruel. (Sanshi.1/white-collar)

The accounts of Sanshi, which have been mostly eloquent during our interview, appear slippery and to some extent incoherent here. He first mocks the picture illustrating *shamate* as 'most most *diaosi*' which can be understood as implying a 'very very low taste'. But when I emphasise the kind of naming imposed on this picture by the mainstream urban culture, he seems to sniff a discriminatory tone connoted by the term *shamate* and his own previous mockery. He then denies the applicability of the term *diaosi* to describe him/her (*ta*). His continuing usage of third person pronouns again testifies to the lack of proper naming to refer to young migrant workers. Sanshi also utilises the rhetoric of projection—projecting his own inability, or unwillingness, to care about migrant workers onto migrant workers' own inability to change their fate due to their culture and family backgrounds. In his response, we can again see the playing out of the *suzhi* logic (see section 3.5.4). It replaces socio-economic differences with cultural and educational factors, concealing class relations under the apparent distinctions between different strata.

The slippery and ambivalent linguistic style, the avoidance of direct discriminatory language, and the rhetorical tool of projection all fall into what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2002) calls 'color blind racism'. I argue that the kind of 'rural blind discrimination' exists among the urban youth in contemporary China. It refers to young urbanites' general 'blindness' to or avoidance of the rural population while adopting a politically correct rhetoric to address this social group. In fact, young urbanites' collective and playful self-deprecation forms part and parcel of 'rural blind discrimination'. The rural population constitutes the object for them to performatively depreciate themselves and to construct their underprivileged identity while at the same time knowing 'I'm not that bad'. In other words, the rural population is recognised only to be disavowed. From a psychological perspective, Billig (2005: 134) argues that 'the pleasure of laughter depends on a lack of sympathy or a temporary anaesthesia of the heart. The cruelty of our laughter…is unadmitted, unavowed–to be disavowed should we

ever be challenged.' To a large extent, the sense of political correctness expressed by the white-collar respondents is brought about by my challenging questions.

The lack of a proper naming for young migrant workers among the urban youth resonates with the 'rural blind discrimination'. Below, I illustrate how the online term *shamate* serves to fill this void of naming and contributes to further *othering* of young migrant workers in young white-collar workers' meaning-making. I will also discuss how this imposed naming by the urban population has an impact on rural migrant workers' perception of the urban-rural hierarchy.

6.4 *shamate* and the Urban-Rural Hierarchy

As I pointed out in section 5.3.3, the online term *shamate* connotes the cheap and copy-cat tastes of young migrant workers 'epitomised' by their exaggerated and colourful hairstyles. The term is sometimes used as a metonymy to refer to the whole population of young migrant workers who are constructed as an abject *other* living in the 'urban outskirts'. There are another two online terms related to *shamate* in Internet discourse—'rural non-mainstream' (*xiangcun feizhuliu*) and 'wash-cut-dry' (*xijianchui*). The former illustrates the over-determination of *shamate* as rural youth while the latter is a metonymy for hair-dressers who are imagined as a major group adopting the *shamate* style. Against this backdrop, I deliberately recruited a focus group of hairdressers in Shanghai. The next section presents some male new workers' elaborations on *shamate* as few female new workers I interviewed know this term.

6.4.1 *shamate* as rebels or abnormal

The focus group formed of six male hair-dressers in Shanghai provides a more nuanced description of the term than those in the urban mainstream media:

Excerpt 5:

M: (pointing at the picture supposed to illustrate *shamate*) this is in fact not *shamate*. The style of *shamate* is like…let me think.
C: *shamate* should wear make-up. This is at most the 'non-mainstream'.
B: shamate have big eyes, and wear make-up.
M: *shamate* was popular in 2005.
C: No, no. At that time, at most 'the non-mainstream' was popular; with their explosive hairstyles. *shamate* was most popular between 2007 and 2008 when the explosive style could not satisfy them. So they started to wear make-up. *shamate* is make-up plus hair-style.
I: Do you think *shamate* is a style that only rural youth adopts, or young urbanites adopt it as well?
C, M, B: they both do.
T: In the eyes of rural parents, *shamate* are those slovenly lads (*xiaopizi*)…
(Focus group 3.1/new workers)

As indicated by Mi Le's (M) spontaneous reaction to the '*shamate*' picture in my visual materials, these hairdressers are familiar with the conventional way of constructing the term from an urban stance. Meanwhile, they make a further differentiation between the 'non-mainstream' style and that of *shamate*, emphasising that *shamate* is more than just wearing exaggerated hairstyles. This kind of differentiation is mentioned by numerous male new workers, some of whom add other elements distinguishing a 'true *shamate*' from 'other imitators', such as piercing. Notably, in the excerpt above, the hairdressers omit the imposed prefix 'rural' by urban media when discussing the 'non-mainstream' style. They also generally deny the assumption that *shamate* is merely a style adopted by rural youth.

In effect, quite a number of male migrant workers I interviewed once wore or still wear colourful hairstyles. Their descriptions of the term *shamate* are torn between two ends overshadowed by the mainstream representations. At one end, there are respondents who, like Taotao (T) in excerpt 5, construct *shamate* as a kind of rebellious figure in the eye of rural older generations. The slang 'slovenly' (*diaoerlangdang*) is mentioned by several new-worker respondents and one white-collar respondent who claims to have a *shamate* cousin in her home town. For these respondents, *shamate* is an adolescent phenomenon

instead of a rural one. Indicating a sense of rebellion, they associate the term with commendatory adjectives such as 'fashionable', 'conspicuous' (*lafeng*) and 'alternative' (*linglei*). But accompanying other group members' teasing, they firmly deny that they are or were *shamate*. While a number of male new workers describe the *shamate* phenomenon in a state-of-fact or even a slightly commendatory manner, some others totally reject this style as 'abnormal', 'non-mainstream' and 'deserving of mental hospitals'.

Although male new-worker respondents tend to depict a more complex imagery of *shamate*, they are manifestly affected by urban media's constructions of the term. When discussing the online term 'urbanites know how to play' (*chenghuiwan*), Taotao, one of the hairdressers in Shanghai, claims that 'rural people "know how to play" as well. But what we play is "small" compared to urbanites'." (Taotao.2/hairdresser). Just as their liminal identity, many male new workers I interviewed on the one hand negotiate with the urban bias entailed in online terms such as *shamate* and 'urbanites know how to play'; on the other hand, they also accept the urban-rural hierarchy connoted by these terms.

This urban-rural hierarchy is underlined in most white-collar respondents' descriptions of *shamate*, which miss all those nuances given by male new-worker respondents.

6.4.2 The further abjection of young migrant workers

White-collar respondents recall that their impression of *shamate* mainly comes from online videos or pictures. Talking about the term, they immediately mention a variety of visual elements, such as colourful and explosive hair, tight pants and 'wash-cut-dry', in an apparently mocking tone. They also largely assume that *shamate* come from rural areas or small towns and work in big cities with their 'shocking and "fashionable" way of dressing' (Yueyue.1/engineer).

In section 6.3.1, I mentioned that there is no proper way to refer to young migrant workers in white-collar workers' meaning making. This void of naming is, to some extent, filled by the online term *shamate*, as shown in Wangliang's descriptions below. Currently working as a journalist in Nanjing, Wangliang comes from a rural village in Anhui province and has a younger brother who works in a factory:

> I think the definition of *shamate* is new-generation *nongmingong* (peasant workers). Recently, it's getting better. I used to see them quite often when I went home for Chinese New Year. My brother also once did this, messing up with his hair and making it long and pointy…just like this picture. It feels that they are slovenly. In fact, I don't like this kind of people; I look down upon them. They are also migrant workers, but very different from their parents' generation. They are also completely different from the post-1980 generation. It feels that they stay in the cities for so long that they want to catch up with some trends. But for me, their style is not trendy at all. It really sucks (*hentu*). (Wangliang.1/journalist)

Wangliang's descriptions seem to integrate the stance of rural parents or the older generation—'they are slovenly' rural youngsters—with the conventional perspective of urban media—they are imitating the urban trends but failing. In Wangliang's meaning making, the term *shamate* arguably contributes to the further abjection of young migrant workers since the term simultaneously fills the void of a proper naming for this social group and rejects it based on the judgment of tastes. Different from Wangliang's downright rejection, more white-collar respondents depict the *shamate* figure in a mimicking manner. Many white-collar workers have rarely contacted young rural migrants in their life. They imagine and approve of young migrant workers' effort to dress up in a more urban and smart way as opposed to the older migrant workers; yet this kind of effort is a constant failure to be disavowed from the urban eye. If the older generations of rural migrants were directly discriminated against in urban China, the younger generations have become an object of self-deprecation and mimicry for young urbanites in online wordplay.

It thus starts to become clear how Chinese Internet discourse contributes to constructing an intermediate position to be subjectified by urban white-collar workers in between the truly subordinated classes and the economically dominant. The discussion below with regard to the *diaosi* wordplay will make this point clearer.

6.5 The Chameleon-like *diaosi* Wordplay

The textual analysis in chapter 5 suggests that the initial construction of *diaosi* is oriented towards lower-middle-class men. As opposed to 'tall-rich-handsome', a *diaosi* figure comes from a humble background and 'moves bricks'—doing low paid work—in everyday life. He leads an *Otaku* lifestyle, playing computer games and masturbating a lot since he has no material conditions to date girls. In the game of love, he can only marry what is 'left over'—'black wood ear'—a girl who has been 'played too much' by tall-rich-handsome men.

The *diaosi* narrative is full of metaphors which mystify a literal level of signification to connote an apparently underprivileged identity. His misery is more suitable for a performative and mimetic way of identification while acknowledging 'I'm not that miserable'. A *diaosi* figure's *Otaku* lifestyle and heavy exposure to digital media are also closer to white-collar workers' and university students' everyday life rather than that of young migrant workers. All of these result in new-worker respondents' tendency to disengage themselves from the *diaosi* wordplay accompanied by their discursive practice of self-approval.

6.5.1 *diaosi* as '*Diao*': new workers' disengagement, mutual tease and self-approval

While the majority of new-worker respondents have heard of the buzzword *diaosi* via offline pathways, most of them report neither understanding its exact meaning nor using it frequently. They generally perceive *diaosi* as a derogatory

term because '*Diao*' refers to men's genitals; and it is used as slang for cursing in Chinese. But in many local dialects, *Diao* can also connote arrogance, pretentiousness or excellence in different contexts. Therefore, when I ask new-worker respondents to articulate their understanding of *diaosi*, their descriptions are frequently contradictory to each other's in focus group settings.

Due to the gendered meanings of *Diao*, male respondents, particularly those born after 1990, appear to be more familiar with the *diaosi* narrative and interested in talking about it. Their descriptions of the buzzword are close to its initial discursive construction and sometimes mingled with their own literal interpretations. For example, Wangsheng, a broadband installer from the city of Fuyang compares *diaosi* to 'three-no products—no car, no house, no girlfriend' (Wangsheng.1/ focus group 4). Tongfei, one of the garment factory workers in Changshu depicts *diaosi* as someone whose mindset is 'completely different from normal people' so that 'if a pretty girl appears in front of him, he will ogle her, and then, pick booger, do something like this' (Tongfei.1/focus group 2). In both focus groups 2 and 4, the male participants tease each other via this scatological buzzword. This mutual tease is comparable to pub talk of Western working-class men who utilise vulgar jokes and cursing terms to construct a sense of brotherhood (Bourdieu, 1991). It is nonetheless rarely mentioned by white-collar respondents who avoid using *diaosi* to describe others (see the next section).

Several new-worker respondents' speech act of self-approval—calling themselves 'tall-rich-handsome' or 'white-rich-beautiful'—is also notably absent among white-collar respondents. When I ask about their understanding of 'white-rich-beautiful' in focus group 1, one of the participants Hongmei immediately points to herself, saying 'someone like me'; and everyone starts laughing. Similarly, Wuting, one of the male factory workers in Changshu, feels surprised when I ask whether they call others 'tall-rich-handsome. 'Of course

not', he answers, 'this is like slapping my own face. I will only call myself "tall-rich-handsome".' (Wuting.2/focus group 2). Manifestly, Wuting does not appreciate the discursive practice of self-deprecation widely reported by white-collar respondents.

Resonating with the discursive practice of self-approval, some new-worker respondents express their disengagement from the *diaosi* wordplay, as illustrated by Xiaxia, who used to work in Shanghai and now stays in her husband's village after marriage:

> If one doesn't have money or something like that, does that mean this person is not worthy for living? No, I don't agree! Poverty is temporary. I don't think one will be poor forever. My friends, my classmates and my colleagues, including me, we never use this term (*diaosi*). (Xiaxia.1/new worker)

Xiaxia's indignant rejection of the *diaosi* title derives from the buzzword's connotation of an inevitable status of poverty and misery. This connotation has to be interpreted performatively instead of literally in order for the felicitousness of the *diaosi* wordplay. But those who live or once lived in real poverty cannot appreciate such performativity of self-deprecation. After all, to deprecate oneself, one has to be not *that* miserable or subordinate. The *diaosi* wordplay, with its inclination for performative self-deprecation is immanently alienated from most new-worker respondents' lived experiences. In fact, several white-collar respondents from poor family background also emphasise that they have never identified themselves with *diaosi*.

Contrary to new-worker respondents' literal interpretations of *diaosi*, many white-collar respondents identify with the term in a more performative and ambivalent manner, as discussed below.

6.5.2 White-collar workers: *diaosi* as continuous registration and distancing of lack

To understand how white-collar workers make meaning of the *diaosi* term, we can start with the descriptions of Meijia whose identity has transformed from a new worker to a middle-class shop owner. She started working as a restaurant waitress in Shanghai at the age of 18. After 15 years, Meijia manages to develop her interest in manicuring into her own business—a beauty salon employing 15 workers at the moment. She still does manicuring jobs for clients, some of whom are millionaires or even billionaires. She encountered the buzzword *diaosi* from her conversations with clients:

Excerpt 6:

> M: I heard the term from others. Initially, I didn't understand it. *diaosi* sounds very vulgar (*nanting*), what does that mean? Then they told me it means not having money, being very poor. So, I said, oh that term refers to someone like me (laughs).
> I: But you have your own business, you are more a 'white-rich-beautiful'.
> M: (laugh) No, I feel I'm quite poor. I just feel I'm an ordinary office worker (*shangbanzu*). Because now (I)'ve seen quite a lot. My thoughts are different from those before. It feels that it's up to you to understand what is relatively poor or relatively rich.
> I: May I ask at which level do you think you finally get rid of the *diaosi* status?
> M: In fact, I don't really understand this. I heard this from others…
>
> (Meijia.1/beauty-salon owner)

This excerpt illustrates how Meijia is 'interpellated' into a *diaosi* subject, to use Althusser's (1971) term. When hearing her clients' explanation of *diaosi*, she identifies with it by contemplating her own relationship with 'being poor' and 'having no money'. As Althusser's example of church-goers indicates, an individual subject to a certain ideology does not necessarily reflect on its meaning carefully, but rather performs it repetitively in daily rituals. As a shop owner who starts working at 11.30 am every day and who is picked up by her husband in a car after work, Meijia *does not* need to reflect on what poverty

truly means anymore. Her identification with the term derives from her perceived ordinariness that she still has to go to work every day which may not be the case for her rich clients. In Meijia's words, she is still an 'ordinary office worker' (*shangbanzu*). Here, Meijia equates *diaosi* to the notion of *shangbanzu* which connotes white-collar jobs as opposed to *dagong* which connotes manual work in contemporary China. This equation corresponds to the buzzword's discursive construction oriented towards white-collar workers. Later in the interview, Meijia denies comparing herself with her clients: 'if I did so, I wouldn't live; I would have to bow down all the time.' But her identification with the naming of *diaosi* instead of 'white-rich-beautiful' is based on a sense of lack. Meijia might 'bow down' to her rich clients mentally, but not openly and corporeally. In fact, through calling herself *diaosi* in front of her clients, the troubling feelings of low self-esteem are displayed openly while also being distanced and disavowed.

Among the white-collar workers I interviewed, IT workers illustrate particularly strong identification with *diaosi*. These respondents admit that their salary is decent. But for them, a frequent necessity to work overtime and their casual wearing in daily life are the two key aspects marking IT workers as *diaosi*. The following excerpt comes from a focus group formed by four male IT workers in Shanghai. Qiangge, a programmer who has worked for ten years, recalls his vivid feeling of being a *diaosi* when he one day went to the financial area in Shanghai:

Excerpt 7

Q: People there all wear suits and ties, carrying luxurious bags. No matter how hot a day is, they are always meticulously dressed up. Me, I wear T-shirt and short pants, carrying a rucksack. When I entered, I felt all of them were staring at me (laughs). A comparison immediately comes out…We programmers just know how to deal with computers. We also rarely socialise with others, going to those 'high-big-upper' places where 'tall-rich-handsome' frequent.
B: Haha, yes. Programmers are all *diaosi*. We know the world very little, and only through computers. We are like frogs at the bottom of the well. (Focus group 9.1/white-collar)

Calling themselves *diaosi*, these IT workers talk about their inadequacy in terms of dressing up, socialising in their spare time, seeing a bigger world, all of which are underpinned by a lack of consumption. Qiangge emphasises a sense of comparison for which the buzzword *diaosi* serves as a perfect signifier with its discursive opposition to 'tall-rich-handsome'. Like many other respondents, he associates the buzzword 'tall-rich-handsome' with bankers and other urban elites working in the financial industry. A number of them mention the so-called *diaosi* behaviour and *diaosi* mindset, relating this notion to being stingy and short-sighted as opposed to being ambitious for financial investment. Xiaocai and Xiaoyang, a couple who both work in the IT industry, consider their hobby of playing computer games after work as *diaosi*—namely, lacking the motivation to work harder for a richer future. Nonetheless, they still go on playing every day. Similarly, the IT workers from focus group 9 continue dressing casually in daily life even though they consider financial workers' smart style as 'tall-rich-handsome'. As Niuba puts it: 'their life may not be as good as ours' (Niuba.1/focus group 9).

Both Meijia's and the IT workers' responses illustrate that on calling themselves *diaosi*, they are not comparing themselves with a specific person or example, but with a kind of *aspirational lifestyle defined by wealth*. Their identification with the naming *diaosi*, as it were, constantly registers their lack or gap in relation to the bourgeois imagery. While this lack is constantly registered, it is also distanced instead of being carefully considered (see the last two lines of excerpt 6). Via the speech act of self-deprecation, difficult and troubling feelings of insecurity and low self-esteem about the self are displayed openly, while also being distanced and disavowed.

White-collar workers' *diaosi* wordplay is thus simultaneously 'constative' and 'performative', oscillating between describing their perceived lack and displaying their sense of lack. As recalled by Wanmei, a young advertiser, 'I sometimes call

myself *diaosi* in front of our boss, so as to "cry about my poverty" (*kuqiong*)'
(Wanmei.1/focus group 7). In this kind of *diaosi* wordplay, the buzzword's initial
association with economic poverty and male anxiety is mystified, replaced by a
status of lack that is up to one's own definition. In Dolley's words, '*diaosi* has
nothing to do with *Diao* anymore' (Dolley.3/ focus group 7). It has become a
notion that signifies a play between plenitude and lack. Just as the notion of
suzhi (see section 3.4.4), *diaosi* is associated by both male and female
white-collar respondents with a combination of inadequacy and indecency
ranging from dressing, consumption, behavior to mindset. As Mozi, a former
journalist who now works for an e-commerce company says: 'the meaning of
diaosi is so broad that a thousand people have a thousand ways of defining it'
(Mozi.1/PR practitioner).

We have now seen how the *diaosi* wordplay, with its identification by most
white-collar respondents with the performative speech act of self-mockery,
serves to continuously register a variety of lack regarding the aspirational
middle-class lifestyle on the one hand; on the other hand, the collective and
public *diaosi* wordplay can also help to distance its utterers from their perceived
lack and to cathect their troubling feelings of insecurity and low self-esteem. The
next section reflects on the social implications of the *diaosi* wordplay which
exemplifies young white-collar workers' collective self-deprecation via online
buzzwords.

6.5.3 The social implications of the *diaosi* wordplay

When I interviewed Sanshi, he was about to buy a car; he emphasised that he did
not want to buy a car that was 'too *diaosi*', namely, a car whose level is 'too low'.
He ended up buying a car that cost him more than 300 thousand RMB, which he
paid in installments. In this scenario, the wish to avoid being seen as *diaosi*
encourages the consumption of expensive goods. As we shall see in chapter 8,

diaosi and other online terms can serve as tags for digital marketers to categorise different groups of consumers and to direct different marketing strategies.

One may notice that in Sanshi's case, his usage of *diaosi* to describe a certain type of car is not self-mockery but a serious judgment. As mentioned in section 6.2, numerous white-collar respondents emphasise the differentiation between using online buzzwords for self-mockery and for referring to others. Male new workers' mutual teasing via the term *diaosi* is rarely mentioned by white-collar respondents. In this sense, while the *diaosi* wordplay appears to inform a collective speech act of self-deprecation among the urban new poor, this apparent collectiveness is in fact highly individualised. When the buzzword refers to others, it connotes less solidarity than a sense of judging that one tries to avoid openly. Some female white-collar respondents report that they 'secretly' refer *diaosi* to men whom they look down upon. Correspondingly, one is not likely to take pride in identifying oneself with the buzzword either. If *diaosi* is for self-deprecation, then the identification cannot be serious. If one seriously contemplates his/her relationship to the buzzword, the variety of lack signified by *diaosi* is to be filled and improved. As Qiubo, a real-estate agent, says when he differentiates *diaosi* from its initial synonym 'poor-short-ugly': 'While "poor-short-ugly" is a fact that one is born to be, *diaosi* is more a status that one can change. A 'poor-short-ugly' who works hard and dreams big is not a *diaosi*' (Qiubo.1/real-estate agent). I argue that following the *suzhi* logic, *diaosi* has become a key signifier sustaining the ideology of individualistic consumerism in contemporary China. The ideology downplays socio-economic inequalities to an individual level, emphasising one's individual endeavour to achieve a middle-class cosmopolitan lifestyle for which consumption constitutes both a means and an end (Pun, 2003; Rofel, 2007; Yu, 2014).

Furthermore, the distinction between using *diaosi* for self-deprecation and for seriously judging others can contribute to further compartmentalising the two

classes of new workers and the urban new poor. With a tone of political correctness, most white-collar respondents consider migrant workers to be situated outside the *diaosi* wordplay because 'we cannot bear to mock them in such a way; and we don't have the rights to do so' (Xiaoyou.1/university student). They generally assume that young migrant workers neither have a high expectation of life nor share the online culture of *diaosi*—namely its subtlety for self-mockery. Some white-collar respondents who identify themselves as *diaosi* categorise young migrant workers as 'pure *diaosi*' or 'sub-*diaosi*' (Yueyue.2/engineer). Potter and Wetherell (1987: 121, 126) observe that people 'draw flexibly on performed categories and construct the sense of categories as they talk'. This speech act of categorisation helps them to make sense of social structure and serve to provide coherence to their worlds. The ever-lasting urban-rural duality in China continuously separates new workers from the urban new poor in the latter's perception of social stratifications. With its apparent signification of an underclass identity, *diaosi* invites the urban new poor to look 'upwards' at the aspirational middle class rather than 'downwards' at the true underclass.

The ultimate consequence of the *diaosi* wordplay is then a possible colonisation of white-collar respondents' imagination for alternative aspirations and alternative social order. As Xiaocai (C) and Xiaoyang (Y), a couple of IT workers in Shenzhen, admit:

> C: I feel that I've always been a *diaosi*. I never consider myself as a 'white-rich-beautiful', or something like that. It feels like I've never changed.
> Y: There is just no other word to describe oneself. (Xiaocai and Xiaoyang.2)

The binary opposition between *diaosi* and the 'rich' dyad not only conceals the true underclass but also keeps underlining a status of being not yet rich, a constant lack to be improved. Given that the probability to reach economic success has become increasingly low at present, this aim is at best for mimicry. Through the *diaosi* wordplay, the differences between the urban new poor and

the economically successful are constantly highlighted yet also disavowed. In this kind of 'convivial tension' (Mbembe, 1992), those who mimic and those being mimicked share the same 'epistemological field' since the latter colonise the imaginary order of the former. As many white-collar respondents emphasise, they do not want to be the rich; they just have an aim in mind—that is to keep moving up the social ladder. The result is that the economically dominant are never an object of class sentiments. The self-deprecating *diaosi* wordplay represents social stratifications in a playful and performative manner. Its felicitousness is broken once someone seriously reflects on the social inequality simultaneously signified and mystified by the buzzword. As Chuchu, a media practitioner notes, when the flow of focus group 7 sinks into an embarrassing stagnation after I insist on the topic of *diaosi* and migrant workers:

> From the perspective of the whole society, depending on what kind of reference you have in mind; if that's the so-called successful people, most of us are *diaosi* (here migrant workers are included). Perhaps at that moment, people won't have interest in self-mockery. (Chuchu.1/focus group 7)

When *diaosi* is related to class antagonism, most white-collar respondents no longer have an interest in talking about this buzzword. The few who do associate *diaosi* with social stratifications still place migrant workers in another 'compartment'. Together with new-worker respondents' general disengagement from it, the *diaosi* wordplay thus gives little sign of constructing a critical social solidarity in contemporary China as some scholars previously argued (Cao and Xu, 2015; Li, 2016; Szablewicz, 2014; Yang et al. 2014). Instead, it draws on and helps to sustain the ideology of individualistic consumerism and the middle-class aspirations.

Mbembe (1992) argues that the carnivalesque and scatological satire in non-official culture of post-colonial Cameroon helps to construct rulers as a 'congenial idol' under 'convivial tension' (see section 2.2). In Chinese online

wordplay, the economically dominant is also performatively worshipped and constructed as convivial, as discussed below.

6.6 The Discursive Ritual of Calling Each Other 'Rich' in Everyday Life

Both new-worker and white-collar respondents report teasing each other through the online term 'vulgar rich' in everyday life. From their descriptions arise two recurring actions that can be associated with 'vulgar rich'. The first is 'showing off' one's newly purchased goods on social media, such as iPhone and luxurious bags. The other is someone who appears to be particularly generous; for example, giving a big 'red envelope' in online group chats. While giving an amount of money in a red envelope is traditionally related to festivals or ceremonies in China, this action has become a part of the 'virtu-reality' brought about by the rapid developments of social media, e-commerce and credit card system in contemporary China (Yu, 2014).

In both cases, a kind of discursive ritual is performed as a group of people leave comments such as 'vulgar rich, let's make friends'. In fact, there exists a kaleidoscope of stickers that denote this kind of expression, so that 'one just needs to throw a sticker, instead of typing in the characters' (Wanmei.2/advertiser). Another commonly used sticker is 'thank you, Boss', which is particularly suitable for expressing gratitude to red-envelope givers in a mimicking tone. As shown by figure 6.1, it is intertextual with the meme 'vulgar rich, let's make friends' (figure 6.2).

Figure 6.1: a sticker of 'thank you, Boss'; Figure 6.2: a meme of 'vulgar rich, let's make friends'

These stickers and memes help to performatively display a kind of 'bowing down' that one would not normally perform in person. As Billig might put it, the popularity of this type of everyday wordplay provides 'a mirror image of the morality' (Billig, 2005: 154) in contemporary China. The playful and carnivalesque form of Internet discourse can coat one's bare worship of wealth with a sense of liberation, lifting the restrictions imposed by the anti-materialistic tradition in pre-1978 China. Moreover, the 'vulgar-rich' teasing can serve to naturalise the social order by glorifying consumption and rendering the rich amiable. This point is brought home by Mi Le, a hairdresser from focus group 3:

> Even this morning, I used this expression. I have a friend who bought a whole set of Estee Lauder. Then I left an online comment: the vulgar rich. She replied, let's make friends. I feel this is very amiable. I said 'the vulgar rich', she said 'let's make friends'. (Mi Le.2/hairdresser)

Discursively speaking, the buzzword *tuhao* (vulgar rich) connotes ambivalence that both derides and desires conspicuous consumption since the character *tu* means 'parochial' or 'unfashionable'. But in Mi Le's case, the buzzword becomes a purely commendatory term. In particular, many white-collar respondents recall using online terms containing the character 'rich' to praise others, particularly via the buzzword 'tall-rich-handsome'.

As I mentioned in chapter 5, the discursive construction of 'tall-rich-handsome' is intertextual with that of 'second-generation of the rich'. While the latter term connotes negative associations with youngsters coming from prestigious background, the former term is more ambivalent, signifying a type of hegemonic wealth-based masculinity for mimicry. When being 'pushed' to reflect on the distinction between the two terms, many white-collar workers suggest that 'tall-rich-handsome' is a more commendatory term which can refer to self-made successful men, such as urban managerial or financial elites who earn a high

amount of salary. In focus group 9, the four IT workers reach the consensus that they want to be the 'first-generation of the rich', and 'fathers of the tall-rich-handsome'. The buzzword 'tall-rich-handsome' thus appears to symbolise the aspirational middle class in contemporary China.

By contrast, its female counterpart 'white-rich-beautiful' is much less welcome by most respondents. Some male respondents report their impression that the term 'white-rich-beautiful' is now rarely used and has negative associations with women who get rich by sleeping with men. This leads us to the topic of Chinese Internet discourse and gender which will be elaborated in the next chapter.

6.7 Conclusion

This chapter started by presenting white-collar and new-worker respondents' different uses of media and understandings of 'web buzzwords' (*wangluo liuxingyu*). The white-collar workers and university students I interviewed generally report their heavy use of digital media, illustrating the integration of their online and offline worlds, of work, socialisation and entertainment. By contrast, most new-worker respondents cannot afford such heavy exposure both in terms of time and money. Correspondingly, they are generally less familiar with Chinese Internet discourse than white-collar respondents. New workers' literal way of interpreting online terms can lead to their disengagement from Internet discourse which largely builds on discursive ambivalence and mystification. It is distinct from numerous white-collar workers' habitual and collective practice of self-deprecation which, I argue, is essential for the *habitus* of Chinese Internet discourse. By mocking themselves as manual labourers via terms such as 'moving bricks' and 'PPT peasant workers', these white-collar workers collectively joke about their perceived predicaments of low income, long working hours and tedious tasks. This discursive ritual is at once 'constative' and 'performative' which resonates with the discursive ambivalence of many online terms' connotations. Despite their frequent self-comparison to manual labourers,

few white-collar respondents had carefully thought about migrant workers' life predicaments and their relationships with online terms that apparently connote an underclass identity. Their neglect of migrant workers illustrates the tendency of an online term's literal meaning to be impoverished by its more metaphoric level of signification in white-collar workers' self-deprecations. The *habitus* of Chinese Internet discourse can thus obfuscate the real underclass—rural peasants and migrant workers—who are recognised only to be disavowed.

I observed that there lacks a proper name for young migrant workers in contemporary China which resonates with their liminal self-identification. The new workers I interviewed rarely identify with the official naming 'new-generation *nongminggong* (peasant workers)', but describing themselves simply as *dagong* (labouring). For white-collar respondents, the term *nongmingong* connotes the elder generations of rural migrants. In this sense, the online term *shamate* can serve to fill this void of naming. *shamate*, which connotes young urbanites' mockery of young migrant workers' inappropriate tastes, further abjectify new workers in the meaning-making of the urban new poor. While the male new workers I interviewed negotiate the urban biases entailed in *shamate*, their construction of the term is also affected by mainstream urban media and internalises the urban-rural hierarchy.

From an orthodox Marxist perspective, the urban new poor formed mostly of white-collar workers and new workers formed of migrant manual workers are similarly located in the social relations of production. But the two social groups are compartmentalised in terms of income, education and *hukou* (household registration), among other things. I argue that online wordplay contributes to further compartmentalising the urban new poor and new workers, as exemplified by the *diaosi* wordplay. On the one hand, the buzzword's derogatory tone and apparent signification of inevitable misery and poverty resonate little with new-worker respondents. On the other hand, white-collar respondents'

collective identification with *diaosi* for self-deprecation is in effect highly individualised instead of leaning towards a sense of solidarity. As many of them mention, they only use this term to refer to themselves and avoid applying it to others openly. Most white-collar respondents' subjectification of *diaosi* is characterised by a play between lack and plenitude. The *diaosi* wordplay tends to constantly register a variety of lack in comparison with the aspirational middle class. Meanwhile, the speech act of openly calling oneself *diaosi* can also help an utterer to distance the perceived lack and to cathect his/her troubling feelings. The ultimate implication of the widespread *diaosi* play is contributing to the 'convivial tension' (Mbembe, 1992) between the economically dominant and the urban new poor. The amiable and convivial imagery of the rich is further naturalised if not 'consecrated' by many respondents' everyday ritual of calling each other 'vulgar rich' and 'tall-rich-handsome'. Through online buzzwords like *diaosi*, social stratifications in contemporary China are represented and perceived in a performative manner which contains class conflicts and fetishises individual consumption.

CHAPTER 7: CHINESE INTERNET DISCOURSE AND GENDER: A ZERO-SUM GAME BETWEEN MEN'S ANXIETY AND WOMEN'S FANTASY?

7.1 Introduction

In chapter 5, I mentioned a series of online terms mimicking the male super rich—'Ma (step) father', 'national husband' and 'national father-in-law'[56], all of which point to the prevalence of patriarchal capitalism in contemporary China. The prevailing gender order favours the male rich yet poses anxieties for the majority of men unable to live up to the scripted ideals of masculinity that associate men's authority with their economic power (Lin, 2013; Du, 2017). The meaning system of Chinese Internet discourse entails tensions between the stance of young urban men in the lower-middle classes and that of young urban women in the middle classes. The former is exemplified by the *diaosi* narrative, which expresses non-elite men's anxiety 'generated by recognition of the gulf between the symbolic and the real' (Kirkham and Thumim, 1995: 15)—between both their symbolically entitled privilege and gender expectations on one hand, and their economic conditions in real life on the other. Nonetheless, the *diaosi* narrative is built on a symbolic order of patriarchy as well: it mimics the rich male in whom the gap is imagined as not being present while blaming women for being materialistic and promiscuous. The stance of young middle-class women in Chinese Internet discourse confronts this self-victimisation and calls it 'straight-men cancer'. This latter stance could be said to emphasise women's autonomy with regard to their bodies and sexuality. However, it tends to limit the sense of autonomy to personal and private realms, particularly to women's empowerment by consumption.

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[56] To recap, the three online terms respectively refer to Jack Ma (CEO of Alibaba), Wang Sicong (the most well-known 'second-generation of the rich' in China) and Wang Jianlin (Wang Sicong's father, who owns Wanda Group and who is also known as 'Wang Wealthiest' in Chinese cyberspace).

In the discursive realm, a kind of zero-sum game seems to be playing out between men's anxiety and women's autonomy and fantasy in romantic relationships. This chapter presents how respondents of different social groups interpret and subjectify this discursive confrontation. After all, most men and women are to date not to hate each other. I will also briefly discuss the social implications of online wordplay for sexual politics in contemporary China. Following Rofel (1999), I seek to pull apart the 'singularity' of both the Chinese woman and the Chinese man (see also Du, 2017). I acknowledge the 'multiplicity' of gender and sexual politics even within the same age cohort, as different social groups are implicated in distinct sets of social relations and discursive formations. The chapter further reavals the middle-class orientation of Chinese Internet discourse and the emerging consumerist feminism. A great starting point is the different understandings of the buzzword 'warm men' by respondents of the four social groups. As mentioned in chapter 5, the buzzword can be compared to the term 'new man' in the Western context.

7.2.1 Prelude: a debate over housework

In a focus group consisting of six restaurant workers in Shanghai, Boli, one of the three female respondents, wishes her husband could behave more as a 'warm man' and share housework with her. She praises Yizheng—the only man among the three male participants who has married—for his willingness to do housework and to take care of his wife. Yizheng is known as a 'good man' (*haonanren*) in the restaurant, but he is also teased during the interview for being 'henpecked' (*qiguanyan*). Aling, one of the young bachelors, ridicules Boli's aspiration and expresses his strong disapproval of the 'warm-man' type. He not only rejects it as 'hypocritical' but also insists that women be in charge of most housework since they are 'born to be meticulous'. Aling's claims then lead to a fairly intense debate between the male and female participants. All the three women emphasise that the times have changed: now that women earn their

own salary, they are entitled to negotiate with their husbands on the household division of labour. While Aling makes little concession, the other two men—Yizheng and Xiang'ai—both feel that it is 'unrealistic' to let women do all the housework; that men only 'help' women instead of 'being supposed to' do housework. In the end, Boli asks Aling to think in women's shoes: 'You are born as a man, and you are entitled not to do these things (washing dishes, clothes, etc.). But what if you were born as a woman?' Aling answers: 'if I were a woman…I would prefer a man like me' (focus group 5.1/new workers).

The female and the male respondents' distinct understandings of 'warm men' expressed in this focus group are typical among the young rural migrants I interviewed. While most female new workers welcome and idealise 'warm men', male new workers generally frown upon them, emphasising that 'men should do what men are supposed to do' instead of paying attention to housework and women's emotional needs. This discrepancy reflects how class and migration 'set the stage for contesting and reinventing established concepts of masculinity and femininity' among migrant workers whose 'preserved and adjusted behaviors and attitudes often coexist and sometimes conflict with each other' (Choi and Peng, 2016: 149). The next two sections present male and female new workers' respective understandings of 'warm men' in more detail, mapping them onto the continuities and discontinuities that migration brings to the existing gender order among the rural population in China.

7.2.2 Female new workers' partial gender empowerment via migrant work

As elaborated in chapter 3, the dual backbone of Chinese patriarchy—patrilineal inheritance combined with patrilocal residence—is still deeply entrenched in rural China (Choi and Peng, 2016; Pun, 2005). In contemporary China, rural men continue to be the primary breadwinners, many migrating to cities for better paid jobs, while rural women mostly play the role of back-up labourers, strategically migrating back and forth between urban and rural China according

to their family's needs in different stages (Du, 2017). The majority of female new workers I interviewed report that they stayed in their husbands' villages from several months to a year after giving birth to children. On coming back to work in the cities, some of them leave their children with their husband's parents in the villages. As noted by scholars (e.g. Du, 2017; Gaetano, 2010), rural migrant women not only receive a lower income and have less chance of promotion than men, but also juggle the dual burdens of wage labour and unpaid domestic labour which are further compounded by the existence of the *hukou* system. Therefore, female migrant workers may be doubly subordinated in cities, if not under the 'triple oppression' along lines of class, gender and rural-urban disparities (Pun, 2005).

But this triple subordination is not the whole story. Arianne Gaetano (2010: 284) argues that 'migration invariably challenges normative gender by expanding possibilities for identity...and by shaking up entrenched social roles and sexual mores'. Through migration, female new workers are spatially detached from the patrilocal family in rural areas, at least for a period each year. Waged labour, rather than unpaid labour, becomes the main part of most migrant women's everyday life. Almost all the scholars who conduct ethnographic research with female migrant workers in China recount stories of rural women who make conscious attempts to escape from their husband's patriarchal families and to transgress the gender order in rural China via migrating and working in the cities (e.g. Du, 2017; Jacka, 2006; Pun, 2005; Yan, 2008). During fieldwork, I also met a young woman from a village in Gansu Province, northwest China, who, at the age of 18, had escaped from her arranged engagement with a strange man and remained in Shanghai. The sense of autonomy in choosing to work in big cities is particularly manifest among the younger unmarried generation, for who, migrant labour is not just done out of economic or familial considerations, but signifies 'their pursuit of modern urban life that is distinct from rural life' (Du, 2017: 70).

In the focus group mentioned above, all the three female members emphasise their increasing autonomy instigated by their waged labour so that they now have economic grounds to negotiate the division of housework. This earning power is underlined not only when they discuss the term 'warm men' but also when they contest the term 'spendthrift chicks'. Again, deploying the rhetoric of past-present comparison, another female respondent Lajiao argues that since women now earn their own salary instead of counting on men, it is not appropriate to be called 'spendthrift'. Migrant women respondents' idealisation of 'warm men' reflects their aspirations for caring masculinity and intimacy in familial and romantic relationships, which is illustrated by Lajiao's romanticisation: 'it is pleasant for a couple to do housework together.' With increasing earning power and rising female autonomy (Shen, 2016), these migrant women yearn for a type of 'new man' (de Castella, 2014) who is willing to share the housework and listen to women's emotional needs.

In another focus group formed of six factory workers in the city of Changshu, while all the five male members assume that women now favour 'tall-rich-handsome' men, the only woman, Dajie (married), says she would be happy to marry an 'economical and practical man' or a 'warm man'. Interestingly, Dajie constructs a scenario in which a woman's marriage to a rich man is miserable: 'what if that rich man leaves you alone at home, caring nothing about you. Do you think that's good?' (Dajie.1/factory worker) Dajie's narrative implies her prioritisation of emotional needs over materialistic desires, which applies to all the migrant women I interviewed (see more in chapter 8). In contrast to the white-collar women I interviewed, none of them fantasises about marrying a 'tall-rich-handsome' man. As revealed by Coco, the young woman from Gansu Province who currently works in Shanghai, she prefers 'someone who is moderate (*pingpingdandan*) but suitable to build a life together with' (Coco.1/saleswoman).

However, economic aspects still loom large in most female new workers' idealised version of masculinity. Although none of them aspires to marry a rich man, they still expect their (future) husbands to have a 'certain economic basis' and to be 'able to at least feed the whole family'. 'It would be the best if a man is both "warm" and capable of making money', said Xiumei from the focus group consisting of five female factory workers in Guangzhou. This kind of dual fantasy, on the one hand, should be related to rural migrant women's rather limited level of income in general. As reasoned by Qunjie, another member of the focus group: 'I hope that my husband can earn more money. (I wish) I could also earn more. In this way, our family will be better off.' (Focus group 1.3/new workers) On the other hand, it illustrates that the autonomy that rural women have earned via migrant work is partial and unstable (Pun, 2005). Even though they are spatially separated from their rural families, migrant women still vacillate between waged work in urban areas and a variety of norms, notions and responsibilities ascribed by the structures of rural patriarchal family and kinship, which tend to lag behind practices (Du, 2017). The multiplicity of identities opened up by migrant work also demands that women struggle and negotiate on a daily basis. While Coco, now aged 25, has managed to escape from her previously arranged marriage, she is increasingly concerned with her status quo, feeling obliged to get married so as to fulfil her filial duty. The female migrant workers' idealisation of 'warm men' illustrates their uneasy struggles between the intersecting structures of gender, kinship and migrant work.

As Du Ping (2017: 135) points out, what underlies female new workers' empowerment by migrant working is migrant men's enduring desires for dominance in the gender relationship, which is well illustrated by Aling's ego-centric claim in section 7.2.1. The next section discusses male new workers' resistance against the ideal of 'warm men'.

7.2.3 Male new workers: 'only having money qualifies one as a warm man'

The deep-seated patriarchal structure of family life in rural China continues to ascribe to men a privileged position which is reinforced by their gender obligation to act as the 'financial supplier' (Lin, 2012: 52). But despite men's general control over women in a patriarchal gender order, not all men benefit from their privilege, as its accompanying obligations and expectations can become unbearable burdens for men of lower classes (Wong, 2016; Choi and Peng, 2016; Du, 2017; Lin, 2012). This is particularly the case with male migrant workers who have to cope with the discrepancy between their gender privilege in rural China and their low economic, social and political status in the cities (Choi and Peng, 2016).

Through his in-depth interviews with 28 male migrant workers in urban China, Lin Xiaodong (2012: 74) notes that 'family as a gendered institution is of central importance' in working-class rural men's constructions of masculine subjectivities. According to Lin, traditional gendered family practices serve to balance migrant workers' sense of inferiority when they work in subordinated social (class) positions. Rather than seeing themselves primarily as individual subjects, his respondents underline their 'roles and responsibilities' as 'fathers, husbands/partners and sons', the meanings of which have nonetheless been transformed by migrant work. In a migrant family where the wife is also a waged worker, the husband can be forced to make 'masculine compromise' and play an 'unconventional domestic role' of child caring and housework sharing (Choi and Peng, 2016: 102).

In their ethnography on male migrant workers in south industrial China, Susanne Choi and Peng Yinni (2016) record migrant men's different responses to this domestic role. These range from downright resistance, selective acceptance to active participation in caring duties. This point resonates with the three men's reactions to the housework debate in the focus group of restaurant workers.

While Aling insists on women's domestic responsibilities, the other men —Yizheng and Xiangai—both express their selective acceptance but at the same time emphase that they would just 'help' with housework out of practical considerations. As Choi and Peng (2016) notes, domestic labour remains central in many migrant men's understanding of femininity. Yizheng, in practice, may actively participate in chores as the focus group's women take him as a good example. But despite being praised and compared to a 'warm man', Yizheng appears somewhat embarrassed and sides with his male fellows, saying: 'women should do more housework and men less.' In fact, he remains mostly silent during the whole debate. While Aling openly disparages 'warm men', the young women's praise is also interspersed with teasing words like 'henpecked'. As Choi and Peng (2016: 100) observe from their fieldwork, '[r]ather than being seen as pioneers of gender equality, the men who work as equal partners in the domestic domain are often ridiculed by their neighbors and peers as "wife slaves".'

If Chinese rural-urban labour migration provides opportunities for women to challenge pre-existing gender norms, this challenge in turn affects the formation and maintenance of masculinity (Lin, 2012). The prevalence of migrant work partially breaks the sociospatial construction of the inside/outside dichotomy which has taken the new form of rural women working inside villages and men working elsewhere since the Mao era (Jacka, 1997). However, this dichotomy is still instantiated in the division of housework within a migrant family. This division may become even more important as it enables men to maintain their habitual sense of entitlement. As Wong (2016: 108) points out, since men 'of lower social status cannot easily enact their masculinity in public or the workplace, the domestic domain may be the only place left where they can claim their masculinity.' Most male new workers' rejection of 'warm men' arguably arises from the term's unconventional signification of manhood primarily in relation to the domestic domain.

On ascribing domesticity to womanhood, male new workers further obligate themselves to the 'masculine' domain of money making. As Rofel (1999: 123) puts it, in the post-Mao era, the state has enabled the market to be one field where 'modernity and masculinity' intertwines. This is reflected in many young migrant men's aspiration to run their own business, an aspiration which encompasses their wishes not only to embrace a modern urban lifestyle, but also to 'become a modern man' (Lin, 2012: 120-121). Yet, the ideology of patriarchal kinship also endows manhood with another dimension—to be 'a filial son' by getting married, having a son, and continuing the patrilineage (ibid: 67).

In the focus group of garment factory workers in the city of Changshu, the five men – who were born around 1993 and who still remain single – share their common feeling that 'life is harsh for men at our age .' They bemoan their tedious labour and low income, and the improbability of 'finding a wife'. The assumption that women want to 'marry up[wards]' with wealthy men cuts across the majority of male new-worker respondents. When I asked if they'd tried to talk with their female colleagues to confirm these assumptions, Tongfei, one of the male factory workers, reflected and explained: 'perhaps our self-esteem is too low and we get this impression that young beautiful girls now look superior and unapproachable' (Tongfei.2 from focus group 2). These young rural migrant men's low self-esteem largely results from their low level of income which cannot match and instantiate their symbolically entitled privilege and gender expectations. Their male anxiety can lead to 'the trap of self-victimisation' that denigrates the integrity of women and exaggerates 'the efficacy of money' (Wong, 2016: 92-93).

Binxin, a young installer of broadband born in 1995, claims that 'only having money qualifies one as a warm man in the eyes of women.' (Binxin.1 from focus group 4) My textual analysis in chapter 5 shows that while the term 'warm men' connotes a type of 'average' and family-oriented masculinity, its discursive

construction still entails an economic aspect. The 'moderate' level of income that 'warm men' or 'economical and practical men' are expected to meet in young urbanites' eye can appear rather demanding for male new workers such as Binxin. In this sense, the variety of online terms connoting wealthy masculinity that range from 'tall-rich-handsome', 'vulgar rich' to 'domineering CEO' can bombard young migrant men's already sensitive nerves, further provoking their anxiety to meet the dual gender expectations of earning money and getting married. But under the ideology of patriarchy, these types of wealth-based masculinities appear more as ideal examples for self-improvement than objects of class sentiments, while 'materialistic' women are the ones to blame. It is thus no wonder that many male new workers I interviewed, particularly those young single men, speak highly of the 'national husband'—Wang Sicong—for his capability to make money easily. The illocutionary force of the term lies in its articulation of the ideology of patriarchal capitalism with that of patriarchal kinship.

Meanwhile, the term 'warm men', signifying a kind of uxorious masculinity that places women in a superior position, can reinforce self-victimisation together with a 'feeling of deprivation' (Du, 2017: 130). Mi Le, a senior hairdresser in Shanghai, describes 'warm men' as 'prioritising women under any circumstance while positioning themselves as constantly inferior'. 'By no means can I be a warm man', he says, and then recalls how he broke up with a girlfriend whom he had dated for a long time: 'we were in a shopping mall when her shoelaces became loose. Then she just did this (illustrating how the girl wanted him to kneel down and tie the shoelaces for her). I didn't say a word to her and left.' On hearing this account, another hair-dresser said in a jokingly respectful manner: 'A man who refuses to lower his head'. (Focus group 3.2/new workers) As we shall see in section 7.3.2, young white-collar women mention a variety of ways in which women perform the effeminate role in order to be indulged. However, for young migrant men who grew up enjoying male privilege and who have taken

pains to maintain this sense of privilege in the city, these gender performances may appear as an imposition that deprives them of their prerogative. The male and female new-worker respondents' distinct understandings of 'warm men' exemplify how the dual axes of emotional and material concerns are entangled, generating multiple tensions and ambivalences in the everyday gender politics of new workers. The next section summarises these tensions and ambivalences.

7.2.4 Interview with a young couple: the gender dynamics of new workers

The following excerpt comes from my interview with a young couple who worked in Shanghai for more than five years before going back to the husband's village in Shandong Province to give birth to their first child. It epitomises the gender dynamics between male and female new workers in contemporary China.

Excerpt 8

> X: I feel it [the term 'warm men'] is close to 'economical and practical men'. These types of men know how to lead a practical life (*guorizi*). They are homely and meticulous, taking many things into account.
> C: How to put it? (Warm men are) the type of men who are very home-oriented but with limited income.
> I (Interviewer): do you feel 'warm men' are good men?
> C: Not really, because their salary is not good. (J then talks about the economic pressures that young men in contemporary China have to face, such as purchasing houses and cars).
> I: So, you consider all these pressures as belonging to men only?
> C: Yes.
> I: Do you agree? (To the wife, Xiaxia)
> X: In fact … although women don't say it aloud, we also have our own pressures. Women will also think about those things that concern men. That's for sure. And then, we think about our children. In fact, we adults can lead whatever kind of life, but we don't want our child to be like this. We hope to bring him/her as much as we have, especially in terms of education. These are my thoughts. We women still put our priority on taking care of everything within the family. (Xiaxia and Chengjie.2/a rural couple)

As we have seen from the previous two sections, both Xiaxia's positive description of 'warm men' and Chengjie's disapproval of it are typical. The couple agrees upon the reference of 'warm men' to a type of home-oriented manhood,

but each perceives it in light of their respective obligations within the matrix of gender relations. Xiaxia reports being immersed in the domestic duties of child care 'within the family'—her husband's family. She indicates that while men frequently underline the gendered obligation to earn money, women's domestic labour tends to be taken for granted. She thus appreciates men who are 'homely and meticulous' and who can think in women's shoes. Alongside her domestic duties, Xiaxia has gone back to work as a quality inspector in a local enterprise. Her life story and expressed aspiration for home-oriented manhood illustrates how waged labour gain female new workers certain grounds from which to negotiate their household duties and to express their emotional needs, while their primary commitments remain tied to the domestic domain. Against the intersecting structures of patriarchal capitalism and patriarchal kinship, female new workers have to struggle between their sometimes conflicting identities as waged worker, mother, wife, daughter-in-law, and more.

This multiplicity is reflected in Xiaxia's complex response when I ask if she agrees that the pressures of feeding the family only belong to men, as her husband Chengjie has suggested. She mentions both women's own pressures in the domestic domain and empathy for 'things that concern men'. This expressed empathy, on the one hand, frames women's duty in earning money as secondary, which resonates with many female new workers' expectation for men to 'at least be able to feed the whole family'. But on the other hand, it is also distinct from many male new workers' discursive resistance against men doing domestic chores. Moreover, the notion of family looms large in female new workers' expectation of men's economic capability. As Xiaxia expresses it, her concern with economic conditions comes less from her own desires than the priority given to the next generation. Female new workers' ambivalence over men's financial obligation derives from their low-paid jobs being exploited by and discriminated against by the market economy (Pun, 2005) as well as their

continual commitment to domestic duties, which is taken for granted and which further restricts their economic autonomy (Gaetano, 2010).

As pointed out by scholars who study rural working-class masculinity in China, rural migrant men generally downplay their female partners' waged work as a secondary complement to the family income, emphasising their onerous responsibility as the primary breadwinner (Choi and Peng, 2016; Du, 2017; Lin, 2012). In Excerpt 8, being 'homely and meticulous' is hardly a merit for Chengjie if a man cannot make enough money to support the family. Given the gender dynamics within this couple interview, Chengjie's discursive rejection of the 'warm men' type may be interpreted as a speech act asserting his privileged position within the family; or a gender performance that accentuates his masculinity defined in terms of earning capability. This rejection can also be related to the internalisation of men's economic responsibility which appears to cut across all the male respondents. The internalisation can nonetheless lead to male new workers' great anxiety given their limited level of income and subordinated position in cities.

It is my contention, then, that in contemporary China the intersection of patriarchal capitalism and patriarchal kinship imprisons as much as it entitles male new workers who are under the dual gender obligations of being the primary breadwinner and getting married so as to continue the patrilineage. Tongfei, one of the male garment factory workers in Changshu, aspires to learn new skills so he can change his current job. One year after the focus group, I asked if he had quit. He explained that he had not because his parents hadstarted to arrange blind dates for him: 'I now have to work hard to save money for marriage.'

Contrary to almost all male new workers' rejection of the ideal of 'warm men', many white-collar men I interviewed express appreciation of this type of masculinity. The next section turns to their descriptions.

7.3.1 White-collar men's ambivalent acknowledgment of women's autonomy

In her PhD thesis on the dominant discourse and performance of masculinity in Nanchong, a small 'peri-urban' city in southwest China, Magdalena Wong (2016: 132) writes: 'Nowadays, in Nanchong (and I believe in China generally), patriarchal attitudes are considered to be feudalistic and outdated…replaced by modern, liberal' rhetoric such as 'equality and democracy' in gender relations. Wong draws this observation mainly from her ethnographic work with men and women in the lower-middle or middle class, including a number of young rural migrants who work as white-collar workers or small businessmen in Nanchong. Wong (2016: 37, 92) argues that men are now required to 'labour more and perform better' in their pursuit of a spouse in contemporary China, as the one-child policy has led to a disproportionate sex ratio, 'which amongst other factors eventually privileges women in the marriage market.' One important strategy that men with ordinary conditions employ, noted by Wong, is trying to become tender men 'who indulge women's desire for love and care' (ibid: 181).

The class backgrounds of Wong's respondents are comparable to those I categorise as 'white-collar respondents' in my research. A number of white-collar men I interviewed show their aspiration to become caring partners in romantic relationships when they describe the term 'warm men'. The following excerpt comes from the focus group formed of four programmers in Shanghai:

Excerpt 9

> I: How do you feel about the term 'warm men'? Is it commendatory or derogatory?
> Q: It's commendatory.
> B: More a commendatory term. Warm men know how to take care of people…I'm not a 'warm man' though (laugh). I don't know how to cook and care for others.
> J: Yes. In effect, (we'd) better treat girls as well as possible.
> N: I don't really identify with this term. Anyway, I'm not a 'warm man'.
> B: I think 'warm men' is a pretty good term.

Q: (It) just refers to 'male besties' (*nanguimi*) (who are) especially considerate towards girls.

J: But this is difficult to achieve. Girls' moods are hard to read.

(Focus group 9.2/white-collar)

Despite the variations in engagement with the notion 'warm men', none of the four programmers strongly rejects this type of caring and home-oriented masculinity, appearing to be at ease with discussing men's consideration of women's emotions. Jiaxiang, who comes from Sichuan Province, expresses his aspiration to be considerate towards 'girls' moods' even though he has difficulty in achieving this. His response also implies an impression of 'girls' capriciousness' and thus their superior position in personal relationships. This impression cuts across both unmarried white-collar men and new-worker men, indicating young women's privileged position in the marriage market. An interesting and telling contrast lies in the different degree of engagement with the term 'warm men' between the two men (Niuba and Qiangge) who have established families and the other two who are still bachelors (Bin'ge and Jiaxiang). The two married men describe the term 'warm men' in a detached manner, which is particularly obvious in Niuba's indifference, while the two single men Bin'ge and Jiaxiang relate more to the term. This indicates that acting as a 'warm man' can be a courtship strategy for non-elite men, who are required to labour more and perform better to pursue their spouses.

But despite Bin'ge's appreciation of the 'warm men' type and his bemoaning that 'I often spend my weekends alone at home', he also distances himself from being a 'warm man'. This kind of simultaneous identification and distancing, on the one hand, illustrates the ambivalence with regard to one's subjectification of online names — a key point that I have mentioned in chapter 6. On the other hand, Bin'ge's as well as several other white-collar men's relative composure over their bachelor status is in contrast with the anxiety of many new-worker bachelors. As Alex, a 35-year-old lawyer, puts it: 'in terms of relationship, I would rather go

without than find a mismatch (*ningquewulan*)' (Alex.1/lawyer). The kind of 'affordability' to remain single is stratified along axes of gender and class (see more in section 7.4.2). The intersection of these two axes structures the availability of discursive alternatives to a social agent as well as his/her resources to negotiate the cultural norm of marriage. This point is symbolised by the name 'golden bachelor' (*zuanshi wanglaowu*) in Chinese.

Resonating with their appreciation of 'warm men' and impression of girls' superiority in romantic relationships, many white-collar men acknowledge women's autonomy while remaining ambivalent towards it. This is first reflected by a kind of political correctness when white-collar men discuss the terms 'black wood ear' and 'green-tea bitch'. After I bring in these 'taboo' topics, most of them immediately express their rejection of the two terms as 'vulgar' and 'improper', which is frequently accompanied by an embarrassed and tacit smile. Yet, on being pressed, many white-collar men indicate their unease about women who are 'promiscuous' with their bodies. In a politically correct tone, they claim that this 'choice of lifestyle' is none of their business. It thus suggests that while young middle-class men in urban China to some extent perceive it inappropriate to comment on women's autonomy with their bodies and sexuality, their patriarchal tendency remains; and still, they cannot let go men's prerogative in sexual relationships.

In most interviews and focus groups, after I had gained respondents' spontaneous responses to terms such as 'black wood ear', I would 'intervene' and push them to recognise the lack of an equivalent term to stigmatise 'promiscuous' men in Chinese[57]. 'Indeed, this is not fair', replied a number of white-collar men, who then started to reflect on their bias against sexually active women. But their reflection, just as their political correctness, is restricted and

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[57] As many respondents point out, there exist terms and slang which signify promiscuous men in Chinese, such as 'stallion' (*zhongma*) and 'planter' (*bozhongji*). But none of them carries as strong a negative tone as the term 'black wood ear'.

conditioned by a liberal ideology of gender equality. While they acknowledge the injustice of only critiquing 'promiscuous women', it rarely occurs to these white-collar men that 'promiscuous men' are exempted from moral judgment largely due to their male privilege underpinned by economic power.

This then leads to another dimension in white-collar men's ambivalent acknowledgement of women's autonomy—the latter's economic independence. Yueyue, an engineer who is recently engaged, makes the following comments using a past-present narrative similar to that of female new workers:

> Nowadays, many women want to find 'warm men'. This shows that women are now less concerned with the material aspect, caring more about a man's personality. As you know, women used to look for husbands who were able to provide material conditions because they earned relatively little and needed to raise children. But now, women's economic conditions are better off generally. *They can partially make a living*. (Yueyue.3/white-collar, my emphasis)

Female new workers' past-present comparison draws on rural women's economic reliance on men which was initially resurrected by China's marketisation (Croll, 1985; Yan et al., 2012) and which has also been partially contested by migrant work. Yet, Yueyue was born and grew up in urban China where women had seen marked improvements in their economic status, particularly in the Mao era. It is thus worth dwelling on what he is referring to in terms of women's lack of economic autonomy in the past. His construction of dependent women in a patriarchal setting is apparently more related to the context of post-Mao rural areas. As shown in chapter 6, a kind of historical displacement is typical among many white-collar respondents' meaning making that conflates rural backwardness in contemporary China with that in the Mao era. This conflation derives from 'the allegory of post-socialism' which the party-state and the market have been actively promoting (Rofel, 1999) since the ecoomic reforms. The allegory celebrates the national progress and unleashed individual pleasure as China moves away from the regulatory policies and politics of Maoist socialism. It conceals achievements as well as the urban-rural duality in

the Mao era, taking the backwardness of rural China nowadays—which has been exacerbated by the market economy—as a negative reference point to highlight the progress that the economic reforms has brought about in urban China. But the state's retreat from regulating economic activities has reinforced and, in some cases, reconstructed a gender division of labour, damaging urban women's earning power (Honig and Hershatter, 1988; Rofel, 1999). As I argued in chapter 5, the *de facto* expansion of gender inequality in urban China is concealed and naturalised by the masquerade of 'consumerist feminism' which celebrates women's empowerment in the private domains of body, sexuality and consumption.

Correspondingly, although Yueyue acknowledges women's 'better-off' economic conditions at present, he meanwhile assumes that women can only make their living 'partially' while men continue to act as the primary breadwinner. This kind of assumption is raised by numerous white-collar men as well as several white-collar women who claim that 'a family will be the most stable if the husband earns slightly more than the wife' (Xiaoyou.2/university student). The ambivalent wording of 'slightly' illustrates the inner tension of 'consumerist feminism' as it articulates men's *de facto* dominance over women by economic power with women's apparent superiority in the private domains. This inner tension resonates with the construction and celebration of femininity as 'an objectified subject' in Chinese Internet discourse. The next section turns to white-collar men's and women's elaborations to illustrate how a type of 'spendthrift' femininity is routinely exaggerated and naturalised in urban youth's daily interactions.

7.3.2 Habitual exaggeration and mystification of 'spendthrift' femininity

If 'warm man' can be regarded as a type of new masculinity that corresponds to young urban women's apparent empowerment by 'consumerist feminism', then an important way for a Chinese man to illustrate his tenderness is buying gifts for

his girlfriend or partner. Yuki, a female marketing practitioner of a mineral water company, gives me an example of how the term 'warm man' can be used in her copywriting:

> It is said that now as soon as girls start dating someone, they stop being able to open bottle lids (laughs). They just suddenly lose their capability to take care of themselves (laughs). This is exaggerating, for sure…But our company can utilise this kind of popular saying to promote our product which is targeted at women and helps with women's periods. For example, I can come up with a copywriting motif like this: a warm man, instead of saying 'drink more hot water' perfunctorily when his girlfriend has a period, buys our mineral water and opens a bottle's lid right in front of her… (Yuki.1/marketer)

The quote illustrates the common usage of online terms by digital marketing, a theme I will further elaborate in the next chapter. Here, I focus on three 'common logics' around gender that Yuki draws on for her copywriting. First, corresponding with their superiority in romantic relationships, young women expect men to take care of them, performing a kind of fragile and dependent femininity to elicit this care. Second, men appear to be 'perfunctory' and unable to fulfil their role as the care-giver. While 'drink more hot water' is a common saying in Chinese Traditional Medicine, in the meaning system of Internet discourse, this saying is somewhat notorious and exemplifies men's casual treatment of women's emotional yearnings when they are weak ('on their period'). In fact, 'drink more hot water' is said to be a typical sentence of 'straight men', which illustrates their low 'emotional intelligence' or EQ (*qingshang*). The term EQ is mentioned in a number of white-collar men's descriptions of the term 'warm men'. As Yueyue, the young engineer, says: 'a warm man has quite high EQ. For example, when a woman says "I don't feel very well", the warm man knows how to make her feel better through buying something for her, like medicine.' Here comes the third assumption that draws on the previous two: it is primarily via shopping that a man shows his earnestness and 'high EQ' with regard to addressing women's emotional needs. Both Yueyue's and Yuki's elaborations articulate the three assumptions which

form a 'warm-man narrative'; the narrative constructs and emphasises a type of dependently consumerist femininity.

Both the assumptions that women become dependent when they start dating and that men treat women's emotional needs casually are signified by exaggerated and playful online sayings. In fact, women's fragility and men's stupidity have to be exaggerated and essentialised so that consumption can bridge the two. There exists an abundance of online wordplay underlining women's consumerist yearnings, such as ''[hand]bags cure all sicknesses' and 'you need a cry dear', which are mentioned by some white-collar women in a joyful manner. 'Bags cure all sicknesses' is a homophone of the exact same four-character phrase 包治百病 (*baozhibaibing*), which initially means 'ensuring to cure all sicknesses'. Drawing on the dual meaning of the character '*bao*', the new term indicates that (luxurious) handbags are sure to cure all women's sicknesses—or performed fragility. 'You need a cry dear', as an English expression, now comes to have a homophone in Chinese with the explosion of China's e-commerce; the homophone 有你的快递儿 (*you ni de kuaidier*) literally means 'there is a parcel for you'. In a gender-essentialising tone, the wordplay goes as: while Western men console women by saying 'you need a cry dear', Chinese men do this by saying 'there's a parcel for you.'

All these playful online sayings are 'mystifying' not only in the sense that they build on and 'impoverish' a previous level of signification, but also that they function to cause 'an immediate impression' (Barthes, 2009)—women are dependent and consumerist, or 'spendthrift', to use the online buzzword 'spendthrift chicks'. In this regard, these sayings are 'performative' as well, since they serve more to perform a deed than to state a fact. A number of white-collar women mention their habitual use of the terms 'spendthrift' and 'chopping hands' (*duoshou*) on social media after shopping. When being asked for motivations, they again raise the key notion 'self-mockery' which, as we have

seen in chapter 6, repeatedly mentioned by white-collar respondents. The exaggeration and performativity of this type of wordplay enables utterers to simultaneously identify with and disengage from it—to both relate oneself to it and to disavow such a relation. After all, one would never really chop off hands; and a young woman would not really lose the capacity to take care of herself as soon as she starts dating a man. The buzzword 'spendthrift (chicks)' remains ambivalent with regard to who pays for the 'spendthrift' woman. Its huge popularity arguably derives from this ambivalence as one can feel free to oscillate between identifying with the naming and disavowing oneself as being completely dependent on men. These jesting online 'mini-narratives', known as *geng* (梗) in Chinese Internet discourse, play a constant game of hide-and-seek between meaning and form, between meaningfulness and meaninglessness, which helps to naturalize consumerist feminism with all its inner tensions.

When I press her to enunciate what 'effect' she wants to 'achieve' when calling herself 'spendthrift' after shopping, Yuki reflects: 'perhaps I want to prove I am still a woman…that I still have the female instinct.' Yuki is unlikely to articulate her intention every time she mocks herself after shopping, but her more attentive reflection illustrates how the *habitus* of Chinese Internet discourse can inform people with an 'order of reality'. Just as national flags remind people of their nationality in subtle ways (Billig, 1995), mini-narratives which exaggerate a type of dependent and consumerist femininity serve as habitual laughter to suggest what is 'objectively' comic (Billig, 2005)—'spendthrift' women. Numerous respondents of all the four social groups—to a lesser degree among female new-workers (see chapter 8)—take it for granted that women are 'naturally' more inclined towards consumption.

In a mixed-gender focus group formed of five white-collar respondents in Shanghai, the respondents spontaneously illustrated how dependent and consumerist femininity is habitually celebrated and fetishised in daily life. At the

beginning, when each respondent took turns to introduce his or her daily use of media, Jiulin mentioned an online forum which he laughingly called a 'spendthrift' forum: 'It compares prices of goods, particularly those of photographic devices. There's a saying that you should never access this forum; even if you do so, you should avoid letting your wife or girlfriend know its existence.' Another man, Nangua, assented: 'Yes, the website is best for you to pick up gifts for your wife, for your "queen" (*nvwang*)' leading Jiulin to reiteratate: 'Absolutely, but don't ever let your "queen" know about this forum by herself'. Later in the focus group, I showed two pictures of Song Joong-ki, a famous Korean male actor who was called 'husband' by his fans during the period I conducted my fieldwork, and of Wang Sicong, to whom the term 'national husband' initially referred. I ask Lin, the only female respondent of the focus group: 'who is the "national husband" for you?'

Excerpt 10

L: Aha, undoubtedly the one on the right (Wang Sicong). Song is dwarfed when they appear together. (Laughingly, everyone seems to agree.)
J: I once discussed this question with my female colleagues. I told them 'you have to pick Wang as your "husband".' Because once you took him as your first husband, Song would surely be your second (husband). And the third, the fourth, the fifth, you just name it.
L: Aha, I dare not…dare not fantasise in that way (in a jokingly shy tone).
X: This depends on whether you want appearance or money.
J: Yes, yes, yes. But when your husband's wealth reaches that extent, that (appearance) won't be a problem.
X: True!
L: You put it very correctly! (laugh). (Focus group 6.1/white-collar)

The two excerpts of the focus group can be seen as discursive rituals which respectively draw on a *geng*, or mini-narrative, in Chinese Internet discourse. In the first discursive ritual, the two men Jiulin and Nangua play on the terms 'spendthrift' and 'queen', co-constructing a wife figure whose consumerist yearnings are both indulged and guided by a husband. In the second excerpt, the respondents co-construct a materialistic female fantasy based on the buzzword

'national husband', this time with the complicit participation of Lin, the only woman of the focus group. Again, we see Jiulin dominating the conversation projecting his own gender assumptions onto women. Jiulin, who runs his own business in the steel trade, is the richest man I interviewed. Like the majority of male respondents, he assumes women to be materialistic, shopaholic and dependent. But different from the 'financial performance anxiety' (Zavoretti, 2016) of new-worker men and white-collar men of lower-middle class, he appears to find it enjoyable talking about materialistic and 'spendthrift' femininity, which arguably serves to reinforce his male prerogative. The female participant, Lin, meanwhile performs her femininity by articulating the traditional code of shyness with a popular mode of entertainment among young urban women—fantasising rich-and-handsome manhood (see more in section 7.4.3). All lines of the conversation are joking and highly 'euphemised' (Bourdieu, 1991), based on a variety of online mini-narratives; they are more carnivalesque in form than serious in meaning. But this kind of everyday habitual wordplay contributes to naturalising and fetishising hegemonic masculinity defined primarily in terms of capital accumulation, as well as its relational femininity emphasised in terms of dependence and consumption, which nonetheless appears to be superior in gender relations.

This focus group is overall the best-off in terms of economic conditions. Their identification with 'spendthrift chicks' and 'national husband' indicate the middle-class orientation of these kinds of wordplays. While Lin, the only female respondent, can be considered as somewhat subject to the male-dominated dynamics of the focus group and thus complicit with a patriarchal stance, the rest of the chapter mainly draws on white-collar women's responses to illustrate their ambivalent entitlement by and subjectification of consumerist feminism.

7.4.1 Young urban women's purchasing power, gender and sexual politics

Reflecting on the social implications of consumerism and its primary linkage with re-emphasised femininities in post-Mao China, Evans (2006: 186) argues that consumer culture opens up 'new spaces and possibilities for negotiating gender meanings, even though their parameters are set by the combined forces' of global capital and the patriarchal party-state: 'The femininities that are at the heart of consumer culture…demonstrate a complex range of influences and meanings, reasserting hegemonic influences in the formation of gender at the same time as they contest them.' Evan's observations are clearly instantiated in white-collar respondents' elaborations on Chinese Internet discourse and their usage of some online terms to confront what they call 'male chauvinism' (*da'nanzi zhuyi*) in everyday life.

When discussing the online term 'little fresh meat', the focus group formed of six white-collar women in Shanghai enumerates a series of male celebrities in a joyful and enthusiastic manner. Their elaborations on the term integrate objectification of young male bodies with codes of cosmetic products. For example, Pony insists that ' "little fresh meat" is still "fresh" enough as if you can squeeze water out of him. His skin still contains plenty of collagen; his hairline hasn't started retreating; his belly hasn't started protruding.' In other words, 'little fresh meat' has an 'expiry date'. Chuchu, meanwhile, insists that she only calls someone 'little fresh meat' if he can arouse her sexual desire so that 'I want to sleep with him; I want to eat his muscle.' (Focus group 7.3/white-collar) Chuchu's daring expression then leads to a cheerful and enthusiastic discussion among the respondents with regard to whether one really wants to 'sleep with' or just finds the male body of a 'little fresh meat' 'adorable'. The majority of white-collar women I interviewed express their adoration of a type of 'white and innocent' (*baibaijingjing*) masculinity that is embodied by a number of young and beautiful male celebrities in East Asia.

As I mentioned in chapter 3, the aesthetic standard of white complexion had been constantly promoted by the literati in Imperial China and associated with ideal femininity. This aesthetic standard was then inherited by the emerging trend of 'anti-masculine taste' in Ming and Qing Dynasties where upper-class men projected their notion of ideal femininity onto young and effeminate boys (Wu, 2003). After a period of apparent interruption in the Mao era, contemporary China has seen the revival of white-complexion fetishism with the commodification of gender and sexuality. Interestingly, while white complexion was first and foremost tied to re-emphasised femininity together with youth and beauty, young heterosexual urban women, who are the major target of these commodified standards, project them back to the male body they collectively adore. Most white-collar respondents appear to fantasise about this young and beautiful male body less in terms of sexual desire than as a form of self-recognition. As indicated by Pony's words above, the ebb and flow of 'little fresh meat', with their embodied fusion of masculine and feminine attributes, serves to cathect many young urban women's yearnings for physical youth constantly codified by consumerism. In addition, the idealised innocence of 'little fresh meat' indicates young women's fantasy for a type of boyhood that is not yet fully mature and 'contaminated' by the worldliness of adult masculinity, a point mentioned by both female white-collar and new-worker respondents.

Appearing as an ambivalent figure, 'little fresh meat' thus poses a certain degree of tension to the predominant masculinity in a patriarchal capitalist setting. Indeed, the term 'little fresh meat' appears in contrast with the pre-existing term 'little white face' (*xiaobailian*); the latter stigmatises men who depend on women with their pretty appearance. A number of male respondents, both white-collar and new-worker, utilise 'little white face' to express their disapproval of the term 'little fresh meat'. Most men show no interest in this topic, appearing to be offended by the objectifying 'female gaze' that the frenzy of 'little fresh meat' exemplifies. Female new workers generally enjoy discussing

the term and associate it with a type of fair, young and innocent male image as well. But in contrast to white-collar women, they rarely mention a celebrity's name. For them, 'little fresh meat' is found in everyday life, such as a young and unsophisticated man who just started working in a factory. The everyday practice of consuming male celebrities is not only gendered but also classed. Wanmei, a member of focus group 7, depicts her zeal for an East-Asian boy band by following their tours from Japan to the US. This kind of fandom for 'little fresh meat' is beyond the income level of new-worker women.

Young urban middle-class women's strong purchasing power has constituted a 'power of the popular' (Louie, 2015: 125) that is not only contesting ideal masculinities in contemporary China but also having a broader effect on gender and sexual politics in contemporary China (see also Song and Hird, 2014). When the six white-collar women discuss the buzzword 'national husband', they mention Dou Jingtong and call her 'national husband in the lesbian circle'. Daughter of the famous Chinese singer Faye Wong, Dou has been known for her tomboy style and has publicly come out as lesbian. As elaborated in chapter 5, there now exists a variety of media content, ranging from Internet literature, manga, TV shows, to online series and webcasts, that cater to young urban women and capitalise on the interrelated themes of 'soft masculinity', metrosexual tastes and homosexuality. Several white-collar women I interviewed identify themselves with the term 'rotten girls', which refers to women who enjoy the BL (boys love) genre. Maomao not only finds BL series and novels far more 'touching' than conventional love stories about heterosexual couples, but also enjoys watching webcasts of gay couples who 'show off their love, answer fans' daring questions about their sex positions, and sometimes promote cosmetic products' (Maomao.1/white-collar). With its rapid commodification, the 'rotten-girl' culture has reached a scale that has prompted the party-state to take legal measures. These legal measures, which attempt to juxtapose homosexuality with pornography and bloody violence and ban the relevant

content online, have so far encountered large-scale outcry in Chinese social media and appeared to wave in the face of online protests.[58]

Generally speaking, white-collar women not only enunciate the strongest support for homosexuality among the four social groups, but also articulate their conscious resistance against sexist terms such as 'black wood ear' (see more in chapter 8). 'Straight-men cancer' is a key word that many of them repeatedly bring up when describing their daily encounter with male chauvinism. White-collar women report using the term in a relatively serious manner to label men's macho words and deeds and to underline women's autonomy with their body and sexuality. In this sense, 'straight-men cancer' has apparently become an important part of young urban women's feminist vocabulary in China. A number of white-collar women juxtapose 'low EQ' and 'straight-men cancer' together to enunciate their accusation of patriarchal behavior, as shown by Maomao's recollection of her unpleasant blind date with a man who she regards as typifying 'straight-man cancer':

> We added each other's WeChat account, and just after several words, the man started to mention his master's degree, his possession of a house and a car. Come on, I'm also a master. He doesn't have to show off in this way. I said goodbye to him immediately. Many 'straight men' are so annoying! Their EQ is so low!   (Maomao.2/white-collar woman)

For Maomao, this straight man, 'like many others', appears particularly annoying because of his unsophisticated boasting about male superiority which exemplifies his low 'EQ' as opposed to that of both male characters in the BL genre and her gay friends in real life. As mentioned in chapter 5, male protagonists in BL works are typically handsome, refined and woman-friendly; and the gay men Maomao has befriended through joining an LGTB association in Shanghai tend to confirm this textual construction. These men are mostly middle

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[58] For example, Sina weibo reversed its ban on 'homosexual' content after the 'hashtag' movement #Iamgay in April, 2018.
https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/16/china-weibo-bans-homosexual-content-protest

class, with occupations ranging from university teacher, designer, architect to photographer, while male protagonists in the BL genre frequently appear to be wealthy, and don't care about earning a living. Daniel, a gay man who comes from a humble family background in Shanghai, emphasises not only that the BL genre is 'far from many gay men's real life' but also that gay men, particularly middle-class gay men, are the most vocal and 'dominant' group within the LGBTQ minorities. Although sexual politics and its relationship with online wordplay cannot be fully addressed in this thesis due to space limits, I would insist researchers take a more nuanced look at the class orientation of and heterogeneity within sexual politics in contemporary China, which, just as the world of so-called 'grassroots netizens', contains inner dynamics of power, hierarchy and symbolic violence. It is also important to bear this point in mind when addressing young urban women's contestations of the gender order with their high educational level as well as strong purchasing power.

As can be seen in Maomao's comment above, she is entitled to a sense of autonomy by her similar level of higher education to the man whom she blind-dated. Nonetheless, the gender order is not a structure reproduced or contested in the single realm of culture and signs. The sense of male entitlement that the 'annoying straight man' demonstrates also derives from his ability to meet the material expectations for men in marriage which perpetuates the current gender order in China. The next two sections turn to the 'material dimension' of consumerist feminism, first with regard to its class orientation and then young urban women's ambivalence over their economic autonomy.

7.4.2 The urban 'progressive' stance of 'consumerist feminism'

In stark contrast to most white-collar respondents' – particularly women's – familiarity with 'straight-men cancer', new-worker respondents have rarely heard of, let alone used, this buzzword in their everyday life, and 'rotten woman' is a completely strange notion to all of them. The few who know 'straight-men

cancer' are all younger men who have both interest and time in 'idling around' online forums. They understand that 'the term has something to do with homosexuality' but no more. In fact, the term's original and currently residual connection with the convention of demonising heterosexual men in the BL genre (see section 5.5.1) tends to put them off. Some new workers immediately make a disgusted sound after hearing the word 'homosexuality'. When I am sitting with three farming men (all born at the beginning of the 1980s) in the village of Shandong Province and trying to explain how the term 'straight-men cancer' connotes criticism of patriarchy while underlining it as a peculiarity of 'straight men', the respondents look bewildered and remain silent. The whole explanation has little resonance for them. Before the interview, I invited the wife of Wangbing—one of the three men—to join in, but Wangbing claimed on behalf his wife: 'she knows nothing about the Internet. Women are not in the position of using these things.' (Wangbing.2/farmer) In the village, it is still conventional that when a dinner table is too small for guests and all family members to eat together, daughters-in-law will be excluded from the dinner table and serve dishes first.

These men from rural China, in the meaning system of Chinese Internet discourse, are typical examples of 'straight-men cancer' given their hostility towards homosexuality, macho deeds and words. A number of white-collar women agree with the discursive logic connoted by the online term 'phoenix men' that men from rural villages who manage to settle down in big cities, despite their success in studies and careers, tend to hold backward gender ideas and thus exemplify 'straight-men cancer'. Dolley, one of the women in focus group 7, describes her impression of 'phoenix men' as follows:

I used to spend lots of time reading posts on tianya.cn where there are various extreme cases of 'phoenix men'. Perhaps reading these stories gave me an impression that rural men are blindly filial (*yuxiao*) to their parents, that they consider women as a tool of reproduction, etc. So, for me, the term 'phoenix

men' already entails (the meaning of) 'straight-men cancer'. (Dolley.4/white-collar woman)

As mentioned in chapter 6, tianya.cn is a popular online forum among urban youth in China, mentioned by many white-collar respondents with regard to their media use. The discursive construction of an extremely macho figure of 'phoenix men' for urban youth to consume online is comparable to that of *shamate*. While the discursive construction of *shamate* feeds on fetishising some young migrant workers' tastes judged from urbanites' eye, the 'phoenix-men' narrative is built on essentialising the backwardness of rural grown-ups' gender notions in the light of a 'progressive' feminist stance that is embodied, accordingly, by urban grown-ups.

This kind of essentialisation and presupposition derive from Chinese urbanites' long-existing prejudices against and abjection of the rural population, and are further reinforced by young urban women's collective imagination and consumption of 'phoenix men' in Chinese cyberspace. Those extreme cases of 'phoenix men' are undoubtedly patriarchal; but on adopting an axiomatic model of 'progressive' feminism, one appears to abandon a whole bunch of socio-economic issues and historical contexts which condition the gender *habitus* of subjects who are situated in 'different ethical-moral traditions' (Mahmood, 2001: 58) and the availability of alternative discourses to them. For instance, the villagers I interviewed can only receive a pension of 100 RMB (10 Pounds) per month after they retire, which perpetuates the traditional gender notion of 'bringing up sons to support parents in their old age' (*yang'er fanglao*) since daughters are commonly married into other patrilocal families. Not to mention that the accessibility to alternative discourses of heteronormativity, such as gender theory and the BL genre, is a classed as well as gendered phenomenon. As Lin (2012: 92) reflects on the deeply entrenched structure of patriarchy in rural China, the moral legacy of being man of the house 'is part of our culturally

formed unconsciousness that directs our daily actions before we have sufficient capital for pursuing our reflexive consciousness.'

Similarly, in contrast to male protagonists in the BL genre who lead an economically carefree life, straight men of lower class backgrounds have to strive for the male authority that both entitles and imprisons them within the patriarchal gender order. In Maomao's story above (see section 7.3.3), the man appears particularly annoying as he directly speaks of men's gender obligations without softening his entitled tone on meeting these obligations. This runs against the ideal scenario fantasised by 'consumerist feminism' where men both provide women with economic support and appear as a tender care-giver instead of boasting about their economic power. The emergence of consumerist feminism in urban China is comparable to bourgeois liberal feminism in the West, as they both downplay structural factors and displace them with a rhetoric of personal freedom and choice in gender relations and sexuality. But a straight man who strains every nerve to afford a house may have little choice but to appear as calculating or 'low EQ'. A 'phoenix man' may have little choice but to appear 'blindly filial' to his parents if their pension is even lower than 100 RMB per month and if they have taken pains to offer him a higher education.

From accusatory namings of 'straight-men cancer' and 'phoenix men' to decontextualised mini-narratives such as 'blind filial duty' and 'treating women as a tool of reproduction', all these online terms and expressions constitute a nexus of 'consumerist-feminist' vocabulary which reduces the entanglement of class, gender and sexuality to certain social groups of men's apparent attributes and notions so they can be compared and judged in a manner of market choice. The key word 'EQ' mentioned by a number of white-collar respondents resonates with the *suzhi* logic prevailing in post-socialist China that puts down structural inequalities to individuals' manifest lack or plenitude of certain qualities, indicating its application to the realm of gender and intimacy.

Nonetheless, as shown by Dolley's own reflection on her prejudice, the illocutionary force of the nexus of 'consumerist feminism' is not stable, but open for constant revisiting.

If terms such as 'straight-men cancer' and 'phoenix men' signify male figures that 'lack EQ', then 'warm men', as we have seen from some white-collar men's elaborations above, symbolises a type of 'high-EQ' masculinity with a caring persona. White-collar women, nonetheless, construct the most complex image of 'warm men' among the four social groups, which indicates their multiple ambivalences on subjectifying this emerging ideology of consumerist feminism among urban youth.

7.4.2 Ambivalences and inner tensions: subjectifying consumerist feminism

The ideology of consumerist feminism, while apparently underlining women's 'superiority' in private domains and romantic relationships, in effect constantly invites female subjects to recognise their interrelated duties of getting married and remaining physically attractive. A number of white-collar women emphasise their sense of autonomy and everyday struggle against male chauvinism; but at the same time, they also imply anxiety over, or at least awareness of, their singleton status. A notable contrast arises from white-collar and new-worker respondents' spontaneous response when seeing the two terms 'leftover women' and 'leftover men' which I juxtapose together in the term list. 'There are only "leftover men", no "leftover women"' is a common sentence blurted out by many new workers, particularly men. On the contrary, for white-collar respondents, women are much more likely to be called 'leftover' than men.

As I pointed out above, against the backdrop of a disproportionate sex ratio in contemporary China, those white-collar men I interviewed, with their relatively high level of education and income, are both materially and culturally entitled to keep calm about their bachelor status, as opposed to young rural migrant men who, with less material and cultural capital, generally struggle with their gender

obligations to get married and to continue patrilineage. White-collar women, meanwhile, become 'leftover' not because they are unqualified for the marriage market but because they are, as it were, 'overqualified', with their comparable level of education and income to urban young men. Yet, they are culturally, institutionally, and economically guided to a liminal position (cf. Croll, 1995) between an independent subject and an object that can be 'left over'. This sense of liminality appears particularly clear in the following excerpt from my in-depth interview with Ran Ting, a young woman who works in Beijing as a financial analyst and earns around 10,000 RMB per month when talking about her struggle to find the perfect match:

Excerpt 11

R: I crazily went through more than a dozen blind dates last year; none of them made me feel good. Some men were not active at all, while the others didn't have good conditions, which I couldn't accept.
I: how bad were their conditions?
R: I cannot accept a man whose economic level is similar to mine…Like other girls, I wish to find someone I can *admire* so that when mentioning him to others, I feel glorified. In fact, women are beings with a bad mindset. (One) hopes her husband to do more housework, but not to spend all the time doing housework.
I: Sorry for interrupting you, where did you get this kind of impression?
R: Maybe from TV. I think society adopts different criteria of men's and women's excellence. Perhaps a woman who can reach my level of education and income can already be counted as excellent; but for men, these are not enough. Having said this, I feel I am especially traditional (as I) think a family will be more stable if the man's *economic position* is higher. That's why I aspire to move upward in my career. In that way, perhaps I can meet more excellent men, though I know the chances are small. Those men who are really excellent are also quite demanding…   (Ran Ting.1/white-collar woman; my emphasis)

Aged 24 when I interviewed her, Ran Ting had had more than 10 blind dates in the previous year in order to find her Mr. Right before turning 25. According to her, women start to lose their advantage in the marriage market after 25; they become 'leftover' after 30. This kind of 'common sense' is mentioned by a

number of white-collar respondents, both men and women (see also Wong, 2016).

Exemplifying the entanglement of emotional and material concerns in young urban women's understanding of marriage and gender relations, multiple ambivalences and inner tensions arise from Ran Ting's elaborations of her continuous setbacks in blind dating. First, she struggles between two types of men who either economically meet her expectation but emotionally do not, or who are emotionally involved enough but not economically qualified. Corresponding to this tension, her expectation for men's role in the domestic realm is also ambivalent—she wishes her future husband to do some housework but not too much. Among white-collar respondents, a common way of constructing the 'warm-men' figure so as to reject it is by emphasising a warm man's 'over-caring' personality or 'too much commitment' to the private realm which impairs his masculinity. Interestingly, this sort of construction is similar to that of another 'leftover' social group—new-worker men (see section 7.2.3). In Ran Ting's quotation above, a third aspect of ambivalence lies between her career capabilities on the one hand, and her aspirational attachment to an even more capable man whom she can 'admire' and feel 'glorified'. This then leads to a fourth dimension of ambivalence—Ran Ting's *mere emphasis* on her ideal partner's higher 'economic position' in a romantic relationship as if a woman can be both financially dependent and emotionally superior when meeting a perfect man. Such self-perception as an objectified subject, or to be more precise, as a subject to be 'rightfully objectified', is reflected in Ran Ting's association of her own career development with an attempt to meet her right man. But as reluctantly realised by Ran Ting herself in the end, the chances of living up to the fantasy of consumerist feminism are small, for such a perfect type of man—even if he really exists—can be demanding in choosing his partner as well.

Few white-collar women I interviewed illustrate such a manifest 'misrecognition' of consumerist feminism and seriously articulated pain in subjectifying it as Ran Ting does. However, many of them, albeit sometimes in a joking tone, share the three inter-related assumptions that Ran Ting brings up: (1) admiring excellent men is part of feminine 'nature'; (2) society adopts different criteria for men's and women's excellence; (3) a family will be more stable if the husband earns more than the wife. As indicated by Ran Ting's response, these deeply-entrenched gender notions as well as the ideology of consumerist feminism are perpetuated by both 'old' and 'new' media; and they should be mapped onto the intersection of symbolic order and socio-economic settings in contemporary China.

As I mentioned in chapters 3 and 5, while urban young women have been empowered by the birth control policy, their autonomy is constantly being questioned and re-instated into a patriarchal symbolic order characteristic of gender essentialism. At the same time, the CPC government has largely retreated from providing economic means to improve gender equality in work and employment. Zuo Jiping (2016) attributes Chinese urban women's declining employment rate in the first decade of the new century and growing domestic-role orientation to 'labour denigration' and work-family conflict. She argues that in post-Mao China, the party-state's 'repeal of its welfare services and commitment to social justice and family well-being', together with the antagonism between the material interests of the market and the caring functions of the family 'have generated, among working women, alienation from their workplace on one hand, and mounting role conflict on the other' (Zuo, 2016: 6). Zuo hence insists that many young urban women's retreat to the domestic domain not only signifies the persistence of traditional cultural ideals, but also their utilisation of cultural resources to 'resist labour denigration and help alleviate work-family conflict' (ibid: 161).

While I disagree with Zuo's wording, I share her 'structural approach' to contextualising women's decisions about work and family roles in accordance with 'a host of marital, familial, workplace, and market considerations' (ibid: 161). Many white-collar women I interviewed complain about their stressful and dull life of work, perceiving it as even more unbearable if a working woman is single, 'without a man's arms to lean on'. They describe their working life and autonomy as 'having no alternative' (*pobudeyi*). Jijie, a market practitioner who spends more than three hours every day commuting in Shanghai's packed underground fantasises that her husband could one day earn a high enough salary to enable her to stay at home and pursue her interests. Having said that, she nonetheless disavows this kind of fantasy as 'traditional' because it runs against the rhetoric of gender equality and women's autonomy that she has been familiarised with. It is again in this sense of simultaneous recognition and disavowal, this sort of oscillation between meaningless fantasy and serious consideration that Chinese Internet discourse comes into play. The next section discusses the role of Chinese Internet discourse in sustaining the masquerade of consumerist feminism by addressing another two online buzzwords—'masculine women' and 'domineering CEO'.

7.4.3 Ambivalent 'masculine women', perfect 'domineering CEO'

Despite her concern with the literal meaning of the term 'spendthrift chicks', Jijie feels that it is OK to use in jokes, particularly 'for showing off love' and for discursively 'motivating' her husband to be more career-driven, though she acknowledges its 'uselessness'. In reality, Jijie earns more than her husband, but she finds it enjoyable to be discursively pampered—that she is 'spendthrift' with her husband's money in the realm of fantasy. Similarly, Lin, from focus group 6, jests that she appreciates her husband (who is also in the focus group) being a 'warm man' most of the time, but: 'I wish he would be macho when paying the bills'. In all these cases, a kind of 'spendthrift' femininity is discursively and

playfully performed, which serves both to highlight a kind of intimacy defined in material terms, and to cathect the fantasy of those young women who in real life 'have no alternative' but to be economically capable. On the other side of the coin, numerous white-collar women report using the buzzword 'masculine women' in a performative and 'self-mocking' manner which indicates their liminality between identifying with and disavowing women's autonomy.

As I pointed out in chapter 5, the connotations of 'masculine women' are built on two planes of meaning—one relating to physical appearance, the other to women's autonomy. Discursively speaking, a masculine-woman figure's appearance is exaggeratedly 'masculinised' so that her autonomy is to be mimicked (see section 5.4.2). Notably, male respondents—both new-worker and white-collar—tend to underline the physical aspect of 'masculine women' and thus denigrate this type of femininity, while new-worker women highlight the term's symbolisation of women's independence, which resonates with their emphasised earning power (see section 7.2.1). White-collar women show a simultaneous recognition of both dimensions. For example, in a mixed-gender focus group formed of five white-collar workers in the city of Fuyang, the female participant Xinming immediately denies that she is a 'masculine woman' when a man Dongyuan calls her one. But after Dongyuan clarifies that he is referring to Xinming's independence and autonomy, she accepts the term, which is followed by Dongyuan's teasing response: 'if you were not here, I would not explain the term in the other way.' As put it by Xinming later: 'I identify with "masculine women" if it means an independent mental status. But I feel this term is more often applied to those women who don't care about their physical appearance.' (Focus group 8.1/white-collar)

In chapter 6, I mentioned white-collar respondents' usage of *diaosi* that oscillates between serious judging towards others and benign, playful self-deprecation. The wordplay of 'masculine women' operates in a similar but more gendered

manner. Among white-collar women, it tends to connote a kind of judgment of women's physical appearance when being named, while symbolising one's autonomy in terms of self-naming. This again resonates with the kind of 'objectified subject' that the ideology of consumerist feminism invites women to identify themselves with. In order to be 'empowered' in the private domain and legitimated in terms of their 'spendthrift' femininity, young urban Chinese women cannot forget about their physical appearance. Their sense of autonomy is thus constantly emphasised and confined.

The multiple tensions immanent in the ideology of consumerist feminism are negotiated and symbolically solved (cf. Gledhill, 1991) by the figure of 'domineering CEO' (*badao zongcai*) which has appeared repeatedly in Chinese idol dramas. Among my respondents, white-collar women discuss it most eloquently and enthusiastically. According to their constructions, a 'domineering CEO' is both handsome and wealthy, which 'qualifies' him to adopt a domineering demeanour towards the female character. Furthermore, he is so possessive that he will be jealous if she is intimate with other men. The figure of 'domineering CEO' thus perfectly matches the fantasy of consumerist feminism as the female character is 'rightfully objectified' by an economically capable and emotionally active man; not to mention his handsome appearance. In addition, a 'domineering CEO' is only devoted to one woman, which meets women's *de facto* over-investment to men concealed by the masquerade of consumerist feminism. For many white-collar women, 'warm men' appear to be not only mediocre but also suspiciously 'warm to everyone'.

Nonetheless, most white-collar women acknowledge that online terms connoting ideal masculinities are only suitable for 'fantasising' (*yiyin*) while in real life there exist more 'warm men' and 'economical and practical men' than 'domineering CEOs' and 'tall-rich-handsome'. They emphasise a clear boundary between their mode of entertainment—consuming and fantasising about perfect

manhood—and their practical expectation for men given their own ordinary conditions. Wong (2016) also notes that while the majority of her female respondents in Nanchong express their aspiration to marry men who are both financially capable and emotionally caring, they are in fact less insistent on this standard in real life, giving priority to men's sense of responsibility towards the family and their relationship. In other words, 'money is more important for women *on a* discursive level' (Wong, 2016: 93).

In her study of young audiences' interpretations of Bollywood films, Banaji (2006) observes both a common belief in 'third-person effects' and the salient incoherence of the 'ideological' positions that her South Asian respondents deploy around gender issues. The young white-collar Chinese women I interviewed also frequently differentiated themselves from others to underline their critical stance on the prevalence of the 'domineering CEO' in TV or online series, and thus their autonomy. At the same time, they express pleasure in viewing or at least talking about this kind of fantasy. Discussing the term 'national husband', the focus group formed by six white-collar women, on the one hand, reach a consensus that none of them really wants to marry Wang Sicong because he is not handsome; on the other hand, none of them denies him the title either, because of his wealth. One of the participants, Julie, who works in the car division of a consultancy company, describes at length her female colleagues' routine of checking whether Wang Sicong has purchased new cars from their database every time he is reported to have changed a girlfriend. Fantasising and gossiping about rich-and-handsome manhood has arguably constituted a prominent gender performance among young urban women in contemporary China.

For scholars such as Judith Butler, this kind of playful performance, on being routinely embodied, is integrated into one's identity and thus female subjectivity. Here, identity is not conceived as fixed and unified, but 'multiple, ambivalent,

contradictory, always in process of construction, but rarely dispensable' (Gledhill, 1991: xviii). In her essay on 'women reading men' of popular fiction and melodramas, Christine Gledhill (1995: 75-76) insists that 'fantasy has to be understood as a process through which public and private, social and psychic, the real and the fantasised intersect and interact in a series of "secondary elaborations" woven out of source material derived from material and psychical experience.' The fantasy of 'domineering CEO' and consumerist feminism in general draw on and in turn perpetuate both the material basis in contemporary China where men overall dominate women with their economic power and the correspondingly widespread belief that women 'by nature' admire prestigious men, thus aspiring to become a 'rightfully objectified' subject.

There exists another discursive ritual related to gender and sexuality in the *habitus* of Chinese Internet discourse—calling each other 'homo friends' (*jiyou*). Before concluding the chapter, I briefly discuss the social implications of this kind of 'queer wordplay'.

7.5 'Queer Wordplay'

It should first be noticed that only some *white-collar* respondents report their frequent wordplay of calling each other 'homo friends' in daily life. The manifest absence of this practice among the new-worker respondents indicates the limited scale of 'queer wordplay' and the intersectionality of class, urban-rural duality, and sexual politics in China. As illustrated in chapter 5, the term 'homo friends' signifies more a kind of 'homosociality' (Sedgwick, 1985), connoting male-male intimacy in a performative and playful manner rather than referring to serious homosexual relationship. The conventional meaning of 'homo friends' is picked up by those heterosexual respondents who report using this term to name and joke about a close friendship, particularly a kind of brotherhood. For them, the term 'homo friends' is a more trendy and playful synonym than other slang such as *hao gemen* (good brother) or *guimi* (besties). The following quotes

come from my interview with Qianbao, a white-collar woman who recalls her husband's changing attitude towards this term:

> Q: My husband used to be a very 'straight' man. He was very conservative and not sympathetic to homosexuality at all. I read lots of gender and queer theories when I was a master's student; and I frequently talked with him about this stuff. Also, I often tease him when he hangs out with his 'good brothers', saying something like: you are going with your 'homo friends' again and abandoning your wife! At first, he felt quite mad hearing 'homo friends'. But gradually he changed and has started to accept this term. He once even joked to his friend's wife: I'm going to take your husband away from you.
> I: So your husband is now more sympathetic to homosexuals?
> Q: No, he still rejects homosexuals. They just use this term for joking. We all know they are not gay. (Qianbao.1/white-collar)

The excerpt first illustrates two points: (1) white-collar women tend to be more sympathetic to homosexuality than men; (2) the term 'straight men' refers to a kind of traditional and macho masculinity in Chinese Internet discourse. It also shows the performativity of 'homo-friend' wordplay in the sense that its utterers perform a kind of routine ritual surrounding this term while they all know this is *not* serious. Homosexuality is recognised in these heterosexual respondents' wordplay only to be disavowed. Although the term 'homo friends' may familiarise people with the notion of homosexuality, this familiarisation is yet also mystifying. Qianbao's husband may have become more used to the existence of homosexuals via the wordplay of 'homo friends', but he still rejects them just like many white-collar respondents' continuous neglect of rural migrants despite their habitual and collective self-mockery via online terms such as 'moving bricks' and 'PPT peasant workers'. In fact, the boundary between homosexuality and heterosexuality can be reinforced by the 'homo-friend' wordplay. Samantha, an English teacher, recalls that she feels quite uncertain if it's proper to use the term 'homo friends' with her gay colleagues and friends. The popularity of 'homo friends' among white-collar workers thus gives no sign of challenging the predominant heteronormativity in China so that the legitimacy

of non-heterosexual relationships could be acknowledged publicly. This point is well framed by Billy, editor on the gender column of an alternative media:

> The term 'homo friends' still disavows homosexuals' intimate citizenship. That is: Today in the public space, I can't say this is my boyfriend publicly. I can say he's my 'homo friend', but it connotes no sexual relationship. The term does not improve the unspeakability of homosexual intimacy in the public space. (Billy.1/editor of an alternative media outlet)

The five gay men and one lesbian woman I interviewed all report more or less using the term 'homo friends', though they are fully aware of its homosocial and heteronormative connotations. Some of them are critical of the term, regarding it as mainstream culture's appropriation of homosexual elements 'for amusement' integrated with commercial co-optation (Daniel.2/HR). My gay and lesbian respondents' usage of 'homo friends' largely parallels that of heterosexual respondents. That is referring to non-sexual intimacy: such as a homosexual's friendship with a heterosexual, or a kind of 'sisterhood' or 'brotherhood' between two homosexuals who both identify themselves as 'female' or 'male'. The term 'homo friends' can thus contribute to reinforcing the kind of heterosexual model among LGBTQ people in China. This resonates with the BL (boys love) genre's representation of homosexuality as a dichotomous relationship between a 'top' man and a 'bottom' man (Mclelland, 2003; Yang & Xu, 2015), known in China as *gong* (1) and *shou* (0).

Gay men's self-identification can also be affected by the connotations of 'straight-men cancer'. The term 'straight men' not only emphasises heterosexual men's macho behaviour and mind-set, but also their lack of taste in consumption. Following this logic, gay men are assumed to be savvy in fashion and consumption. Numerous white-collar women I interviewed consider consumer tastes and meticulous care of one's appearance as the key indicators of gay men. Bin, a design manager in Shanghai, claims that 'now gay men take on the responsibility to show men's "appearance value" and consumer tastes' (Bin.1/design manager). While this imposed expectation appears natural and

enjoyable for a middle-class man like Bin, it can be an alienating burden for working-class gay men. This point is to be further addressed by future research.

7.6 Conclusion

By comparing different social group members' distinct understandings and uses of online terms such as 'warm men', I illustrated how gender and sexual politics are implicated in the structures of class and the urban/rural duality in contemporary China. Migrant work and waged labour enable female new workers to partially contest the patriarchal gender order in rural China, which is reflected in their aspirations for men to share household duties and to address their emotional needs. Their emphasised earning power and idealisation of 'warm men' can be understood as both symbolising and contributing to their everyday struggles against the entrenched patriarchy in rural China. However, the great majority of male new workers I interviewed express a distaste for the idea of 'warm men', emphasising their obligation to be the primary breadwinner within a family. I argued that in contemporary China the intersection of patriarchal capitalism and patriarchal kinship imprisons as much as it entitles male new workers because their low level of income cannot match and instantiate their symbolically entitled privilege and gender expectations. Under the disproportionate sex ratio, 'the male marriage squeeze takes its toll especially on men who come from lower economic class backgrounds' (Wong, 2016: 37). Chinese Internet discourse mimics and fantasises about wealth-based masculinities while exaggerating and mystifying a type of 'spendthrift' femininity. This symbolic order can exacerbate the anxiety of lower-class men and lead to their 'self-victimisation' that denigrates the integrity of women and exaggerates 'the efficacy of money' (Wong, 2016).

White-collar men's overall appreciation of the 'warm men' type and white-collar women's complex construction of the buzzword illustrate their respective subjectification of the ideology of consumerist feminism, which simultaneously

celebrates and confines women's autonomy to the private realm of the body, sexual desire and consumption. Chinese Internet discourse, with its generally playful form and mimicking tone, both draws on and plays an important role in sustaining the tensions and ambivalences immanent to this ideology.

Through presenting white-collar women's ambiguous identification with the buzzword 'masculine women' and their fantasy of the 'domineering CEO', I illustrated how white-collar women subjectify the ideology of consumerist feminism. They struggle with a kind of liminal positionality between autonomy and dependence, career and physical attractiveness, male chauvinism and their own anxiety over marriage. Inconsistently, they yearn for both autonomy and dependence but also have to negotiate them both in accordance with their lived experiences. Correspondingly, most white-collar men cannot forego their prerogative in sexual relationship and only partially acknowledge women's economic independence. Underpinned by the ideology of consumerist feminism, two common sense logics appear to be shared by most white-collar respondents: (1) a family is most stable if the husband earns slightly more than the wife; (2) admiring excellent men is part of feminine 'nature'.

The chapter also illustrated the urban bourgeois orientation of consumerist feminism. The buzzword 'straight-men cancer', which forms part of urban young women's important feminist vocabulary, has little resonance for new-worker respondents. While undoubtedly challenging male chauvinism and misogyny, the urban 'progressive' stance of consumerist feminism tends to reduce the entanglement of class, gender and sexuality to certain social groups of men's apparent attributes and gender notions. This point is exemplified by many white-collar women's collective consumption and mockery of 'phoenix men'. Last but not least, I briefly discussed the social implications of the 'queer wordplay' in Chinese Internet discourse—the 'rotten girls' culture and the popular term 'homo friends'. The fact that both of them are only reported by

white-collar respondents already suggests the intersection of class stratification, rural/urban duality and sexual politics in contemporary China. While the 'rotten-girl' culture symbolises some urban young women's support of LGBTQ minorities, the BL (boys love) genre tends to construct homosexual relationships in a dichotomous and heterosexual manner. Comparable to white-collar respondents' collective self-deprecation as manual labourers, the wordplay of 'homo friends' is playfully performed by many heterosexual white-collar respondents to joke about male-male intimacy. This performance builds on the simultaneous recognition and disavowal of homosexual intimacy, contributing to further demarcating the boundary between homosociality and homosexuality in contemporary China.

CHAPTER 8: GROUP AGENCY AND THE INSTITUTIONAL CO-OPTION OF CHINESE INTERNET DISCOURSE

In the previous two chapters, I have already shed some light on forms of agency revealed by different social group members' distinct understanding of online terms connoting class and gender meanings. As I emphasised in chapter 2, while agency is expressed through individual actions, personal agency is 'laden with collectively produced differences of power' (Sewell, 1992: 21) and conditions of living. In this chapter, I further address group agency in relation to class and gender by grounding my respondents' various forms of engagement with (including disengagement from) Chinese Internet discourse in specific temporal-relational contexts (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998), as well as taking into account the kinds of authority upon which their agentic actions rely. Following the work of Banaji (2017), I will summarise a spectrum of discursive practices that range from defiant rejection, indifference, apparent conformity, to innovative reformulation with regard to the narratives, social norms and *doxic* order signified by Chinese Internet discourse. I will also touch upon the conventions and regulations reported by media practitioners in terms of corporations' and party-media's respective co-option of and reinscription of Chinese Internet discourse. With substantial economic and symbolic resources, the two collective organisations can greatly expand, refract or constrain individuals' exercise of agency and shape the changing connotations of online terms.

On the metaphorical ladder of power and resources in contemporary China, rural peasants and migrant workers – to whom I have been referring as 'new workers' in the thesis – generally occupy the lower rungs, while rural women tend to be further subordinated. Significantly, it is female migrant workers who enunciate the strongest sense of rejection and disengagement from the prevailing ideology

of patriarchal capitalism and its emerging by-product among urban youth—consumerist feminism. The chapter starts by addressing this point.

8.1 New Workers' Agency

8.1.1 Rural migrant women's disengagement from rich masculinity and 'spendthrift' femininity

When discussing rural migrant women's understanding of 'warm men' in chapter 7, I mentioned their emphasis on earning power and yearnings for caring and home-oriented masculinity in familial relationships. This duality can be related to the intersecting social structures of the market economy and patriarchal kinship within which their everyday life is situated. While female new workers gain certain ground to negotiate their household duties via migrant labour, their primary commitments remain tied to the domestic domain, with their waged labour being exploited by capital and downplayed within family. Meanwhile, rural migrant men who take pains to live up to their economic obligations and to maintain their gender privilege mostly disparage women's emotional needs and their aspirations for shared domestic duties. These backdrops contextualise most female new workers' rather critical stance towards wealth-based masculinities connoted by a series of online buzzwords.

Contrary to white-collar women, the female new workers I interviewed show little interest in discussing the online term 'domineering CEO'. In the focus group formed by five female factory workers in Guangzhou, none of the participants identify with it because they hope to work for a boss 'who is reasonable rather than domineering'. As I pointed out in chapter 6, new-worker respondents tend to interpret online terms literally, which is distinct from many white-collar respondents' performative engagement with Internet discourse. For many white-collar women, the term 'domineering CEO' refers not to a corporeal 'CEO' who is really 'domineering' but rather connotes a type of economically capable and emotionally active masculinity about which the ideology of consumerist

feminism invites young women to fantasise. Nonetheless, many rural migrant women I interviewed have experienced working for a 'domineering CEO' in a real sense—low wage, scant welfare and military-style management. They thus distance themselves from this wordplay, which is similar to many new workers' disengagement from the buzzword *diaosi* in that, for them, being poor is not something for self-deprecation but their real-life situation (see section 6.5.1). As mentioned by Guangguang, who worked in an electronic factory hiring more than 2000 workers in Guangzhou, 'I have never seen the CEO of our factory. Why would I imagine myself dating one?' (Guangguang.1/focus group 1).

Rural migrant women's general disengagement from wealthy masculinity is also instantiated by their indifference to the term 'national husband'. While respondents from the other three social groups discuss it at length, none of the rural migrant women I interviewed bother to recollect to whom 'national husband' refers, although they report having heard of the term 'from somewhere'. In the focus group of Shanghai restaurant workers, the three female participants challenge the two young men's praise of Wang Sicong for his wealth and business acumen. The three women underline that Wang is a typical example of 'competing on father' and being 'way more advanced (economically) than others at the starting point of life'.

Moreover, most female new workers I interviewed also distance themselves from performing 'spendthrift' femininity. They mention that men are actually more 'spendthrift', being engaged in gambling, which remains a prominent activity in many rural men's spare time (cf. Du, 2017; Liang, 2016). Again, their lived experiences contradict the mini-narrative signified by the buzzword 'spendthrift chicks' with its bourgeois familial ideal. Hongmei, a former factory worker in Guangzhou, rejects with biting sarcasm the common sense notion that a family is most stable if the husband earns more than the wife: 'If a husband just earned 10 RMB per month, should a woman just earn 9.9 RMB so that the family

can be stable? Can they survive in that way?' While a number of white-collar women consider the online saying 'without women being spendthrift, men won't be motivated to make money[59]' to be 'feminist', and playfully agree with its logic, Hongmei and Jiajun, another participant in focus group 1, co-construct the most serious and articulated critique of the 'spendthrift' wordplay and indeed of the whole ideology of consumerist feminism among my respondents. They argue that this is a false claim because nowadays not only women but even men have difficulty making enough money: 'it is not up to men in terms of how much they can earn; this is a societal issue. His salary is just that much, so you expect him to sell his kidney so that you can afford to be spendthrift?' (focus group 1.3/new workers).

Jiajun and Hongmei had both joined a labour NGO in Guangzhou and had studied gender theories when I interviewed them. Their critical sense and eloquence are not necessarily representative of all female new workers. Nonetheless, migrant women's experienced poverty and everyday struggle against the 'triple oppression' along lines of class, gender and the rural-urban divide (Pun, 2005) make them more attentive to the inner tensions of patriarchal capitalism and consumerist feminism. Their interpretation of online wordplay in accordance with their lived experiences tends to deconstruct the urban middle-class orientation of these ideologies which are routinely mystified by Chinese Internet discourse. To put it in a slightly crude manner, female new workers have been struggling with both domineering male capitalists and rural men who aspire to become rich and domineering. Although I did not discuss the issue of sexual harassment with female new workers, senior colleagues' and employers' common molestation towards young female workers[60] can be another reason

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[59] In Chinese: 女人不败家，怎样促进男人赚钱的积极性

[60] A labour NGO based in Shenzhen issued a survey report on female workers' subjection to sexual harassment in 2013. See the report in Chinese via https://pan.baidu.com/s/1GT3saTV0mp4I1NqiY4sQEw?errno=0&errmsg=Auth%20Login%20Sucess&&bduss=&ssnerror=0&traceid=#list/path=%2F (last access: 23/08/2018).

for their contempt for rich men. The diffuse and insidious discursive 'invitation' (Banaji, 2006) of terms such as 'national husband', 'tall-rich-handsome' and 'spendthrift chicks' fails with these young women as their dangerous fetishism for everyday life becomes clear.

Meanwhile, a number of male new workers I interviewed appear to acknowledge the futility of individual striving and to have become disillusioned with the possibility of their own economic success. These workers mostly choose to work close to their *hukou* (household-registered) villages. The next section addresses their agency in relation to online wordplay.

8.1.2 Local new workers' indifference to norms and *doxa* signified by Internet discourse

In Fuyang, a county-level city in Anhui Province, I met a group of male broadband installers who had all chosen to work close to their hometown after years of migrant work in big cities. Earning between 2000 and 3000 RMB per month and having no official weekends or holidays, they nonetheless appear to be rather free-spirited. They watched a basketball game, played cellphone games and smoked continuously during my observations at their office. They kept postponing their assigned tasks, saying to their clients that they were very busy while in fact they drank bottles of beer at lunchtime. When I asked whether the aspiration of 'becoming a CEO, marrying a white-rich-beautiful (woman) and reaching the peak of career' appealed to them, this group of local new workers showed manifest indifference and replied in a scathing tone:

> B: Yes, I know this saying. But I don't think this is practical. It's just a daydream, suitable for thinking about at night so as to fall asleep.
> I: what are your practical dreams then?
> Z: I don't have any specific thoughts. Just spending a day as a day.
>
> (Focus group 5.1/new workers)

In their previous migrant work, these men had done manual labour in various settings ranging from restaurants, factory assembly lines to supermarkets. None

of these jobs offered them a decent income, stable welfare or career development. Now, disillusioned, they prefer to 'spend a day as a day' without a plan. They feel just as alienated by the current job of installing and maintaining broadband. But at least they can now work close to their homes and have more leeway to avoid being disciplined. The middle-class aspirations signified by Internet discourse hardly appeal to them as they cannot relate this type of empty rhetoric of economic success to their bleak conditions. And they are not alone.

Scholars and journalists have noticed that young migrant workers in China are becoming increasingly disillusioned (e.g. Liang, 2016; Yang, 2017). The most extreme example perhaps comes from Sanhe (三和), a district in the city of Shenzhen where hundreds of thousands of young rural men look for one-off jobs, spend their wages in playing games at web cafés until they are out of money and then seek jobs once again. Having no money, no girlfriend, no outlook for the future, they seem to embody perfectly the buzzword *diaosi*. But instead of identifying with this buzzword which, as we have seen from chapters 5 and 6, is oriented towards white-collar workers, these young migrant workers call themselves *gua bi* (挂逼), a scatological term that integrates a gaming jargon (Yang Z., 2017).

Apart from indifference to the social norms of success, the local new workers I interviewed also distance themselves from the *doxic* order signified by Chinese Internet discourse. They refuse to fantasise about befriending the 'vulgar rich' from a *diaosi* position. This kind of disengagement mainly stems from the relatively low cost of living in small cities and rural villages where a sense of lack tends to be experienced in less overt ways compared to top-tier cities. As Xiubin, one of the broadband installers, puts it: 'Here in Fuyang, few people earn more than 5000 RMB per month. If you earn more than 8000, you can probably be considered the "vulgar rich". But in cities like Shanghai, you can hardly survive with 8000 RMB. The income gap is much bigger there.' (Xiubin.1/focus group 5)

Chinese Internet discourse, with its urban middle-class orientation, performativity of comparison and mimicry, may have little resonance for those who work and live in rural or 'peri-urban' parts of China.

This point is well illustrated by Wangbing, a male farmer (born in 1982) in a village of Shandong Province. Through the newsfeed of his QQ account, TV series and news, he reports having encountered online buzzwords such as 'tall-rich-handsome', 'vulgar rich' and *diaosi*. But he has no interest in checking what they mean, let alone using them. He considers them as 'not down-to-earth', meaningless to use with villagers who are mostly children or the elderly (Wangbing.2/farmer). Villagers' talk constitutes a linguistic field where Chinese Internet discourse is of little value. A question that arises from this is: in new workers' linguistic fields, are there terms or stereotypes that constitute equivalents of these online buzzwords? The next section briefly addresses this question.

8.1.3 Local dialects and Internet discourse

Apart from its estrangement from many new workers' lived experiences, another factor that limits the popularity of Internet discourse within this social group is their habitual use of local dialects rather than Mandarin in everyday life. If Chinese Internet discourse can be viewed as a type of linguistic *habitus*, then this *habitus* presupposes one's familiarity with Mandarin. As the unified official language in China, particularly amongst the Han ethnic group, Mandarin forms the basis of all written Chinese characters including online buzzwords. While the usage of Mandarin for speaking has become naturalised among urban younger generations mainly through school education, this is less the case with young rural grown-ups, particularly those who work in their home villages or migrant workers who share the same geographical origin and hang around together in a

workplace[61]. Some online terms are not easy to pronounce or refer to in local dialects. For instance, the group of garment workers from a village in Anhui Province reports that the phrase 'moving bricks', which is used by white-collar workers to joke about their cheap labour and tedious work, connotes 'playing Mahjong' in their local dialect.

Nonetheless, in local dialects there exist certain 'shorthand' stereotypes that are equivalent to online buzzwords. For example, when discussing their understanding of *shamate*, quite a number of young migrant workers and white-collar workers born in rural areas mention the slang term *xiao pizi* (小痞子) which can roughly be translated as 'little ruffians'. In the focus group formed of six restaurant workers, three participants from the same village in Anhui Province associate the term *diaosi* with an expression in their local dialect that has no formal characters in written Mandarin[62]. Nonetheless, these expressions from local dialects *do not* carry the same connotations as their counterparts in Chinese Internet discourse. The term *xiaopizi*, for instance, has no signification of rural/urban gap in tastes or discursive *othering* of young migrant workers as the term *shamate* does.

An intriguing example in this regard comes from my discussion with Chengfu, a farmer in a village in Shandong Province. After hearing my explanation of how urban white-collar workers compare their office work to 'moving bricks', Chengfu makes the following comment:

> Hehe, (the term 'moving bricks') degrades manual work, and also degrades the 'labouring people' (*laodong renmin*). We, the labouring people, just hope to see the income gap become smaller. No matter it is really moving bricks or doing office jobs, they are both labouring (*laodong*). They deserve to be well paid. The existing gap is too huge. The work of moving bricks should be done by someone, so too should office work. Perhaps those white-collar

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[61] In fact, this is a typical case as migrant workers frequently rely on their hometown fellows (*laoxiang*) to settle down and find jobs in new places.
[62] Local dialects include a small proportion of words or expressions which only have pronunciation but no formal way of writing, though some linguistic experts have made efforts to publish dictionaries of specific dialects and included esoteric characters to pin down this kind of pronunciation.

workers feel that they are not paid well. They won't feel so insecure if their income is higher. (Chengfu.1/new worker)

In Chengfu's articulation, 'labouring' and 'labouring people' are respectively equivalent to 'moving bricks' and *diaosi* in the meaning system of Chinese Internet discourse. Yet with distinct connotations and popularity, the two sets of terms epitomise the sharp contrast in terms of the perceived value of manual labour between the Mao and the post-Mao eras. As we have seen in chapter 3, the label 'labouring people' was a 'primary marker of class' in the Mao era (Lin, 2014: 29). It was used to signify the unification of workers and peasants, and to glorify the identity of manual workers. On the contrary, the value of manual labour now appears so low that the younger urban generations utilise 'moving bricks' as a metaphor for self-deprecation, with 'labouring people' being displaced by neologisms such as *diaosi*. Chengfu, in his 40s, is the only respondent who mentioned the socialist rhetoric of 'labouring people' when discussing the wordplay of 'moving bricks'. Interestingly, Chengfu is also the only one who relates the social groups of manual workers and office workers, or two types of 'new poor' (Wang, 2014), to each other in his aspiration for a fairer society. He replied to my questions in Mandarin with a heavy local accent. The term 'labouring people' emerges naturally from his response. But even if this kind of socialist rhetoric has penetrated local dialects, it has become semantically residual like the notion of class which is downplayed in the official and mainstream discourses of contemporary China.

While most new workers I interviewed express a sense of estrangement to Internet discourse, a group of service workers actively participate in online wordplay to gain a kind of cultural entitlement, a phenomenon to which the next section turns.

8.1.4 Cultural entitlement via acquisition of the *habitus* of Internet discourse

Pun (2005: 128) observes that for *dagongmei*, or young rural women who migrated to work in industrial south China, '[a] command of Cantonese…was a must for climbing the hierarchical ladder…because in Cantonese one could not only converse better with superiors but also be part of the same *habitus* and the same expressive style, and thus be more readily assimilated into managerial culture.' Pun conducted her ethnography at the end of the 1990s when the Internet was still at the stage of infancy in China. With the explosion of e-commerce and the government's active promotion of this industry, a command of internet discourse now seems to be a must if migrant service workers want to interact with their young urban clients in top-tier cities. Just as those *dagongmei* who attempted to learn Cantonese two decades ago, some young rural migrants working as hair-dressers and manicurists in Shanghai try to inculcate Internet discourse into their linguistic *habitus*.

Having added their WeChat accounts, I observe these service workers' attempts to utilise online terms and the playful form of online speech in their posts. Through WeChat, they not only maintain their relationships with customers who can book appointments via the platform but also actively advertise the beauty salons they work for. As with white-collar workers, the boundary between their work, social life and entertainment is blurred. A noticeable phenomenon worth studying further is the 'self-orientalism' (Yan and Santos, 2009) of these rural migrants' online wordplay, which feeds into urbanites' abjection of rural China. For instance, before the 2018 Spring Festival, I saw a senior hairdresser post a short video clip to his WeChat account and remind his clients to make appointments in time before he headed back to his home village (see figure 8.1). The video contains no background information except showing several peasants 'moving bricks' manually with the help of a donkey. This type of video is likely to capture some young urbanites' imagination as it both visualises the performative

wordplay of 'moving bricks' and allows them to consume the backwardness of rural China as spectacle. In fact, there exists an abundance of rural-themed memes and videos in Weibo, WeChat and video websites[63]. The production, circulation and reception of these types of media content require more academic attention.

今天还有没有 约5点的 举个手
让我们年前见最后一面

Figure 8.1: a screen shot of a senior hairdresser's WeChat advertisement

Service workers such as this senior hairdresser are innovative in terms of appropriating the theme of 'moving bricks' to connect with their clients and to achieve better advertising effects But their innotaive agency is meanwhile conformist as it conforms to the social order signified by Chinese Internet discourse. Among the new workers I interviewed, these senior service workers are economically the most successful; some of them have established their own business. Resonating with Bourdieu's (1994: 155) observation of 'the paradox of

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[63] Such as *Kuaishou* (快手) and Tik Tok or *Douyin* (抖音).

the dominated', and Banaji's (2017) term 'conformist agency', these rural migrants gain both cultural entitlement and economic benefit by submitting to the prevailing *doxa*, while 'resistance may be alienating'. Their inculcated *habitus* of Chinese Internet discourse, which is distinct from other new workers' overall disengagement, indicates that embracing online wordplay is premised on a variety of readiness in one's daily life with regard to Internet access, location, language use, people one interacts with, and the blurred boundary between online and offline lifestyles, etc. The variety of readiness is oriented towards, but not limited to, young white-collar workers and university students, as well illustrated by these service workers' active engagement with online wordplay. But what underpin and in turn become reinforced by the *habitus* of Chinese Internet discourse are urban middle-class lifestyle, aspirations and values.

Having addressed new workers' various forms of agency regarding online wordplay, I now turn to white-collar respondents' agency.

8.2 White-Collar Women's Rejection and Reformulation of Sexist Online Terms

In chapter 7, I illustrated young white-collar women's contestations of the gender order with their high level of education and strong purchasing power (see section 7.4.1). Unsurprisingly, many of them underline their distaste for sexist namings in Chinese Internet discourse, particularly the term 'black wood ear'. Emphasising women's autonomy with regard to the body and sex, they reject this 'vulgar' and 'low' expression. They argue that the term 'black wood ear' not only misrepresents the clitoris, but also shows men's chauvinistic speculation about women's sex life. Yet, the white-collar women I interviewed are more ambivalent about another sexist naming 'green-teach bitch'. Some of them, though expressing reservations about the wording 'bitch', partially identify with its narrative and adopt a kind of 'third-person' rhetoric. As put it by Samantha: 'while "black wood ear" is a highly visualised term, "green-tea bitch" refers to some women's personality and mode of behaviour. This type of women does

exist around us' (Samantha.2/English teacher). In chapter 5, I argued that the imagery of 'green-tea bitch' illustrates the ambivalent status of hyper-femininity in contemporary China where women struggle between two sets of values—feminine beauty and capability. This struggle is instantiated by a number of white-collar women's expressed ambivalence regarding the terms 'masculine women' (see section 7.4.3) and 'green-tea bitch'. On the one hand, these white-collar women try to be 'masculine' in terms of capability but not physical experience. On the other hand, they frown upon those hyper-feminine women who capitalise on their femininity, highlighting their own self-sufficiency.

Meanwhile, several white-collar women reformulate the conventional meaning of 'green-tea bitch' by ascribing a kind of 'girl power' to the term. As said by Chuchu, 'I don't think ordinary people can be called "green-tea bitch". For me, she has to be pretty and capable, somewhat shining and "bitchy".' (Chuchu.3/focus group 7) Here, Chuchu turns the conventionally derogatory word 'bitch' into a somewhat commendatory term which signifies a type of capable and beautiful femininity. These 'shining' girls appear to run out of men's control, so much so that they become stigmatised. Another way of reformulation is getting rid of the character 'bitch' and just appropriating the expression 'green-tea' to describe a dressing style (Hongju.2/media strategist).

White-collar women's various forms of agency regarding the sexist nomenclature in online wordplay again exemplify the emergence of consumerist feminism among the urban youth. These respondents highlight women's autonomy with the body as well as the imagery of a young and capable woman empowered by her individual attributes and consumption. They reject the stance of men's self-victimisation in Chinese Internet discourse which denigrates the integrity of women, describing this stance as 'straight-men cancer'.

White-collar women's collective usage of 'straight-men cancer' has apparently got on many white-collar men's nerves. They react to this accusatory term and to the overall rise of consumerist feminism in different ways, to which I now turn.

8.3 White-Collar Men: 'nowadays, men are the vulnerable group.'

As I demonstrated in chapter 7, the ideology of consumerist feminism is a kind of invitation to people to perceive women as 'an objectified subject' whose emotional and material needs are privileged but whose economic status is ambivalent, if not dependent on men. When discussing the buzzword 'straight-men cancer', white-collar men express their opinions on the rise of feminism in contemporary China. Worryingly, the ideology of consumerist feminism has further confused men's understandings of feminism, making them quickly jump to further self-pity.

This point is illustrated by the accounts of Shizhi, a young film maker who considers himself as a 'masculinist' (*nanquan zhuyizhe*). For him, feminists are those women who 'want to take advantage of both sides' as they call for women to be treated equally while at the same time expecting men to support them economically. He claims that 'nowadays men are the vulnerable group' because 'society is more tolerant towards women than men'. Numerous white-collar men share this view and point to 'evidence' such as men's obligation to make money and to purchase real-estate, and society's hostility against sissy men instead of tomboy women.

Although disingenuous, these examples illustrate how patriarchy limits men's practices by essentialising masculine features and men's economic obligations. It is precisely patriarchal capitalism that makes most ordinary men appear to be 'the vulnerable group' at present. Yet, in the ideological struggle between different types of feminism, it seems that consumerist feminism is gaining more ground among urban youth. Its power lies not only in inviting women to fantasise about becoming 'rightfully objectified', but also in guiding those men who are

unable to meet the ideal masculinity to blame women as imposing and to scapegoat 'feminism'. Sanshi, a white-collar man, confronts my feminist stance by saying: 'feminism is supposed to fight for women's rights, but now many women don't want these kinds of rights. They want to stay at home. Then whose interests are feminists representing?'

From the previous chapter, we have seen that white-collar women's subjectification of consumerist feminism is full of ambivalence, confusion and even pain. Many of them emphasise the separation of their fantasising mode from real-life expectations and practices (see also Wong, 2016). But surrounded by 'consumerist-feminist' online wordplay such as 'spendthrift chicks', most white-collar men I interviewed misrecognise the symbolic order as material reality. Without reflecting on women's gender obligations, they highlight the costs that men have to pay in the current gender order. From Sanshi's elaboration above, we see how men's perception of and reflection on the existing gender order can mingle with their desire to retain their (unacknowledged) gender privilege.

In fact, Sanshi, Shizhi and several other male respondents identify themselves with the term 'straight-men cancer'. They have become 'immune' to, if not taking pride in accepting, this accusatory title. While many white-collar women imagine gay men as being women-friendly, I also ran into a gay man who hardly hid his macho assumption that women should stay at home taking care of their children and husband. These men's resistance against the buzzword 'straight-men cancer' and their reformulation of its signification from a derogatory term to a self-approving one illustrate men's 'contaminated agency' (Banaji, 2017: 33, 203). Their agentic resistance against the critiques symbolised by 'straight-men cancer' is deployed against those who are weaker—women. In one case, this type of 'contaminated agency' also involves a class dimension. A white-collar man who had visited the industrial zone in Guangzhou called young

female workers there 'black wood ear'. He perceives these women as 'casual' and 'cheap' because of their intimate contact with men in the public space of factories. But many young industrial workers have neither money nor time to choose more a private space for their dating. The term 'black wood ear', while conventionally being sexist, here constitutes a shorthand stereotype through which the white-collar man expresses both misogyny and disdain for rural migrant workers.

Having discussed different social groups' agency regarding Chinese Internet discourse, the chapter now turns to discussing its co-option by the market and the party-state, which is revealed by the co-option of online wordplay by corporations and party-organ media.

8.4 The Co-Option of Internet Discourse

My wording here appears to endow corporations and party media with a certain collective personality. But as Max Weber (1978: 14) puts it, a collective concept such as a nation, a corporation, etc. only means 'a certain kind of development of actual or possible social actions of individual persons' in a sociological context. How a PR practitioner or an online editor of a party media utilises online buzzwords is a result of his/her agency combined with certain institutional interests, conventions, regulations and resources. The institutional settings serve to expand, authorise or constrain individuals' agency. My discussion below aims to address their interplay, while remaining reflexive towards media practitioners' constructions of professional identities as well as the common assumptions underpinning their constructions.

8.4.1 The dilemma of co-opting online buzzwords for commercial purposes

Respondents who work in media, PR, advertising and marketing generally consider online buzzwords as helping to attract people to click a news article or an advertorial since buzzwords symbolise what is currently trendy or

controversial. They can also increase an article's or an advertisement's visibility because the use of buzzwords 'makes it easier to jump out of search engines' (Hong.1/individual entrepreneur in e-commerce). This strategy of so-called 'riding on trend' (*ceng redian*) leads to the common practice of 'clickbait' in online news reporting (cf. Kormelink and Meijer, 2018) and digital marketing—namely titling an article with buzzwords or other eye-catching elements that have little to do with the content in order to gain a higher click rate. The dual pressure of creating content rapidly and reaching as big an audience as possible demands that digital media workers closely follow the latest online trends and strategically utilise buzzwords in their work. A market imperative is immanent in the ebb and flow of buzzwords and hot topics in Chinese cyberspace.

Just as a market can reach the point of saturation, online buzzwords can also become 'over-used' so that the effect of such co-option is useless or even negative. Most media practitioners express a high degree of sensitivity to the 'freshness' of online buzzwords, and regard my list of terms as outdated. This resonates with many white-collar respondents' familiarity with the list, yet is in contrast to many new workers' sense of estrangement. While most new workers find the term list quite trendy, Zee, a senior copywriter claims that 'an online term's popularity normally lasts for just one to two weeks, at most several months'. Being alert to the latest online topics and buzzwords has become a part of many digial-media practitioners' content of work as well as an important channel to construct their professional identities. Notably, their conception of the Internet is ubiquitously oriented towards the youth, which is in fact the urban youth. As said by Hongju: 'If one wants to be successful in the Internet industry, one will have to learn the post-1990 generation's and the post-2000 generation's communicational style' (Hongju.3/media strategist). In this sense, media practitioners' usage of online buzzwords in their work is again performative in the sense that they aim to achieve better communicational

effects. The creation, circulation and over-use of online buzzwords constitutes one after another discursive ritual routinely performed among urban younger generations, including digital media practitioners who are also largely formed of urban youth.

However, most media practitioners I interviewed deem many terms on my list 'still usable' (Yuki.2; Jijie.2; Susan.1; Mozi.2/marketers). While most online buzzwords emerging with hot social issues or topics eventually get forgotten, terms connoting class and/or gender meanings tend to become words that one can just 'normally' use (Steven.1/party-media online editor). That is to say, one does not expect readers to click or share an article just because the title contains buzzwords such as 'appearance value' or 'little fresh meat'. They enter urban youth's everyday vocabulary so that both media producers and consumers of this social group hardly feel surprised when encountering these neologisms.

Corporations' constant pursuit of distinction from other competitors means that the co-option of online buzzwords can only be strategic and up to media workers' own judgment. Meanwhile, the media practitioners I interviewed also reach a consensus that even though utilising online buzzwords brings a vivid and light-hearted style of writing, it also risks appearing too informal and vulgar. In this sense, the carnivalesque and vulgar dimension of Chinese Internet discourse poses a constant tension to any attempt at co-option. This 'wildness' needs to be contained, tamed, and reformulated if it is to be utilised as a part of the 'legitimate language' of the market and that of the party-state. The next two sections respectively discuss corporations' and party media's co-option of online wordplay.

8.4.2 Digital marketers: re-accentuating, hyping and creating online buzzwords

Addressing the suitability of online buzzwords in their copywriting, respondents who work as PR practitioners, marketers and advertisers connect it to the market positioning of a given brand or product, as well as the age of targeted consumers.

They generally maintain that online buzzwords are of little use for digital marketing if the brand or product is targeted at successful and senior groups, such as a luxury car or high-end real-estate. Resonating with many scholars' assumption about the 'grassrootsness' of the Chinese Internet, these respondents generally perceive online buzzwords as being more useful for promoting 'everyday products' and 'accommodating younger generations' (Moon.1/product manager). But it is questionable whether the products they promote are really daily necessities affordable by all the youth. Jijie, a marketer of a real-estate company in Shanghai, provides an interesting and telling example:

> I will avoid using online terms such as 'vulgar rich' if our products are targeted at really rich people. But if a flat is for rigid demand and targeted at *diaosi*, the term 'vulgar rich' can be considered. I will utilise it in a positive tone, emphasising a status of upgrading (*jinjie*). Like, a *diaosi* achieves 'reversing (the situation) and fighting back' (*nixi*) after buying the flat…
> (Jijie.3/marketer of a real-estate company)

The *diaosi* group in Jijie's elaboration comprises those youngsters who have the potential to purchase a flat in a first-tier city. While her use of the buzzword *diaosi* aims to signify a kind of grassroots identity, it nonetheless has little to do with hundreds of thousands of young rural migrants who face both institutional and economical barriers in buying property in first-tier cities. As we have seen in chapter 5, *diaosi*'s signification has become increasingly bourgeoisified over the years. The commercial co-option arguably plays a central role in this process. This kind of co-option is formed of numerous media practitioners' like Jijie's copywritings in which they instill their own middle-class oriented interpretations of *diaosi*; their interpretations and assumptions then become popularised via corporations' substantial symbolic and economic power. In Jijie's example, the two terms *diaosi* and 'vulgar rich' signify two groups of consumers to whom different products and different marketing strategies are directed. According to Susan who works in the PR division of an e-commerce company, online terms

frequently serve as tags through which consumers are allocated to different niche markets (Susan.2/PR practitioner). This point is shared by most of the digital marketers and enterpreneurs I interviewed. Through their creative copywriting, shorthand sterotypes connoted by online terms and their doxic order are not only taken for granted but also commodified to signify various 'neo-tribes' (Yu, 2014) that are defined by consuming certain products or brands.

To correspond with her company's interest in selling flats, Jijie emphasises a sense of life upgrading through the purchase of a flat. She selects and re-accentuates the signification of lack amongst the complex connotations of *diaosi* and that of plentitude amongst 'vulgar rich' while at the same time downplaying the sense of 'vulgarity' in the latter term. Her innovative agency in wordplay is entangled with the corporate interests, further downplaying the social stratifications ambivalently signified by the discursive opposition between *diaosi* and the series of 'rich' buzzwords. The commercial co-option of Internet discourse typically involves reformulating the signification of online terms to match the marketing strategy of a brand or product. To use Bakhtin's (1994) terms, that is to find, among the 'multi-accents' of an online buzzword, the connotation that most fits the defining feature of a brand/product and imbuing this feature into the buzzword when utilising it.

Apart from the relatively conventional practice of 'riding on trend'—reformulating an online buzzword's meaning to serve corporate interests, several digital marketers report that their work also involves hyping or even creating online buzzwords which are tailored to a given brand or product. Moon, a former product manager of a game company, views the popular online expression in 2016 '(drinking) Vita lemon tea makes one feel higher than taking marijuana' (维他柠檬茶，爽过吸大麻) as a typical example in this regard (Moon.1/product manager). The phrase 'taking marijuana' was imbued with new meaning directly related to a brand's product. Through hyping this phrase into an

online buzzword that went viral, the companies managed to boost the product's sales volume. According to Moon's disclosure, hyping online buzzwords or hot topics involves multiple actors, such as moderators of popular online forums, key opinion leaders (KOLs) in social media, Internet 'users' hired to repeatedly share or comment on some posts, known as 'water army' (*shuijun*) in China. When talking about these kinds of marketing campaigns, media practitioners repeatedly bring up the jargon KOL which refers to Internet celebrities and 'online-joke writers' who have accumulated a huge number of followers on multiple digital platforms. Due to their huge influence, corporations hire them to promote commodities in a playful and carnivalseque manner. Major Chinese KOLs' charges for creating and circulating advertorials can be directly found online[64].

The commercial co-option, reinscription and even creation of Chinese Internet discourse illustrates the entanglement of individual agency with corporate interests. As Emirbayer and Mische (1993: 1008) argue, 'actors are always simultaneously located in a variety of temporal-relational contexts at once' so that actors who feel creative and deliberative in one context can be highly reproductive in another. The digital marketers I interviewed take pride in coming up with copywriting that becomes widely circulated online. Some of them passionately elaborate those 'classic cases' of viral marketing which shape their professional aspirations and identities. For example, Zee recalls her friend's participation in Apple's marketing campaign for the iPhone 6 in an envious tone. She appears amazed at the product motif 'bigger than bigger' which once led to heated online discussion about its translation in Chinese. The English word 'bigger' pronounces similarly to the scatological term *bi ge*[65] which connotes 'level' or 'class' in Chinese Internet discourse. The motif thus utilises online wordplay to highlight the iPhone as a high-class digital divice that simultaneously

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[64] See one via http://www.meihua.info/a/66619
[65] *Bi* refers to female vagina as slang.

appears accessible and 'grassroots'. This kind of motif is surely creative, but it can serve to mystify Apple's as well as other IT giants' exploitative process of production. In this sense, digital marketers' and online KOLs' innovative agency can be *contaminating* with its commodification to serve the corporate interests and to foster commodity fetishism (Marx, 1915; Billig, 1999).

Fairclough (2001b: 231) observes that with the emergence of a 'knowledge-based' economy, 'language and other forms of semiosis become commodities'. From the digital marketers' descriptions, we can see that online buzzwords can become both commodities and carriers of commodity messages in Chinese cyberspace. The short 'life cycle' of most online buzzwords also resonates with the quick turn-over rate of a market economy that is increasingly based on e-commerce and commodified information. I thus call for more academic attention to be paid to the hierarchical structure and the political economy of Chinese cyberspace to address the issues of digital enclosure (Andrejovic, 2007), consumer labour (Huang, 2016) and the market imperative behind the ebb and flow of online buzzwords and hot topics.

Having sketched out the interplay between digital marketers' individual agency and corporate interests, I now turn to the co-option of Chinese Internet discourse by party media.

8.4.3 Party-media workers: political correctness under multiple restrictions

All the three respondents who work or once worked for party media claim that they are encouraged to use online terms in their news editing or reporting. Steven, a Weibo editor for party media, says: 'the official wants to occupy the field of public opinion. Our Weibo aims to appear accessible and colloquial in order to reach as many people as possible.' (Steven.2/weibo editor) Just as digital marketers, these respondents working for party-media also presume the accessible form that online buzzwords embody and hence their importance for engaging more audience.

However, these party-media workers' co-option of Internet discourse takes place in the context of multiple restrictions. Both mentioned by the respondents and reported in news, party media such as Xinhua News Agency are forbidden from using a variety of 'vulgar' and 'irregular' terms, such as *diaosi*. But when it gained popularity in 2012, the party-organ newspaper *People's Daily* published several articles on '*diaosi* mentality' (cf. Yang et al., 2014). In fact, the official regulations have been changing back and forth, reflecting the party-state's unpredictable take on online public opinions. According to my respondents, 'Xi Uncle' (*xidada*), an online nickname for Xi Jinping once actively used by party media, is now forbidden by the Publicity Department of the CPC (*zhongxuanbu*) without a clear reason.

Another restriction reported by the respondents is the avoidance of online terms which are 'discriminatory' against certain groups of people. They range from 'black wood ear', 'green-tea bitch', *shamate*, 'phoenix men' to 'straight-men cancer' and 'homo friends'. In fact, the themes connoted by these online terms—homosexuality, feminism, class and urban/rural divides—are all considered sensitive, so it is better to avoid even a semblance of debate suggested by their usage. Steven emphasises the extreme importance of selecting online terms carefully when working for party media: 'if you are not careful, party media's uses of online terms will become others' news to be hyped and distorted' (Steven.3/weibo editor). Party-media workers' agency regarding online buzzwords is thus restricted not only by the party-state's direct regulations but also by party media's contestable aura. What underpins this aura is urban younger generations' long-existing mistrust of party media which resonates with the online sentiment of official-common confronations. But as I mentioned in chapter 2, corporations can also hype and capitalise on this online sentiment.

The contestable aura limits party media's intervention into problematic online sentiments which, despite many media scholars' emphasis on the 'resistance' side, can be highly misogynist and discriminatory. My respondents hence all report a sense of political correctness in their daily work. Or in the words of Yachen, a former WeChat editor of party media, it is to highlight the aspect of 'positive energy' (*zhengnengliang*) and 'inspirations' in online wordplay (Yachen.1/former WeChat editor). The following quote from Xiaoxiao, a young party-media journalist, epitomises party-media workers' uneasy manner when using online terms:

> The term 'reversing (the situation) and fighting back' can absolutely be used; like someone goes through numerous setbacks but eventually succeeds. But (one) can never say the 'reversing (the situation) and fighting back' of *diaosi*. (Xiaoxiao.1/journalist)

While the term 'reversing and fighting back' is immanent in the *diaosi* narrative (see section 5.3.2), it is detached from the narrative in Xiaoxiao's writing under the multiple restrictions of party media. In this way, the connotation of social inequality in the *diaosi* narrative, albeit highly partial and patriarchal, is also discarded. The various online terms censored by the party-media's political correctness are indeed discriminatory. But avoiding these terms also negates the possibility of discussing the social groups or phenomena that they point to in whatever problematic way. As Susan Woolley (2013) argues when she looks at the high-school classroom in the US, politically correct form of speech which avoids words such as 'gay' and 'ghettos' leads to the violence of silencing. With issues of class, gender and sexuality being avoided, the kind of positive energy or inspirational meaning that party media workers seek from Internet discourse appears to be an emphasis on individual striving and merits regardless of one's position in the social structure.

While under multiple restrictions, party media workers tend to stay away from online discriminatory terms and the social issues connoted by them, alternative

media offer more space for discussing these issues. The next section turns to an alternative media editor's reflections on the usefulness of online wordplay for social struggles.

8.4.4 An alternative-media perspective

The left-wing alternative outlet that Billy works for aims to provide Chinese youth with a vivid outlook on social injustices. Like other media practitioners I Interviewed, Billy reports frequently utilising online buzzwords when editing articles so they can resonate more with readers. But as editor of the gender section, he reports being cautious with the buzzword 'straight-men cancer':

> I think the term reduces an institutional, cultural and structural problem to one of sexual identity. When I address gender issues, I will just use 'patriarchy'…I will never let a buzzword replace what I want to say. A social problem must be thoroughly explained while buzzwords' role is just making your writing more accessible and readable. (Billy.1/editor of alternative media)

Billy's words illustrate his critical reflection on the conventional meanings of online buzzwords such as 'straight-men cancer' as they tend to reduce structural issues to individual attributes and identities. Rather than simply riding on the trendiness of these buzzwords, Billy aims to contextualise them and to explain many social problems that are at once signified and concealed by Internet discourse. Resonating with Chengfu's spontaneous use of the socialist rhetoric 'labouring people' (see section 8.1.3), Billy reports sticking to those old-fashioned terms that 'people are now reluctant to use', such as 'class' and 'workers', and making efforts to reformulate the negative connotations imbued to these terms in contemporary China. In some cases, he also attempts to appropriate some online terms and resignify their conventional meanings. Although his agency is critical and progressive, it is nonetheless unlikely to be greatly expanded via the limited resources of alternative media. As Billy puts it vividly:

> We once utilised 'urbanites know how to play' (*chenghuiwan*) to satirise outrageous changes in the Labour Law. But this kind of usage has little chance

of gaining popularity… And it will be extremely weird (*leiren*) if you refer the term 'national husband' to Marx (laughs). (Billy.2)

In chapter 2, I argued that the co-option of online wordplay can be viewed as mystification (Barthes, 2009) in the sense that the conventional meaning of a given term becomes impoverished and turned to connote another concept. Barthes (2009) insists that myth is a form of speech 'justified in excess'; it exists on the natural state achieved by the concept which the myth signifies. In contemporary China, individualistic consumerism has replaced socialism as the prevailing ideology (Yu, 2014) so that reformulating the term 'national husband' to signify male celebrities makes much more sense than tying it to Karl Marx. While the centrifugal force of Chinese Internet discourse is instantiated in different social groups' and individuals' agency of negotiating with and reformulating the meaning of online terms, the capability to make this reformulation socially visible and popular lies first and foremost in commercial companies. A number of digital marketers I interviewed mention their appropriation of a 'feminist' theme and calling the super-rich 'relatives' in their copy-writing. It is perhaps not a coincidence that the two themes also loom large in many white-collar respondents' discussions of online buzzwords.

8.5 Conclusion

This chapter addressed two major themes: different social groups' agency regarding Chinese Internet discourse and online wordplay's co-option by institutions such as corporations and party media. The two themes are interrelated because while agency is revealed by personal action, it is implicated in collectively produced differences of power relations and authorisation (Sewell, 1992). Institutional co-option of online wordplay comprises the interplay between the exercise of social actors' agency and the institutional settings which may expand, authorise, refract or constrain that agency. This interplay illustrates that social actors are simultaneously located in multiple temporal-relational

contexts (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998) so that one's embodied agency can appear innovative and reproductive at once.

The chapter first presented how respondents of different social groups engage with, critique or disengage from Chinese Internet discourse in accordance with their conditions of life and the nexus of power relations that inform their agentic actions. Struggling against the 'triple oppression' along lines of class, gender and rural-urban divide, most rural migrant women I interviewed remain critical of the online wordplay fantasising about wealth-based masculinities and performing 'spendthrift' femininity. The urban middle-class orientation of Chinese Internet discourse goes against the grain of their lived experiences of poverty, of working for 'domineering' capitalists in a real sense, and of dealing with rural migrant men who aspire to become rich and domineering.

Meanwhile, some new workers appear to have become disillusioned about achieving economic success, showing indifference to the social norms and *doxic* order signified by Chinese Internet discourse. They worked for years in major cities and tried different types of manual labour, but none of these jobs brought them a promising outlook for the future. They now work closer to their household-registered villages where living costs are lower and income gaps smaller. Compared to other new workers and white-collar workers living in big cities, these local new workers express a less sense of lack. According to the data of National Bureau of Statistics of China, the number of 'local peasant workers' (*bendi nongmingong*) reached 11.24 million out of the total number of migrant workers (28.17 million)[66] in 2016. The increase in this category accounted for 88.2% of the total increase of migrant workers that year. I call for policy-makers and scholars to make a more nuanced differentiation within the heterogeneous group of new workers when reflecting on the future of the rural population.

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[66] http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/201704/t20170428_1489334.html (last access: 8/7/2018)

Many new-worker respondents' disengagement from online wordplay is also due to their linguistic *habitus* of local dialects, while the *habitus* of Chinese Internet discourse presumes one's familiarity with and normalised use of Mandarin in daily life. Among the new-worker respondents I interviewed, those who identify most with Chinese Internet discourse are a group of service workers contacting young urbanites on a daily basis. In a sense, these service workers actively acquire this *habitus* to speak their customers' language. Their strategy of 'self-orientalism' which caters to the urban population's abjection of rural areas is noticeable and worth more academic attention.

As the two major groups that generally embrace Internet discourse, white-collar women and men respectively fight for their ground in the gender politics among urban youth. White-collar women reject and reformulate sexist labels in online wordplay, highlighting women's autonomy with the body as well as a kind of 'girl power' based on young urban women's individual attributes and capabilities. White-collar men bemoan men's gender obligations and apparently inferior status in contemporary China, blaming women for being demanding and scapegoating 'feminism' for making women increasingly imposing. White-collar men's perception of and reflection on the changing gender order are dotted with contaminated agency which entails their continuous desire to grip the gender privilege. Their apparent critique of consumerist feminism in effect reproduces this malleable ideology.

The media practitioners I interviewed generally assume that online buzzwords have become essential for media and corporations to win Internet users' attention. Yet, their notion of 'Internet users' are in fact young urbanites closer to Wang Hui's (2014) notion of the urban new poor, to which these media practitioners also belong. Their middle-class oriented interpretations of online terms become further popularised by the institutions they work for which poessess substantial symbolic and economic power. By reformulating, hyping

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and even creating online buzzwords, digital marketers play a prominent role in turning online namings into consumer identities. While Chinese Internet discourse is full of online terms fetishising bourgeois aspirations and familial ideals, its commercial co-option can contribute to further reinforcing commodify fetishism which is characterisised by consumers' collective forgetting about the unpleasant productive processes of goods (Billig, 1999). In the Chinese context, new workers largely embody these productive processes; and they are also largely silenced and excluded by Internet discourse.

Party media workers' use of Internet discourse is both subject to official regulations and the prevailing online sentiments of 'official-common confrontation' so that they avoid touching upon most discriminatory terms discussed by this thesis, and the social issues connoted by them. The party media workers I interviewed report utilising the playful form of online wordplay to endorse a kind of politically correct emphasis on individual striving and merits. While alternative media offer more space for discussing the structural issues of Chinese society, their limited resources and impacts are less likely to popularise the kind of critical and reflexive agency regarding Internet discourse. The capability to shape the directionality of online terms' changing connotations lies first and foremost in commercial companies.

CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION

9.1 Introduction

Through combining textual discourse analysis with focus groups and in-depth interviews, the thesis has explored the politics of online wordplay in contemporary China with regard to its historical contingencies and social implications for class and gender relations. The thesis was built on three major research questions: (1) what, if anything, motivates members of different social groups to use or disengage from Chinese internet discourse in their daily life? (2) Via its use by institutional forces as well as individuals, how does Chinese Internet discourse arise from and contribute to the transformations of gender and class relations in China? (3) What forms of agency in relation to gender and class are revealed by the use of or disengagement from Chinese internet discourse by different social groups?

By addressing these questions, I attempted to go beyond the dichotomising framework that views online satirical culture as exemplifying Chinese grassroots netizens' carnivalesque resistance against the authoritarian party-state. Based on Wang Hongzhe's (2010, 2016) works which deconstruct the notion of netizens (*wangmin*) and my brief genealogy of 'grassroots' (*caogen*) (section 5.1), I pointed out that both notions are overloaded with urban orientation in the Chinese context; the identity of 'grassroots netizens' has been predominantly occupied by post-1980 urban youth. Having mostly received a higher education and becoming white-collar workers, the post-1980 generation constitutes an emerging new middle class in post-socialist China. However, they appear to be angry and anxious in Chinese cyberspace, both commenting on various social issues and underlining their 'underprivileged' status in the form of carnivaleque wordplay. I contextualised urban youth's emphasis on their 'powerless' position and the ambiguous class orientation of their social critiques in light of Wang

Hui's (2014) concept of the 'urban new poor' whose poverty is primarily perceived as inadequate consumption. Wang categorises another type of 'new poor' as 'new workers'. It refers to rural migrants who constitute the majority of manual labourers in contemporary China and whose poor living conditions are distinct from those of empowered 'old' workers in the Mao era. The thesis illustrated Chinese Internet discourse's orientation towards the urban new poor and the aspirational middle class, as well as its ambivalent correlations with new workers. I drew on Billig's (2005) critical and discursive approach to understand the contribution of laughter to unifying or dividing different groups of people in accordance with different power dynamics between those who joke and those being laughed. With regard to gender, I showed that Chinese Internet discourse is torn between the stance of male anxieties and that of female aspirations, both of which are implicated in class structures and urban-rural duality.

In total, I analysed 37 online terms that connote class and/or gender meanings, conducted ten focus groups with 53 people, and interviewed 37 individuals (including 12 media practitioners). I categorised and recruited four social groups of respondents—male and female new workers, male and female white-collar workers born between 1980 and 1995. All of this was done from a critical socio-linguistic perspective which acknowledges language as 'both a site of and a stake in' social struggles (Fairclough, 2001a), and the constant interplay between its temporary 'verbal and ideological unification' and the ever-lasting room for people to imbue their own meanings when using words and signs (Bakhtin et al., 1994: 74-75). Adopting the approach of 'embodied agency' (Taylor, 1989; Banaji, 2017), I grounded different social group members' various forms of engagement with (including disengagement from) Chinese Internet discourse according to their conditions of life and nexus of power relations that inform their agentic actions. Informed by Sewell's (1992, 2005) theorisation of the duality of social structures, I was also attentive to the co-option of online wordplay by corporations and party media, and how Internet discourse becomes everyday

vocabulary that mystifies (Barthes, 2009; Billig, 1995) the ideology of patriarchal capitalism as well as its by-product—consumerist feminism.

The thesis makes a contribution to a cross-section of Internet and gender studies, class analysis, and discourse and ideology analysis. In particular, it provides a more comprehensive and critical framework to further knowledge about digital culture and online participation in China. Yet, this research is under several constraints. My relatively short period of fieldwork—three months between April and July, 2016—as well as my positionality as an urban middle-class heterosexual man limited my access to recruiting lesbians and working-class LGBTQ respondents. Given the small, biased sample and word limit, I only briefly touched upon the topic of Chinese Internet discourse and sexual politics, which is worth further researching. Although I sought helps from scholars who had conducted ethnography with rural migrant women and hung out with young migrant workers to recruit more new-worker respondents, my sampling frame is still relatively urban-biased, especially regarding female respondents. The thesis's findings are thus to be enriched or contested by future research that further 'de-urbanises' the Internet studies of China. It is also important to explore the older generations' uses of digital media, their interpretations of and engagement with online wordplay.

Below, I tie together the major findings of the thesis and relate them back to the theoretical and historical literature that I drew on. In the end, I summarise the implications of this thesis for future research studying the Internet and gender both in the Chinese context and worldwide.

9.2 Chinese Internet Discourse as *both* 'Popular' *and* 'Legitimate' Language

The thesis started with Bourdieu's conceptualisation of 'popular' and 'legitimate' language to understand the social conditions of the creation, circulation and use of Chinese Internet discourse. Bourdieu defines 'popular language' as a form of

speech habitually and collectively embodied by dominated classes who seek linguistic distinction from the 'legitimate language' of dominant classes. 'Legitimate language' is an authorised form of speech which imposes naturalised social order, or *doxa*; it prescribes both a legitimate way of representing the world and the hierarchy between different types of representations. Chinese Internet discourse appears at once as a 'popular' and 'legitimate' form of speech. On the one hand, it is characterised by playfulness and informality, dotted with slang and scatological elements, as well as a carnivalesque outcry about social stratifications. On the other hand, Chinese Internet discourse helps to contain class conflicts both by compartmentalising the truly subordinate classes, such as rural peasants and migrants, and by reducing structural inequalities to individual issues of gender and sexual identities. The *habitus* of following latest online buzzwords and using them in everyday life is premised on a variety of forms of readiness such as Internet access, language use, the blurred boundary between online and offline lifestyles, all of which are oriented towards young white-collar workers and university students who work and live in big cities.

The thesis suggests that Bourdieu's clear-cut boundary between dominant and dominated classes for theorising 'popular' and 'legitimate' language has to be moderated by both a historical viewpoint and a political economic perspective. A historical viewpoint explores the 'historical formation, revision, differentiation and change' (Banaji, 2017: 37) of social classes. It acknowledges the power dynamics and hierarchy within dominated classes and the contribution of this hierarchy to containing and fragmenting unified class struggles. From a perspective of political economy, the economic interests of the dominant social fraction can directly threaten the cultural and political interests of the dominated fractions (Garnham and Williams, 1980) by co-opting and re-inscribing a popular form of speech. Legitimate language can take a popular form and be coated with a rebellious appearance.

From an orthodox Marxist perspective, urban white-collar workers and rural migrant workers both belong to the dominated class in post-socialist China, since they are similarly located in the social relations of production by selling their mental or manual labour to capitalists to earn a living. But from a Weberian point of view, they belong to two classes with different levels of income, education, and social status. As I showed in chapter 3, the urban-rural duality has existed throughout China's modern history and has been institutionalised by the *hukou* (household registration) system. In the Mao era, despite socialist rhetoric such as 'labouring people' which connotes the class unification of urban industrial workers and rural peasants, the rural population had no access to the variety of social welfare enjoyed by most urban dwellers. They were also strictly prohibited from migrating to the cities. In post-Mao China, rural peasants and migrants continue to be institutionally, culturally and legally separated from the urban population.

This huge population of migrant workers contributes to the prominent status of China as a 'world factory' and its economic boom ever since 1978. However, rural migrants were subject to blatant discrimination in the cities. This is illustrated by the label 'blind flow' that urban media widely used (Lin, 2013) in the 1990s. The perceived lack of *suzhi* (quality) in the rural migrants' body (Anagnost, 2003) legitimated the shameless exploitation of their labour under the market economy. As exemplified by the comedy skit 'extra-born guerrillas' in 1990 CCTV Spring Festival Gala, the rural population's apparently backward gender notions were also mocked. The various forms of lack and inadequacy embodied by the rural population downplayed and legitimated their poor socio-economic conditions.

All these pre-Internet power dynamics between the urban and the rural population continue to underpin the apparently 'grassroots' discourse of online wordplay. Instead of blatant discriminations, Chinese Internet discourse is

characterised by discursive mimicry of young rural migrants, which is instantiated in white-collar workers' collective and habitual practice of self-deprecation. The urban 'progressive' stance of consumerist feminism entails young urban women's collective consumption and mockery of 'phoenix men' which essentialises the backward gender notions of rural grown-ups who manage to settle down in big cities. Chinese Internet discourse thus contributes to further compartmentalising the two social classes of 'new workers' and the 'urban new poor' (Wang, 2014). With its constant co-option by the market and the party-state, online wordplay has transformed from 'non-mainstream' to 'new-mainstream' culture (Wang H., 2010, 2016) which sustains the 'convivial tensions' (Mbembe, 1992) between the party-state, the market and the urban new poor who predominantly occupy the identity of 'netizens' in the Chinese context. Below I break down these findings.

9.2.1 Self-deprecation and double mimicry

Via the *habitus* of Chinese Internet discourse, young urbanites construct their collective identity as the 'powerless' and 'grassroots' youth. In chapter 6, I illustrated that this identity construction to a large extent operates via self-deprecation. Despite their generally high level of education and moderate income which on average doubles that of migrant workers' (see section 3.5.3), young white-collar workers share a common feeling of lack and insufficiency which, on the one hand, results from real-life predicaments brought about by China's marketisation, such as soaring house prices, expensive living costs, and declining social welfare. On the other hand, it has to do with the endless displays of tempting and capricious consumerist lifestyles in the media, as symbolised by the online saying 'having money is to do one's whims'. Elaborating on the concept of 'new poor', Bauman (2005: 37-38) argues that poverty not only means 'material deprivation'; it is also 'a social and psychological condition': poverty means being 'not up to the mark', being 'excluded from whatever passes

for a "normal life".' In a consumer society, a 'normal life' is the life of consumers while the poor are 'socially defined, and *self-defined*, first and foremost' as 'flawed consumers' (ibid: 38, my emphasis).

As exemplified by *diaosi* wordplay, young white-collar workers' identification with their underprivileged status is both self-defined and performative. The connotations of *diaosi*, just like many other online buzzwords studied in this thesis, feature discursive ambivalence and build on mystification. Their significations oscillate between a first level of literal meaning and a second level of meaning that is more metaphoric, playful and that impoverishes the first level. Online wordplay has fuelled the discursive ritual of self-deprecation among the urban new poor. They collectively and habitually relate themselves to names or terms literally signifying poverty while at the same time feeling free to disavow these kinds of identification knowing 'I'm not that bad'. Apart from *diaosi*, other terms mentioned in this thesis include 'moving bricks' and 'PPT peasant workers'. If self-deprecation is essential for the *habitus* of Chinese Internet discourse, then this *habitus* tends to obfuscate true class categories by inculcating the *doxa* of double mimicry into its utterers.

Chinese Internet discourse constructs a *de facto* intermediate position which, on the one hand, at once recognizes and disavows the *similarities* between the living conditions of the truly underprivileged classes—rural migrants and peasants—and those of the urban new poor. On the other hand, the intermediate position is also manifestly different from the economically dominant; but the variety of perceived gaps compared with the aspirational bourgeois lifestyle are both continuously registered and distanced via performative self-deprecation. Illustrated by the term *shamate*, which signifies and imagines young migrant workers to be imitating the urban trends but constantly failing, the rural population serves as a negative reference point in Internet discourse for the urban new poor to project their own effort to imitate

the rich, which is perceived as constantly failing. The truly grassroots is included in the 'grassroots' wordplay of the urban new poor only to be disavowed. Young white-collar urbanites look 'downwards' just to reinforce their 'upward' looking and to distance their corresponding low-esteem.

This 'upward' looking is symbolised and perpetuated by a series of online buzzwords mimicking the male rich, such as 'tall-rich-handsome', 'national husband' and 'vulgar rich'. Chinese young white-collar workers' *collective self*-deprecation and double mimicry via online wordplay illustrate how Internet discourse contributes to generating and maintaining the consumerist subjectivity of the urban new poor. The apparent collectiveness is in effect highly individualised, as the ideology of consumerism invites individuals to contemplate their own relations to the aspirational middle class in contemporary China. This ideological invitation does not necessarily stem from the Althusserian (1971) ideological state apparatus. It can take a more diffuse form of self-hailing which is superfluous and oscillating between serious self-recognition and performative display of this recognition.

Just as both Eagleton (1991) and Thompson (1984) observe, contemporary capitalist society operates more on a 'superfluous' ideology which lacks specific systems of beliefs or doctrines. It vacillates between meaning and non-meaning on the basis of rationality, commodity exchange and the lack of consensus on social changes. These western thinkers' observations resonate with Wang Hui's (2008) argument that the CPC government has been adopting 'depoliticised politics' to rule post-socialist China in a technocratic and developmentalist manner.

Instead of helping to construct critical solidarity between the two kinds of 'new poor' in contemporary China, online wordplay metonymises powerful elites in the figures of congenial idols. I regard the online term 'envy, jealousy and hatred' as epitomising the 'structure of feeling' that prevails among Chinese urban youth.

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The term indicates that the power and wealth of political and business elites are not simply resented but also envied and desired. To be more precise, *in Chinese cyberspace, the politically dominant appear to be the object of resentment while the economically dominant tend to be mimicked, if not adored*. The distinction I am making here may seem to be naïve, since the economically dominant assert invisible political pressure, and the politically dominant can become extremely wealthy through their positions of power. But recognising this distinction is important for understanding how the multiple convivial tensions between the market, the party-state and 'netizens' play out via the carnivalesque online wordplay in contemporary China.

9.2.2 The convivial tensions between the market, the party-state and 'netizens'

As I mentioned in chapter 3, what concerns the post-1980 urban generations who grew up under China's marketisation and growing Western influences are less economic and social 'inequality' than perceived 'inequity'. For them, inequity is embodied by corrupt cadre-capitalists and by the party-state which manages the market economy in an authoritarian manner. In contemporary China, there exists glaring incongruity between the CPC government's continuous adherence to the socialist rhetoric and its *de facto* distanciation from the working class and the peasantry, whose alliance together with the working-class leadership are supposed to form the basis that defines the PRC as a socialist state[67]. Meng (2018: 142) observes that the ruling legitimacy of the party-state has derived from a dynamic balance between three elements: '[w]hen socialist conviction becomes weaker, nationalism and developmentalism will grow stronger in order to sustain the legitimacy of the regime.' From Deng Xiaoping's famous statement 'development is the absolute principle' in the early 1990s to the notion of

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[67] Article 1 of the PRC's Constitution states: 'the People's Republic of China is a socialist state under the people's democratic dictatorship led by the working class and based on the alliance of workers and peasants.'

'Chinese Dream' raised by Xi Jinping since 2012, developing and modernising China to achieve the 'great revitalisation of the Chinese nation' has now become the most articulated theme in the official discourse. This theme underpins the party-state's attempt to circumvent 'the thorny issue' of its 'political representativeness' (Meng, 2018: 186) and to stifle class politics at a time of intense class polarisations and conflicts (Lin, 2014).

The official rhetoric may appear rigid and 'hypernormal' (Yang et al., 2014), particularly for many young urbanites whose distrust of the communist party is reflected in the contested aura of party media. In contrast, commercial media and corporations not only utilise online sentiments about the confrontation between the commoners and the officials for clickbait but also co-opt Internet discourse by reformulating, hyping and even creating online buzzwords. Exemplifying the 'dialogic' nature of language (Bakhtin et al, 1994), digital marketers and online editors are in constant dialogue with the popular accepted meanings of Internet discourse, attempting to re-signify it in accordance with their companies' interests. Online buzzwords now constitute an essential resource for media and corporations to compete for young urbanites' attention. But corporations' constant pursuit of distinction from other competitors means that the co-option of online buzzwords can only be strategic, relying on media workers' experience, writing skills and timely judgment.

Through media workers' creative copywriting, shorthand stereotypes connoted by online terms and their *doxic* order are turned into 'neo-tribes' (Yu, 2014) defined by the consumption of certain products or brands. The commercial co-option has led to the further bourgeoisification of online wordplay. The ebb and flow of online terms naturalises consumerism and commodity fetishism. Billig (1999) argues that in consumerist society, commodity fetishism lies in people's collective forgetfulness of the process of goods production. In the

Chinese context, new workers largely embody this productive process; and they are also largely silenced and excluded by the Internet discourse.

Online wordplay can nonetheless be coated with an appearance of carnivalesque resistance against the party-state. As I showed in chapter 8, the variety of discriminatory online naming/practices can rarely be addressed in party media because doing so risks being perceived as cracking down on online sentiments. A sort of 'mutual zombification', in Mbembe's (1992) term, plays out in Chinese cyberspace. The ruling CPC party cannot achieve its absolute authority as many 'netizens' toy with power in a covert and carnivalesque manner while also acknowledging the party's capricious power. But in the apparently 'resistant' wordplay of Chinese netizens formed largely of young urbanites, the truly subordinated classes tend to be compartmentalised. At the same time, the logic of capital tends to be legitimated if not glorified. Many white-collar respondents associate financial and business elites with relatively commendatory online terms such as 'tall-rich-handsome' and 'high-large-upper'. *To a large extent, the market economy, and capitalism, achieves hegemony through young urbanites' 'zombification' of the party-state and their carnivalesque wordplay which appears to toy with the authoritarian government and its 'socialist' claims*. Online wordplay is, in fact, part and parcel of the allegory of post-socialism (Rofel, 1999) which denigrates the socialist experiments in the Mao era and their legacies in contemporary China.

I do not claim that Internet discourse contributes solely to the hegemony of market economy and the multiple convivial tensions between the party-state, the market and the urban youth. But it both greatly expands the latter's sense of collective 'resistance' via wordplay and facilitates corporations in their reshaping of the directionality of popular sentiment. Notably, the CPC government is now in close cooperation with Chinese e-commerce giants to re-adjust the country's mode of economic development and to boost domestic demand (Meng and

Huang, 2017). The important role played by online wordplay in naturalising the masquerade of consumerist feminism further illustrates the urban, middle-class orientation of Chinese Internet discourse and its tendency to become a legitimised form of speech.

9.2.3 The emerging ideology of consumerist feminism

While the official rhetoric frames superrich capitalists in a nationalistic tone and labels them as 'people's entrepreneurs', their naming in Chinese cyberspace is more gendered, as illustrated by the buzzword 'national husband'. Jack Ma, or 'Father Ma' in Internet discourse, is hailed both for being the 'initiator of spendthrift chicks' and for showing China's soft power to the world via the huge success of e-commerce. During the 2016 Rio Olympics, many Internet users, including some female white-collar workers I interviewed, referred 'national husbands' to their favorite male medalists. The party-state and the market appear to be complicit in guiding and co-opting nationalistic sentiments in Chinese cyberspace. Thus articulated, nationalism and patriarchal capitalism constitute an essential part of the prevailing ideology in contemporary China.

A by-product of this 'patriarchal capitalism with Chinese characteristics' (Meng and Huang, 2017) is the emergence of consumerist feminism which celebrates women's empowerment but limits this to the private realm of the body, sexuality and, most importantly, private consumption. In chapter 5 I demonstrated how consumerist feminism serves as a masquerade to conceal the ever widening gender inequality brought about by China's ecoomic reformss. Full of ambivalences and inner tensions, this ideology seeks to negotiate four interrelated dimensions of gender politics at present: the disproportionate sex ratio that privileges young women in the marriage market, young urban women's high level of education and consumer power, the commodification and essentialisation of gender difference, and the party-state's repeal of its welfare

services and commitment to improve gender equality in work and employment. Exemplified by the online saying that 'a good man should be a pile driver on the bed and an ATM machine off the bed', consumerist feminism constructs women as subjects in the private realm and objects in the public realm of social production. It invites women to fantasise about being 'rightfully objectified' by economically capable and emotionally active men, as signified by the online term 'domineering CEO'. In order to be 'rightfully objectified', women's femininity has to be emphasised and tied up to consumption. Built on a bourgeois familial ideal, consumerist feminism leaves out the fate of most social groups of women, such as the rural and the older, who have no willingness to be and are not in a position to be empowered by the allure of youth, beauty and individualistic consumption. As illustrated by the online parodies 'spendthrift chicks' and 'thrifty wives' (see section 5.4.3), the androgynous figures of rural middle-aged women are reprimanded so as to highlight the 'modernised' and 'liberated' female essence embodied by young urban middle-class women.

Online wordplay and the practice of online shopping have dovetailed to fetishise femininity emphasised in terms of beauty and consumption which is relational to the hegemonic wealth-based masculinity. As we saw in chapter 7, a kaleidoscope of online mini-narratives that exaggerates and mimics 'spendthrift' femininity is picked up by white-collar respondents in everyday interactions. This kind of discursive ritual oscillates between meaningful descriptions and 'meaningless' jokes, which the utterers can feel free to identify with or to disavow. The playful form and mimicking tone of Internet discourse fits perfectly with the ideology of consumerist feminism which at once highlights women's autonomy and dependence. In a playful manner, some female white-collar women I interviewed view online expressions such as 'without women being spendthrift, men won't be motivated to make money' as 'feminist'. For them, feminism roughly equates to men pampering women. A prominent way to do so is meeting women's

'shopaholic nature'—an assumption shared by the majority of respondents with the exception of female new workers.

However, most white-collar women I interviewed emphasise a clear boundary between their fantasy or entertainment mode and their real-life expectations. In other words, men's economic capability is more important for them on a discursive level (see also Wong, 2016). Similar to the *diaosi* wordplay which simultaneously registers and distances a sense of lack, 'spendthrift' femininity is discursively and playfully performed by many young urban women to both highlight the aspirational intimacy defined by women's economic attachment to men, and to cathect the gap between the aspirations and their real life. This discursive ambivalence, nonetheless, leads to many young ordinary men's anxieties and misrecognition of the symbolic order as the reality. They fall into the trap of self-victimisation, denigrating the integrity of women and exaggerating the efficacy of money as sexual leverage. Both the male new workers and many white-collar workers I interviewed illustrate a manifest sense of deprivation. Some of them accuse 'feminism' with making women increasingly imposing and demanding. This outcry is frequently underpinned by men's desire to retain their (unacknowledged) gender privilege.

Chinese Internet discourse is torn between the stance of urban young men in the lower-middle class and that of urban young women in the middle class. The former is exemplified by the initial construction of the *diaosi* narrative which stigmatises some women for exchanging their body for men's wealth. With its patriarchal, misogynist presuppositions, the *diaosi* narrative both condemns and conceals the intersectionality of gender and class orders. Its misogynist outcry and male anxieties are rejected as 'straight-men cancer' by the urban consumerist feminism which underlines women's autonomy over their bodies and sexuality, yet remains ambivalent about women's economic independence. While consumerist feminism undoubtedly challenges a variety of patriarchal

deeds and words, its ambivalence and inner tensions lead to many men's misconception of feminism as 'aiming to take advantage of both sides'— i.e. it calls for women to be treated equally while at the same time expecting men to support them economically. A number of white-collar men I interviewed thus refuse to reflect on their male-chauvinism, taking pride in identifying with the accusatory label 'straight-men cancer'.

The ideology of consumerist feminism thus appears highly malleable. It not only reduces feminism to women's empowerment in the private realm, but also invites men who are unable to meet the demands of ideal masculinity to misrecognise this reduced version as real feminism and to identify themselves as victims. In both cases, the efficacy of money is fetishised so that the prevailing social system of patriarchal capitalism becomes reinforced. Moreover, as shown by urban young women's collective consumption of 'phoenix-men' stories, consumerist feminism also serves to conceal the socio-economic gaps between urban and rural populations under the apparent distinction of gender notions.

Powerful as the ideology of consumerist feminism may appear, it is strongly rejected by a number of female new workers I interviewed. Situated on the lower rungs of Chinese society with little economic and symbolic power, this social group's views and agency are rarely represented in Chinese cyberspace and mainstream media. The next section reflects on the correlations between agency, authorisation and social power.

9.3 Agency, Authorisation and Power

Given the overall middle-class orientation of Chinese Internet discourse which is dotted with the abjection of the rural population, most young migrant workers I interviewed express a sense of estrangement towards and disengagement from Internet discourse. The real poverty they experience makes them interpret online wordplay in a literal and serious manner which in turn demystifies the

metaphoric connotations of many online terms. In particular, female new workers disengage themselves from the wordplay of 'spendthrift chicks' and from fantasising about dating wealthy men. Instead, they emphasise their own earning power and aspirations for the type of masculinity that shares household duties and attends to women's emotional needs, as illustrated by their idealisation of 'warm men'. Their everyday struggle against the 'triple oppression' along lines of class, gender and rural-urban divide (Pun, 2005) makes this group of working class women more attentive to the inner tensions of patriarchal capitalism and consumerist feminism, both of which are perpetuated by the *habitus* of Chinese Internet discourse. The new workers who have become disillusioned about economic success and who have chosen to work close to their home villages also illustrate their indifference to online wordplay, as well as the norms, aspirations and *doxa* signified by it. Internet discourse is alienated from these local new workers' everyday life and linguistic *habitus*. After hearing me describe young white-collar workers' self-comparison to 'moving bricks', a middle-aged farmer spontaneously came up with the socialist term 'labouring people' which, unlike online terms such as *diaosi* and 'moving bricks', serves to unite white-collar and manual workers' living conditions in his understanding.

The farmer's usage of 'labouring people' may appear rather old-fashioned for young urbanites given the prevalence of post-socialist allegory in urban China. In fact, I observed the existence of a historical displacement among many white-collar respondents' meaning making that conflates rural backwardness in contemporary China with that of the Mao era. Many new workers' disengagement also apparently corresponds with white-collar respondents' presupposition that rural youth do not share their culture of online wordplay. In their (white-collar) view, the various forms of agency revealed by new workers' disengagement from or indifference to Internet discourse can simply be reduced to their lack of cultural knowledge and educational level. Meanwhile, new workers who are in close contact with young urbanites actively adopt the *habitus*

of Chinese Internet discourse and even deploy the strategy of 'self-orientalism'. Their adoption can be understood as a kind of cultural entitlement so that they speak their customers' language. The fact that these new workers are most economically well-off testifies to Bourdieu's observation of 'the paradox of the dominated': 'resistance may be alienating and submission may be liberating' (cited in Lawler, 2004: 119). With little economic and cultural capital, new workers' critical agency regarding Internet discourse can hardly be socially authorised and recognized. Their disengagement tends to be perceived as an inability to inhabit entitled dispositions, while submission to the *doxic order* can empower new workers and bring them more benefits. Agency, in this sense, can be complicit with power and instantiated 'in a spectrum of resistance and conformity' (Banaji, 2017).

Digital marketers' agency in terms of co-opting and reformulating online buzzwords further illustrates the complex correlation between agency, power and authorisation. Their personal creativity is entangled with corporate interests and authorised by the substantial power of commercial forces. While many digital marketers' copywritings are highly innovative in the context of wordplay, they can simultaneously express 'contaminated agency' (Banaji, 2017) as their creativity helps to mystify the exploitative process of commodity production and foster commodity fetishism. Echoing Mahmood (2001, 2005) and Banaji (2017), my thesis illustrates the need for a move beyond a normative, agonistic understanding of agency, and for an acknowledgment of its implication in specific power relations between different groups of social actors.

The thesis's last section reflects on how this project may inform future studies of the Internet and gender in both the Chinese context and worldwide.

9.4 Implications for Future Research on the Internet and Gender

The biggest implication of my thesis for future Internet studies is the necessity to acknowledge the heterogeneous composition and social stratifications of Internet users, instead of taking for granted and celebrating 'grassroots netizens'. Future research must further address the symbolic power of China's online culture from the perspectives of sexuality and race/ethnicity. Moreover, media scholars should attend to subordinate social groups' media uses, living conditions and aspirations all of which can be silenced to oblivion if we are not reflective on the myth of digital empowerment and our own positionality in the social order. The simultaneous co-option and reinscription of Internet discourse by institutional forces such as corporations cannot be neglected either, as they play an important in re-shaping the directionality of online sentiments. While the thesis addresses discursive phenomena, I identify with Sewell's (1992, 2005) theorisation of the duality of social structures. To better understand how material layouts condition linguistic changes, I deem it essential to pay close attention to the existing structures from which Internet discourse arises, its historicity, and the political economy behind the ebb and flow of digital memes and online buzzwords.

The last point also applies to gender studies. Lack of attention to the political economy of gender may result in an exaggerated sense of the fluidity of gender identities and norms through personal re-iteration. This thesis shows that gender politics in contemporary China are implicated in class structures and urban-rural duality so that there exists no homogeneity of Chinese men or women, even within the same age cohort. The discursive options for 'doing' and 'undoing' gender are unevenly distributed among different social groups. One of my key contentions is that the articulation between patriarchy and capitalism imprisons as much as it entitles men of lower classes in China and worldwide, because their economic conditions prevent them from living up to their socially prescribed

privilege and obligations. The gulf between the symbolic and the real causes very real male anxieties and pain. In this sense, scholars and activists should make more effort to relate feminism to non-elite men's lived experiences and liberation, rather than simply presuming that *all men* as beneficiaries of a patriarchal gender order are the 'other' of feminism (see also Connell, 2005; Du, 2017).

The results of a recent national survey of American teenagers (Miler, 2018) show some interesting and telling parallels with my analysis. On the one hand, girls feel they are empowered to play more diverse roles at school except when it comes to being judged about looks. On the other hand, boys still generally feel obliged to behave as 'strong, athletic and stoic'. Both 'post-feminist masquerade' in the West (McRobbie, 2007) and consumerist feminism emerging among urban youth in contemporary China emphasise a kind of 'girl power', celebrating young women's empowerment through their individual beauty and capability. These kinds of masquerades generate young women's liminality between becoming autonomous subjects and remaining sexually desirable. Moreover, as they serve to conceal the continuity of patriarchal capitalism, these ideologies have little to say about the diversity and fluidity of masculinities.

It is perhaps not a coincidence that the myth of digital empowerment (Banaji, 2015) and that of 'girl power' have both become prevalent in China and the West. As Billig (2005: 209) reminds us: 'Dutiful consumption encourages us to mock apparent authority, enabling us to enjoy the feeling of constant rebelliousness in economic conditions that demand continual dissatisfaction with yesterday's products'. Feminist elements have been incorporated into many advertisements as 'the rebel sell' (Heath and Potter, 2006).

To avoid becoming complicit with commercial forces, critical scholars should reflect on the power relations and political economic relations that can be mystified by these trendy notions, and refer back to those apparently 'old-

fashioned' thoughts and theories in social science, such as class, ideology and socialist feminism. Equally importantly, only by reaching out to—yet not romanticising—subordinate social groups can scholars and activists come to understand the emerging 'counter-progressive' movements worldwide, most of which are racist, sexist and nationalistic. The apparent impasse between the stance of male anxiety and that of female fantasy and autonomy in Chinese Internet discourse suggests the dangerous implications of 'progressive' identity politics if they do not take into account bread and butter issues. No social injustice can be torn down without addressing socio-economic inequaities. It has never so urgent to recognise that, in whatever problematic ways, there is some appealing rationality in the annoying 'straight-men cancer'. Without it, the most powerful embodiment of this malaise in the US would not have been elected and be followed by more elsewhere.

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Appendix 1.1 Illustration of the six clusters of Chinese Internet discourse

Having Money makes one do one's whims
Kidney device
Hand-chopping (party)
Spendthrift chicks
Double Eleven

Vulgar rich (let's make friends)
Tall-rich-handsome,
White-rich-beautiful
Second-generation of the

National husband
Domineering CEO
Warm men
Little fresh meat
Economical men
Cancer of straight men
Rotten women

Shamate
Phoenix Men
Urbanities know how to play

DIAOSI
Otaku
Short-poor-ugly
Moving bricks
Reversing (the situation) and fighting back
Black wood ear

Little Fresh Breeze
Peacock women

Singleton Dogs
Homo friends
Leftover women (leftover men)

Green tea bitch
Outside girl
Internet celebrities
Unfashionable-fat-round,
Masculine women (VS green tea bitch)
Soft girl
Naive-white-sweet

A patriarchal perspective: male anxiety, stigmatized and aspirational femininities
Urban and rural gaps, articulated with gender and consumption tastes
(Urban) women's aspirations for masculinities, partial empowerment, ambiguity of online feminism
Mimicking the rich, downplaying social inequalities at an individual level
Gendered consumerism
The *Diaosi* narrative
'Appearance Value' is a term cutting across all the clusters except for the cluster of 'urbnan/rural gaps'

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Appendix 1.2 Glossary of the online terms mentioned in this thesis

- Appearance value (颜 值): having 'high appearance value' means good-looking.

- Black wood ear (黑木耳): young women who have much pre-marital sex.

- Boys love (BL, 耽美): a genre of literature written by and for women based on the homoerotic theme between two young men. This genre is often adapted to animations, online series and films.

- Competing on father (拼爹): a relatively derogatory term referring to the intergenerational transfer of power and wealth.

- *diaosi* (屌丝): A key word of this thesis. It denotes 'pubic strings', connoting a kind of underprivileged identity of ordinary white-collar workers.

- Domineering CEO (霸道总裁): economically capable and emotionally active men who pamper their girlfriends.

- Double Eleven (双十一): denoting Nov.11th, a date when the annual 'online shopping carnival' takes place.

- Economical and practical men (经济适用男): economically average men who are yet suitable to establish a stable life with.

- Envy, jealousy and hatred (羡慕嫉妒恨): a kind of complex emotion which oscillates between resentment and desiring. It is often related to wealth and power.

- Green-tea bitch (绿茶婊): those women who appear innocent but who are in fact quite calculating with utilizing their hyper-femininity to gain benefits from men.

- Hand chopping (剁手): a playful way to mean shopping; often related to women's shopping.

- High-large-upper (高大上): high level or high class.

- Homo friends (基友): a playful way to mean friendship, especially between men.

- Little fresh meat (小鲜肉): young, beautiful and innocent men, embodied by many male celebrities in East Asia.

- Leftover men (剩男): singleton men who have passed the conventional age for marriage.

- Leftover women (剩 女): singleton women who have passed the conventional age for marriage.

- Bi Ge (逼格): a scatological term (Bi is slang for vagina), connoting class or level. A common way to use the term is 'high *Bige*' (high class).

- Masculine women (女汉子): women who are quite independent or who do

not dress up in a feminine way.

- National husband (国民老公): initially referred to Wang Sicong, son of Wang Jianlin who owns Wanda Group and who was ranked as the richest man in 2015. Now the term can be referred to many popular male celebrities and even gold medalists.

- Phoenix men (凤凰男): men who grew up in rural China and mangage to establish a life in the cities; they have traditional gender notions, frequently appearing macho.

- Reversing (the situation) and fighting back (逆袭): related to the buzzword *diaosi*; can be understood as achieving success from a underdog position.

- Rotten girls (腐女): young women who follow the boys love genre.

- *shamate* (杀马特): young migrant workers who try yet fail to appear urban, characterized by their exaggerated and colorful hairstyles.

- Singleton dogs (单身狗): singleton youth who appear as 'pathetic' as dogs.

- Spendthrift chicks(败家娘们): shopaholic women who relentlessly spend men's money.

- Straight-men cancer(直男癌): macho deeds and thoughts.

- Tall-rich-handsome (高富帅): the discursive opposite of *diaosi*

- Vulgar rich (土豪): nouveux riches

- Warm man (暖男): can be compared to the notion of 'new man' in the Western context.

- White-rich-beautiful(白富美): the female equivalent to 'tall-rich-handsome'.

Appendix 2.1 Topic guide

Themes	Typical questions
Warming up	- Can we start off by you telling me a little bit about yourself—what's your job/major (if student)? - How is your daily routine organised? (If doing focus groups, letting each participant introduce themselves in turn, and at least following up with one question, such as how long have you been doing this job…) - How often do you go online? For what kinds of activities? - Do you watch TV, read newspapers or use any other media? - Follow up by prompting the respondents to say a bit more about his/her interests and other aspects of personal life.
Motivations of using or disengaging from certain terms; limited popularity of online terms among certain groups.	- When I mentioned popular online expressions, what terms immediately come to your mind? - Do you use online terms in daily life? (Following up by asking the respondent to describe a typical situation where he/she uses a term). - Is there any reason that makes you use/not use them?
Showing the term list	
The various ways in which respondents of different social groups inhabit, negotiate with, disengage from or reject Internet discourse.	The organisation of this session depends on respondents' identification and familiarity with specific terms on my list. If necessary, I also show the 'visual stimuli'. - On this list, are there terms you feel that they are just describing you? - What terms do you use a lot? - What terms do you dislike particularly? - I notice that you laugh/frown/grimace, etc. when you tick the term XXX. Can you tell me a bit more what you were feeling or thinking at that moment? - How do you understand XXX - In your local dialect, is there expression similar to XXX
Intervening	For you, those who DO move bricks or do other

questions, depending on whether respondents are interested in and familiar with the relevant terms.	manual work, are they *diaosi?* • Are all *shamate* from rural areas? • Is 'national husband' Wang Sicong a 'second-generation of the rich'? • What's the difference between 'second-generation of the rich' and 'tall-rich-handsome'? • Did you realise that there was no equivalent of 'black wood ear' to describe man? How do you feel about this? • What makes someone a 'straight-men cancer' is his consumption tastes or behaviour? • What makes someone a 'masculine woman' is more her appearance or personality?

With media practitioners, apart from the questions above, I also ask them to give examples of how they may utilise some of the terms in their writing.

Appendix 2.2 The term list for interviewing.

Please tick the web buzzwords that you are familiar with or have heard of

☐ *diaosi* 屌丝

☐ moving bricks 搬砖

☐ appearance value 颜值

☐ little fresh breeze 小清新

☐ little fresh meat 小鲜肉

☐ phoenix men 凤凰男

☐ homo friends 基友

☐ the naive-white-sweet 傻白甜

☐ leftover men; leftover women 剩男、剩女

☐ national husband（国民）老公

☐ soft girls 软妹

☐ the short-poor-ugly 矮穷挫

☐ competing on father 拼爹

☐ kidney device 肾机

☐ black wood ear 黑木耳

☐ 外围女 outside girls

☐ 腐女 rotten girls

☐ economical men 经济适用男

☐ *Otaku* 宅男

(☐ iPhone6 leg I6 腿)

☐ *shamate* 杀马特

☐ spendthrift chicks 败家娘们

☐ Urbanites know how to play 城会玩

☐ green tea bitches 绿茶婊

☐ peacock women 孔雀女

☐ masculine women 女汉子

☐ the white-rich-beautiful 白富美

☐ the tall-rich-handsome 高富帅

☐ the unfashionable-fat-round 土肥圆

☐ vulgar rich (let's make friends) 壕（我们做朋友吧）

☐ warm men 暖男

☐ domineering CEO 霸道总裁

☐ reversing and fighting back 逆袭

☐ _____makes one do one's whims _____就是任性

☐ hand-chopping (party) 剁手(党)

☐ singleton dogs 单身狗

☐ 网红（脸）Internet celebrity ('s face)

☐ 直男癌 straight-men cancer

(☐ A4 waist A4 腰)

(☐ Daily used face 日抛脸)

*Terms in brackets were added after the pilot study.

Appendix 2.3 Consent Form (translated version)

Hello, I'm grateful for your time and for chatting with me!

My name is Yanning Huang, currently pursuing a PhD degree in a British University. My thesis is concerned with some popular new phrases in Chinese cyberspace. Your answers will be of great value to me; I am eager to know how you understand and use these online terms in everyday life. Before the interview, please take some time read the following items. Lengthy as they may seem to be, they will guarantee your privacy and confidentiality when participating in the interview. You will be welcome to further contact me after the interview.

1. I volunteer to participate in the PhD project conducted by Huang Yanning from London School of Economics. The project is designed to explore different social groups' understanding of popular expression in Chinese cyberspace.

2. I have the right to decline to answer any question or to end the interview. There will be no adverse consequence if make this kind of decision.

3. The interview will last approximately one to one and a half hours. Notes will be written during the interview. The interview will also be taped for future transcription. If I have any concern with recording, I shall tell Yanning at the beginning.

4. My real name will not appear in Yanning's thesis or any other report that contains my interview. In addition, Yanning will make sure that the relevant description of my information won't have any impact on my confidentiality.

5. If I am attached to any institution or company, the name of the institution/company won't be reported as well.

6. Before Yanning's thesis to be submitted, I will be given a chance to have a look at the transcript of my interview.

7. I have read the items above and communicated with Yanning to fully understand their meanings.

8. I have been given a copy of this consent form with both my and Yanning's signatures on it.

_____ _____

Interviewee's signature and date

_____ (The researcher's signature)

Appendix 2.4 Demographic Information of the respondents

Focus group 1, Panyu, city of Guangzhou				
Hongmei	1983	Female	Saleswoman	Rural
Jiajun	1984	Female	Unemployed	Rural
Guangguang	1982	Female	Electronic factory worker	Rural
Qunjie	1980	Female	Electronic factory worker	Rural
Meijie	1982	Female	Mancurist	Rural
Focus group 2, Changshu, Jiangsu Province				
Tongfei	1993	Male	Garment factory worker	Rural
Limi	1993	Male	Garment factory worker	Rural
Yangbin	1992	Male	Garment factory worker	Rural
Tingting	1992	Male	Garment factory worker	Rural
Dajie	1982	Female	Garment factory worker	Rural
Chunqiang	1993	Male	Garment factory worker	Rural
Focus group 3, Shanghai				
Mi Le	1984	Male	Senior hairdressor	Rural
A Biao	1981	Male	Senior hairdressor	Rural
A Bin	1985	Male	Senior hairdressor	Rural
Chenchen	1986	Male	Hairdressor	Rural
Xiao Le	1995	Male	Apprentice	Rural
A Tao	1994	Male	Apprentice	Rural
Focus group 4, Fuyang, Anhui Province				
Xiubin	1987	Male	Broadband installer (leader)	Rural

Shuaishuai	1995	Male	Broad installer	Rural
Wangsheng	1986	Male	Broad installer	Rural
Binxin	1994	Male	Broad installer	Rural
Shenli	1988	Male	Broad installer	Rural
Lizhi	1985	Male	Broad installer	Rural
Focus group 5, Shanghai				
Boli	1987	Female	Busgirl	Rural
Aiqing	1983	Female	Busgirl	Rural
Lajiao	1983	Female	Waitress	Rural
Yizheng	1982	Male	Cook	Rural
Xiangai	1991	Male	Busboy (temporary)	Rural
Aling	1993	Male	Busboy(temporary)	Rural
Focus group 6, Shanghai				
Xiange	1988	Male	Banker	Urban
Hangou	1989	Male	Programmer	Urban
Ling	1989	Female	Programmer	Urban
Jiulin	1988	Male	Businessman	Urban
Nangua	1987	Male	E-commerce	Urban
Focus group 7, Shanghai				
Meimei	1990	Female	PR	Urban
Dolley	1991	Female	New media operator	Urban
Nujing	1991	Female	Car journalist	Urban
Pony	1992	Female	Marketer	Urban
Chuchu	1991	Female	Content creator	Urban

Julie	1991	Female	Consultant	Urban
Focus group 8, Fuyang, Anhui Province				
Wangchen	1990	Male	Engineer	Urban
Qiubo	1990	Male	Real estate manager	Urban
Zhiyu	1991	Male	Master student	Urban
Dongyuan	1991	Male	Architect	Urban
Xinmin	1991	Female	Banker	Urban
Focus group 9, Shanghai				
Qiangge	1982	Male	Programmer	Urban
Niuba	1981	Male	Internet security	Urban
Jiaxiang	1992	Male	Programmer	Urban
Binge	1993	Male	Programmer	Urban
Focus group 10, Shanghai				
Lanqiu	1992	Male	Broker	Urban
Wangliang	1992	Male	Journalist	Rural to Urban
Xiaoyou	1991	Female	Marketer	Urban
Samantha	1991	Female	English teacher	Urban
Individual interviews				
Yueyue	1988	Male	Engineer	Urban
Qianbao	1986	Female	PR	Urban
Zee	1985	Female	Advertiser	Urban
Will	1988	Male	Business startup	Urban
Sanshi	1988	Male	PR	Urban

Zhongxiang	1984	Male	Photographer	Rural to urban
Maodou	1990	Female	Video producer	Urban
Shizhi	1991	Male	Video producer	Urban
Albus	1991	Male(gay)	Teacher	Urban
Maomao	1992	Female	Teacher	Urban
Coco	1993	Female	Saleswoman	Rural
Jack	1992	Male	Salesman	Rural
Angel	1982	Female	Saleswoman	Urban
Bonbon	1991	Female	Journalist	Urban
Guyue	1987	Male(gay)	Design manager	Urban
Alex	1982	Male	Lawyer	Rural to urban
Qi'er	1988	Male	Programmer	Urban
Meijia	1983	Female	Manucurist and business owner	Rural
Daniel	1986	Male(gay)	HR	Urban
Mozi	1990	Male	Former journalist	Urban
Xiaxia	1988	Female	Factory inspector	Rural
Chengjie	1989	Male	Home decoration	Rural
Lili	1993	Female	College student	Rural
Wangbing	1982	Male	Farmer	Rural
Chengfu	1976	Male	Farmer	Rural
Hongju	1984	Female	Media strategist	Urban
Hong	1989	Female	E-commerce seller	Urban

		(lesbian)		
Yuki	1984	Female	Marketer	Urban
Xiaoyang	1992	Male	Programmer	Rural
Xiaocai	1992	Female	Programmer	Urban
Susan	1990	Female	PR	Urban
Xiaoxiao	1989	Female	Journalist (party media)	Urban
Ran Ting	1992	Female	Banker	Urban
Hu	1991	Male	Programmer	Urban
Bin	1993	Male(gay)	Student	Urban
Moon	1989	Female	Game product manager	Urban
Billy	1992	Male(gay)	Online editor	Urban
Steven	1991	Male	Weibo editor (party media)	Urban
Yachen	1992	Female	Wechat editor (party media)	Urban
Jijie	1989	Female	Marketer	Rural to urban

Appendix 3.1: Top 15 selected online terms mentioned most by all respondents

Buzzword	Total
diaosi	974
Straight-men cancer	295
Masculine women	260
Tall-rich-handsome	230
Spendthrift chicks	225
Warm men	217
shamate	208
Vuglar rich	172
Bi	143
National husband	141
Homo friends	128
Little fresh meat	128
Moving bricks	110
Green-tea bitch	109
Phoenix men	97

……

Appendix 3.2: Top 15 selected online terms mentioned most by new-worker respondents

Buzzword	Total
diaosi	150
Spendthrift chicks	86

Vuglar rich	82
Masculine women	74
Warm men	65
shamate	65
Tall-rich-handsome	61
Singleton dogs	54
Bi	49
Competing on father	37
Little fresh meat	32
Internet celebrities	28
Hand-chopping party	28
National husband	27
Homo friends	23

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Appendix 3.3: Top 15 selected online terms mentioned most by female respondents

Buzzword	Total
diaosi	288
Masculine women	148
Warm men	136
Straight-men cancer	123
Little fresh meat	94
National husband	79
Spendthrift chicks	74
Green-tea bitch	73

shamate	71
Vuglar rich	68
Tall-rich-handsome	60
Domineering CEO	56
Phoenix men	44
Internet celebrities	35
Appearance value	34

……

Tall-rich-handsome

- Rich and smart dressing;
- Very good at flirting and hooking up with girls;
- Playboy like, never lacking girlfriends;
- Arrogant, contemptuous of *Diaosi*

Distortion and expansion:
- Homo friends
- Picking up soap
- Deities

(helper/opponent)

Diaosi

- Messy dressing;
- Poor—moving bricks, no cars and house, eating instant noodle and other street food.
- Very into games (DOTA) and IT stuffs, but innocent of dating girls (low EQs);
- University dormitories or bachelor apartment;
- Never has girlfriend, thus masturbating a lot (Japanese porn stars);
- Low self-esteem
- Affection towards the female character, who is named as white-rich-beautiful or goddess;
- Tragically, as a 'spare tyre' in the game of love.

Action 2: Hooking up and abandoning
(Subject/object)

Action 1: Confessing affection, declined
(Donor/receiver)

Action 3: Getting together in the end
(Donor/Receiver)

Black wood ear

- Materialistic;
- Sexual body—detailed depiction of her sexy dressing (e.g. black stockings), make-up and passionate performance in bed (voice, eyes, foreheads), resonating with a porn star;
- Her vagina (from pink to black);
- Her abdomen (in the end, carrying child of the tall-rich-handsome)

Appendix 5: Interview thematic analysis grid

Theme 1: Motivation

- **Reject**
  - Low
  - Vulgar
  - Reflection
  - Overuse
- **Indifference**
- **Embrace**
  - Language of youth
  - Fun
  - Please others ⎤
  - Lighten the atomsphere ⎦ — Euphemised
  - Habit, everday vocabulary
- **Co-option**
  - Clickbait ⎤
  - Visibility via searching engine ⎦ — 'Riding on trend'
  - Accessible
  - Hyping and creating online buzzwords for corporate interests
  - Dilemma

Theme 2: Social order

- **Class**
  - Official-common confrontation
  - Self-deprecation, lack ⎤ — Convivial tensions
  - Tease via the 'rich' wordplay ⎦ — Double mimicry
  - 'Rural blind discrimination' ⎤
  - Middle-class aspiration
  - Self-approval — Compartmentalisation of the two types of 'new poor'
  - Urban-rural order
  - The old term 'Labouring People' ⎦

- **Gender**
  - Idealisation of 'warm men'
    - Housework division
    - Family-oriented
    - Emotional needs
  - Male anxieties
    - Sense of deprivation
    - Self-victimisation
    - Women are demanding
  - Discursive ritual of performing 'spendthrift' femininity ⎤
  - Fantasising about wealth-based masculinity — Masquerade of Consumerist feminism
  - Separation of the entertainment and real-life modes ⎦
  - Everyday confrontation against male chauvinism

Continued below…

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Sexuality

Rotten girls and the BL genre
Dichotomising 'upper' and 'bottom' men
Young urban women's support of homosexuals
Straight men's low EQ and consumer tastes

'Queer wordplay'
Homosociality and heteronormativity
The boundary between heterosexuality and homosexuality
Copying heterosexual mode to homosexual relationship

Theme 3: Agency

Female new worker
Rejecting wealth-based masculininty and 'spendthrift' femininity
Critique of consumerist feminism
Mulitiplicity of identities

Local new worker
Disillusion
Indifference to the online doxa
Local dialects
Less sense of lack

Literal interpretation of Internet discourse

White collar women
Rejecting sexist namings
Adopting the label 'straight-men cancer'
Reformulating 'green-tea bitch'

White collar men
Taking pride in being 'macho'
Rejecting consumerist feminism
Contaminated agency

Service worker
Adopting the online speech form for advertising
Self-orientalism

Entanglement between personal agency and instiutional setting
Creativity that contributes to commodity fetishism

Consumerist neo-tribes

Constraints
A product's/brand's targeted consumer
Party media's contestable aura
Ban

Critial agency and alternative media

Appendix 6.1 Transcript of focus group 1

The focus group consists of five female workers in Guangzhou. All of them are married and having children. Four were born in between 1980 and 1985. One (Q) was born in 1976, not strictly qualified to be my respondents. But since she was introduced by others to the focus group, I could not put her off. Three (Q, G, X) were still working in electronic factories when the focus group took place. One (J) just changed her job, looking for working as a supermarket cashier. The other (M) worked for a workers' NGO after her hand was seriously injured in an accident. She helped me recruit the focus group. They came to Guangzhou roughly at the same time, between 2004 and 2005. The factory workers' salary is now the lowest legal salary in Guangzhou, up to 2,000 RMB at most. They felt they earned more around 2005, 2006, when the salary was around 1,100, but the living expenses were much lower. They now have far less chances to work overtime, since their factories are closing off. This means they can't earn more money.

About media use
J: I hardly go to any websites.
G: Me too. I basically use Wechat and QQ.
Q: Just chatting on Wechat.
X: I also use Weibo, Taobao and sell some stuff (laugh).
M: I will also use a website to sell the things I don't need any more at home.
J: I mainly check Tencent news on Wechat and follow what my friends are doing everyday on Wechat, read some of the articles they share.
H: You don't go to bulletin boards, do you?
Everyone: No.
H gives each other a list of web buzzwords asking everyone to tick those they know or have heard of.
G: I don't exactly know what diaosi means.
H: Maybe we can start by talking about it (everyone laughs).
J: Just feeling oneself is diaosi.
Q: I feel that I hardly use any of these terms. I just saw some people use 'little fresh meat' on Wechat.
G: I know very little of many terms, but don't really understanding their meanings.
The terms that all the group members know are diaosi, the tall-rich-handsome, leftover women and leftover men, national husband, potent president.
X: what is 'outside girl'……'black fungus'?
M: Girl's private part.
The rest made the sound of disliking.
M: Yes, web language is so…
J: vulgar.
H: I found that you all know the terms **leftover men** and **leftover women**.
M: Because they are mentioned on TV every day, especially during spring festival.
J: In those comedy skits.

M: CCTV plays skits like this every day. There is also an advertisement of a blind dating website: if you like your grandma, then find her a boyfriend ASAP. Her biggest wish is to see you get married and give birth to a child.

H: So who are regarded as leftover men and women?

X: Those aged above 30, and haven't got married.

Q: It depends on whether you are men or women. I feel when women's ages are above 25, approaching 30, they start to become leftover women a little bit.

H: Do you dislike this term, since it makes it like someone is leftover because he/she's not married.

G: No, not very.

X: It's a neutral time…

G: Yes.

H: I would like to hear how you understand the term **diaosi**.

G: I don't really know its meaning.

H: Where did probably you see the term?

G: Online or via **TV**, I'm not sure, some news, just said this is very Diao, or diaosi (laugh). I sometimes have a look at news.

X: I don't really its meaning either.

M: I think it refers to having no money, no house, no car, no status, no background, having nothing. I think that's diaosi.

J: I feel it's more like the type of people feeling proud of themselves. **Like, I'm one piece of diaosi. So it's likely that this person has *some* money, but not very rich.**

G: Yeah, I also got this feeling that diaosi were a bit arrogant (拽).

H: But you all know the tall-rich-handsome and the white-rich-beautiful?

Everyone: yes.

H: What do you think the white-rich-beautiful refers to?

Everyone: namely, they are **white, rich, beautiful**! (laugh)

M: like me (pointing to herself).

Explosion of laughs.

Everyone: yes, roughly, hahaha.

J: Give us red envelops then, quick!

H: How about the tall-rich-handsome?

G: rich man, the tall-rich-handsome. (**Theme: gendered differentiation between the terms tall-rich-handsome and white- rich-beautiful**)

Q, X: Handsome!

H: Where did you see the terms tall-rich-handsome and white-rich-beautiful?

X: on TV.

G: Some TV serials mention these terms. I watch them sometimes.

H: do you feel the tall-rich-handsome and the white-rich-beautiful represent the group of highest level in this society?

G: I don't think they are highest, right?

X: (the highest) is **potent president** (laugh). (**Theme: gender and class order, agency**)

H: what kind of people are potent presidents?

Q: I know this term. Someone who's very arrogant and mighty.

G: Maybe…anyway, he is indeed a bit…but he has money, and he's very potent (powerful).

X: Some aged guys (家伙) who are arrogant.

J: Guys (laugh)

Q: Self-centric.

J: but if it's a woman, I will regard her as capable. (someone says: yes)

X: I watched some TV serial that depicts a potent president. He's arrogant and powerful towards anyone except for her (the main female character).

G: Yes, he's not that powerful towards his own (woman), but still a little bit. It's mainly towards others. This is called domination or something (laugh).

……H asks if the respondents feel their bosses are 'potent president', they answer that they have never ever seen their bosses.

M: Many bosses are the vulgar rich, though…Maybe not the vulgar rich, they are more 'ground beetles' （土鳖）. (everyone laughs)

H: what's the differences between the **vulgar rich and ground beetles**?

M: The vulgar rich still have very little bit of…taste, still a very little bit. And then 'ground beetles' have no taste at all. They just have money.

H: do you agree? (to the rest of the respondents)

G: Yeah, something like that.

M: I'm talking too much and you stop talking.

G: because you know more than we do.

X: because we go to work everyday…

H: so you work in factories and do have less time to go online.

Q: yes, very little.

G: sometimes when I get home, I feel too tired (to go online).

H: can you check your mobile phone when working?

G: just during noon, occasionally. During work, sometimes I sneak a glimpse, but not to surf the Internet. I just check if someone is looking for me in group chatting. If there's something emergency, I will reply.

H：Let's go back to the topic of buzzword. There's a saying 'the vulgar rich, let's make friends'. Do you want to make friends with the vulgar rich?

J: I think that's joking. Like for example, if one has got money and being generous, (others) will **tease and make fun of** this person.

H: you mean if someone's generous when spending money, you will say this person is the vulgar rich?

J: yes yes. We often say this (laugh).

M: Come on, embrace my leg (laugh)

J: It's generally joking.

Everyone: joking.

J: perhaps when you do see a real vulgar rich, you won't be able to say this kind of words (laugh).

G: I have never used this sentence I think.

M: Because we don't know any vulgar rich. And there is no vulgar rich in this area.

H: I think you all mentioned another term that you are familiar with, **spendthrift chicks**. Do you think this is derogatory term against women?

M: spendthrift chicks is also a kind of self-mockery perhaps. And **men more use this term to describe women**.

G: I don't think I'm one.

X: There are also spendthrift menfolks.

M: Spendthrift menfolks buy something even less practical (everyone laughs). We are spendthrift on small things; they are spendthrift on big (expensive) things.

X: Yes (laugh).

H: do you know this picture. It says Jack Ma is the initiator of spendthrift chicks.

J: this is very **disgusting** (**theme: agency of some working-class women against the interpellation of spendthrift chicks**).

X: this is fake, right? You photo-processed it?

H: I downloaded it from the Internet. There are another two online sayings, I would like to hear your comments. The first one is **'if women are not spendthrift, how come men become motivated to earn money'**; the other is 'even if you are rich, you cannot let the husband get rich; even if you are poor, you cannot let the wife be poor'. Do you agree?

Q: It means that **women should be spendthrift**…(**theme: a very interesting and telling debate among the respondents, to show how the term spendthrift chicks, and the variety of online sayings related to it, can have impact on people's understanding of gender order, as well as the possibility that this kind of impact can be totally resisted.**)

G: so that men can be motivated to earn money.

X: This makes some sense.

G: Yes, I think so too.

X: It means if you don't spend the money, he will feel the earned money is already there. Then he won't be motivated. If you spend all the money at home, then he will have to earn money, right?

G: 'even if you are rich, you cannot let the husband get rich; even if you are poor, you cannot let the wife be poor'; this also makes sense. Once men have got money, they will go bad, so you can't let your husband be rich (laugh).

X: even if you are poor, you cannot let the wife be poor. If the wife is poor, other men will…(lots of laughs)

H: so you all agree with these sayings?

J, M: No, I don't agree.

J: I think women can earn money for ourselves. Why (one) needs men to be her sugar daddy.

M: Also, I think it's not up to the man himself to decide how much money he can earn. He just has this amount of salary, do you want him to sell blood (laugh)?

J: to sell a kidney (laugh).

M: Yes, selling a kidney to give you money? I think in the current environment, not only my own husband earns little, others' husband…including myself, don't earn a lot. The society decides our earning level, right? So I think it's not correct to feel that if I don't spend enough, he won't be motivated to earn money.

……omitting the part where the group discussed Double Eleven as a 'hand-chopping' festival, and some relevant online sayings.

H: Do you buy something on Double Eleven?

G: If I need something, Iwill buy.

X: No need, no buying.

H: I don't think you are spendthrift.

G: Yes, I think we are not spendthrift. We are independent and self-supported, relying on ourselves (laugh)!

M: We don't have enough money to be spendthrift.

G: Yes, **spendthrift on what** (laugh).

H: Talking about being self-supported, there is term called '**female man'**, do you know that?

(Theme: the ambiguity of 'female man' as a term connoting capable women)

G: Yes. Someone relatively capable, namely doing things that one can do.

X: It means not depending on others. Dealing with things one can deal with.

H: Do you feel it's a positive term, then; it has positive meanings?

X: Of course it's positive.

J: I don't think it's positive. Because actually, if you doing things well, you become a female man. It has some underlying meaning—that you are too strong. It has some negative tone, as if you are doing something that is beyond your scope (as a woman).

G: I think, maybe some people have this kind of thoughts. Some people may feel that female men are too strong/powerful. As if you do all you can do, then you don't rely on me anymore (laugh).

J: Why there is no equivalent on man's side?

H: Because man's already man.

J: Yes! Then **it feels a bit discriminatory.** Women are not supposed to be like this. If you are like this (doing things you can do), you become a man. In this way, you are not like a woman.

(Theme: agency)

H: SO you think being an independent woman is something one should take for granted, right?

X: The society is now like this.

G: Not taken for granted. It depends on each family. Sometimes…anyway, I think if a woman can work, then she should have her own work.

……(*omitting the part on the term national husband. None of the respondents really knows Wang Sicong, and not interested in talking about him.*)

G: For me, national husband is someone who is kind and cares about home.

H: Then it's similar to warm man?

G: Yeah perhaps. Someone good at taking care of others, and being very considerate. Like warm man, a little bit.

H: Do you hope your husbands to be a warm man? (J laugh) Why are you laughing?

J: I don't want a warm man, because I think (laugh)…

M: You are already very warm (laugh).

H: You are already independent, not needing others' care? Wow, you are indeed feminist!

X: She's an **able woman** (女强人)

G: **female man. (Theme:the distinction between able woman and female man)**

H: Are able woman and female man the same?

G,X: No.

X: Female man is a woman who's relatively powerful/dominating (强势). Able woman refers more specifically to a woman's career. Her career is relatively successful.

H: and you, do you want to have a warm man as your husband?

M: No (laugh).

H: you two are very independent, indeed.

J: We warm each other first (laugh)

G: because their understandings are different from ours.

H: How about X?

X: It would be good if he's **both a warm man and good at earning money**.

J: Perhaps everyone's aim is different. This perhaps is related to how I grew up. Everyone has her own ideal image of husband, but my ideal image is never related to his economic capability.

H：how about Q?

Q: I hope my husband can earn more, and I can earn more as well. In this way, our family will have a better life. I feel **depending on myself is not enough**; it's better to count on the family.

……(*omitting the part where H raised the topic of some white-collar interviewees, both men and women, thinking that a stable family is structured in the way that the man earns a little bit more than the woman. The group members generally think that it depends on what kind of man. Some kind of man is more macho. **The most important thing is that the couple's personalities fit; it has little to do with the man's money**).

M shares the list of terms on her Wechat.

X: I think we are all outdated. **Those aged around 20** know all these terms.

H: why don't you want to have a warm-man husband?

M: **I have hands and feet, I can take care of myself. Why does he have to be warm? Too warm makes me feel hot, hahaha…And I don't agree that a family will be stable if the man earns a bit more than the woman. If a man earns 1 RMB per month, the woman earns 0.99 RMB, how to live? How to be stable, right?**

…….(Talking about **'little fresh meat', all the respondents say they don't like this type of men**)

J: I like men who look relatively down-to-earth and sophisticated.

X: Little fresh meat makes me feel they are **not reliable**.

H: what kind of man are little-fresh-meat?

G: relatively young, and quite handsome.

Q: it feels a bit like **'little-white-face'**（小白脸）**.**

G: Young and not sensible.

X: it feels that you are in the position of taking care of him.

……

H: You mentioned at the beginning that you once moved bricks in your home villages before leaving for working in big cities. Do you know a web term called 'moving bricks'?

All the members say they don't know the term. H explains how it's used by white-collar respondents: they say they face the computers all day, typing words all the time. They feel this kind of work is very mechanical, so they compare it to moving bricks. Any comments?

G: OK…

M: **Their bricks are really light**.

X: I can't understand this comparison.

G: me either.

……H raises the topic of 'fighting with fathers', G and Q don't know the term. X understands it as mocking those people who work too hard: like why are you working so hard, being so diligent, what the fuck are you fighting for?

M: **my understanding is that if you family background is not good enough and you want to achieve something, then you need to fight with fathers. That is, you need to find a kind of step-father who has background to support you. For example, if my child wants to go to local school in Guangzhou (not those for migrant workers), then we need collect enough points to get the household. Neither his father nor I is qualified. So we need to find our son a qualified father, or mother.**

H: this sounds really sad.

M: Yeah, but this is life.

J then talks about her daughter's school where students' parents need to campaign for more votes from friends to support their children's extra-curricular performances, such as dancing, drawing, etc: from day to night, other parents share their children's works on social media. But I can't afford so much data. I can't afford this kind of game.

M: this is not competence among kids, but among parents!

M goes on talking about a story of her friend, who found a local Guangzhou resident to be her kid's mother, so that the kid can enjoy free entrance to a local school. M also introduces the existing business in Guangzhou to 'serve' the migrant parents: spending 38,000 RMB to let your children have a Guangzhou *Hukou* (household registration), to let him/her be able to study in Guangzhou and take part in entrance exams for high schools and universities in Guangzhou, to enjoy medical insurance. In Beijing, the amount has perhaps reached 100,000 RMB.

Appendix 6.2 Transcript of focus group 7

The focus group consists of six female white-collar workers currently working in Shanghai in the sectors of online media, marketing or PR. They were all born around 1990. Three (C, J, W) were born and grew up and in Shanghai. The other three (D, N, P) all earned a master degree in a prestigious university in Shanghai, which helps them to get a Shanghai *Hukou*. Their salary is likely to range between 6000 and 10,000 RMB.

D was born in a fourth-tier city, Yishui, in Shandong Province. She made a strong case **that she felt she was like a female worker (女工), similar to those Foxconn workers**. P was born in Nanning, Guangxi Province; she regards herself as a 'town youngster' (小镇青年), while her 'old home' (老家) is a small town centre. She felt that going to work every day 9 to 5 was very exhausting. N was born in Ningbo, Zhejiang Province, not far from Shanghai. W introduces herself as a 'star-chasing dog'—a crazy fan of her favorite male stars; she will even buy air-tickets to follow her favorite bands' world tour. W also operates a vegetarian public account on Wechat as her hobby.

Group members: W (Wanmei), P (Pony), C (Chuchu), D (Dolley), N (Nujing), J (Julie)

Interviewer: H

When J introduces herself: …I now work in an agency that does client analysis for car companies. Every database has the name **Wang Sicong**. (**Theme: Wang Sicong as the national celebrity**)

D: Does Wang Sicong own a motorcade?

J: And then my colleagues will often be alert (with news): wow, **Wang Sicong changes another girlfriend; he bought his new girlfriend what car…and then we go to the database, finding nothing. He hasn't bought her any car, but the news said he did.** His girlfriend is always our potential client…(J goes on talking about how their databases capture the personal information of social media users, such as your gender, hobby, the texts you produce…and then do categorization…)

W: I thought these were done by IT workers.

J: They are in charge of capturing data, we visualize the data and present them to our clients, writing PPTs...(laugh) (we are) modern **peasant workers**(民工)

…Talking about the existence of numerous young female web stars posing themselves sexually in front of web cameras

C: I once wanted to propose a reportage topic on these female hosts who are pretty, good at playing games and interacting with people. Like, **if you can't attract pretty girls' attention, this will be possible online when you…**

W: spend some money (laugh)

C: yes, spending a little money, for example sending a pretty girl a gift, like a car, a yacht, etc. And then the girl will address you: XXX, thank you.

W: **diaosi feel they are favored**. (**theme: a spontaneous use of the term by a group of white-collar women when talking about a typical diaosi behavior**).

P: The first time I got to know web broadcasting, it was seeing my younger brother watching online games. I couldn't really understand the point. But now some girls broadcast their everyday life, even sleeping!

J: this reminds of someone broadcasting David Beckham sleeping many many years ago. (everyone gets excited, talking about this anecdote)

…

H: As girls, how do you feel about so many boys liking watching sexy web stars talking about online games?

D: It has some legitimacy.

J: Yes. You see, you cannot just let them watch Beckham sleeping. **Men and women should be equal**. You cannot just let girls be spoony (花痴)

…

Media use: The six group members, as they summarize by themselves, 'follow things that are so homogenized' (P's words). They all use WeChat and Weibo as two major platforms, reading articles published by public accounts or major opinion leaders. Among these accounts, they are particularly interested in **subcultures** combined with lifestyles, fashions and tastes; **entertainment and celebrity news**; **women's topics**, including some '**popular feminists**' whose posts are worth textual analysis; and **cultural contents**—poetry, films, interesting knowledge, etc. Some of them also use APPs to read news. They mostly spend several hours on social media every day, after getting up, on the way to work, and before

going to bed; but they don't go to Baidu bulletin boards. D is particularly interested in online sayings （段子）, especially those from **'female hooligans' in thinking**.

H: what do you mean by 'female hooligans' in thinking?

D: Reading what they write makes me feel awesome. They just touch upon something obscure, something most people are not willing to talk about.

…

Talking about **the general usage of web buzzwords (first in their work)**

H: I would like to ask, do you feel web buzzwords are an important element when you operate corporate accounts on social media? For example, will you use them in article titles?

D: I think it depends on the feature of your corporations and what you are pursuing……those titles created by punsters (段子手) are very low; they are for the diaosi group. If it's to be more artistic and of high taste, then you can't create titles in this way.

H: Interesting. So you are saying web buzzwords are for **diaosi** to use?

D: Not exactly! It's just for a specific group. Namely (long stop) those who use **weibo** (laugh).

H: Those who use weibo…

D: Yes, I think most buzzwords stemmed from, or gained their popularity via weibo.

N: I think whether to use certain buzzwords or not depend on timing…Because you know, if something's said too much, its effect of communication will surely be bad. When **a buzzword, or a hot social topic** just comes out, I think using it helps communicating, because **it is what people pay most attention to at the moment. Because of its trendiness, it can accelerate spreading**…But you know, the core of many online topics are actually quite low…(*N here uses the example 'UNIQLO', which once became a catchphrase at the beginning of 2016. A video filming a couple having sex in a fitting room of a UNIQLO branch in Beijing was leaked to the Chinese cyberspace and went virus. Many people were suspicious that this was UNIQLO's marketing*). Using it, especially when it's not fresh anymore, will lower your *BiGe* (level)…

P: I think the reasons why Dolley felt that web phrases were a bit low are that **the *earliest* ones came from games, bulletin boards and weibo**. But now I feel **the sources of (creating) web phrases are particularly diverse**. For example, the expression 'life is not just about drifting along at the moment, it's also about poems and the far'. It comes from a song, and it's not low.

……

H: So you feel web buzzwords are transforming from a low level to a higher level?

P: I think now **more and more people are creating this topic on purpose**. Because initially, they (web buzzwords) **were created by really online idlers of bulletin boards**, but now there are many……terms not related to online games at all; they are just used for using them. I feel there is a sense of production. So you can't define whether it's low or not. It depends a specific brand…

C: I think no matter it's online topic or web buzzword, it's, comparatively speaking, a core-like thing……for us who create contents, perhaps **a hot topic needs to be caught, but it has to be wrapped by a cover that has the feature of a brand**. **You cannot just copy the original stuff.**

H: So do you **use web buzzwords in everyday life? (Theme: using web buzzwords in everyday life)**

P: Of course!

H: For example?

J: What is popular recently is XX (other respondents agree)

P: But I'm now fed up with the term XX **because so many people are using it**.

N: I think lots of catchphrases in everyday life are actually web buzzwords. For example……

D: The boundary between the online and offline has broken. A kind of online speech transforms into a common expression that lots of people use.

……

D: so when did everyone start to use web buzzwords?

J: when the term 'gelivable' and something like this (were popular)

P: the earliest one was 'Jia Junpeng, your mum calls you to go home and have dinner' (laughter)……

J: Wow, when was that? I miss the old times.

……

N: Some earliest probably came from **Diba**.

D: Yes, at that time **even People's Daily was impressed**.

H: What motivates you to use web buzzwords? For what purposes?

W: I just feel them **naturally** come out (from my utterances).

J: Yes, **subtly, without consciousness**, they are moved to our vocabulary base (词库).

W: Not necessarily to achieve certain effects on purpose.

D: Web buzzwords are those that can lighten the atmosphere.

W: I think web buzzwords must contain some **laughing points** (笑点) (everyone agrees). And, it can express meanings of a **very long sentence**. So when you chat with others, you naturally use them.

P: When you don't want to talk in length, you just throw an emoji or a sentence (buzzwords) with profound meanings. Then everyone will understand.

W: It's funny that now stickers on WeChat will follow these buzzwords…You don't even need to type in the words; just a sticker does all the job.

D: For example the term *Ran Bing Luan* (然并卵，Yet it does no damn avail)…**It expresses a helpless circumstance, for self-mocking (自嘲，*Zichao*), self-dissolution (自我消解, *Ziwoxiaojie*)**.

N: I think web-buzzwords are sometimes a good way of self-mocking. Under many circumstances, we use it with a tone of self-mocking, self-blackening (P: yes yes yes).

D: It feels that everyone is **self-mocking and self-blackening (自黑, *Zihei*). This is a feature of people nowadays, isn't it? (laugh). None is afraid of self-blackening. You cannot blacken (degrade) me, but I can degrade myself.**

P: and to address a social affair that is especially sensational, like the stock market…when many people want to comment on these hot topics that make you feel helpless, they like using web buzzwords. Because you cannot comment very seriously, you can just use web buzzwords to state your position.

…

D: This reminds me of the annual most used emoji last year—the one crying and laughing at the same time (everyone laughs)…

H: When you use web buzzwords for self-mocking, are you just joking or your joking contains some real emotions?

D,P: Of course there is some real emotion.

D: **It's using a kind of quite humorous and apparently unreal way to express real emotions.**

N: All the jokes contain something serious….

H: Some girls often call certain celebrity their 'husband'…

P: (they) love him a lot!

J: really…**when everyone says national husband, does everyone want to marry Wang Sicong** (laugh)

C: But now the husbands change very quickly.

…(*Omitting the part where the interviewees mention **five celebrities' name in a row**. They mention a national husband who is actually a woman; according to them, this is **the national husband among lesbians**. They also discuss **the mustaches and muscles** of a husband*)

H: Do you think Wang Sicong can be counted as a 'national husband'?

D: Yes, he is, forever (the rest laugh).

N: He's the earliest one, right?

P: He's the 'unexplainable' (迷之, *Mizhi*) national husband, since he has no scale of appearance.

N,D: He has money!

P: Yes, just because of money (laugh).

D: Are you really willing to let him marry you?

P: No!

J: So everyone really likes him and wants to marry him?

P: Of course not! This is just jesting (调侃, *Tiaokan*).

D: Just jesting, but **it to some extent reflects (laugh and stop) one's worship of money**, doesn't it? (everyone laughs)…**(we) all like money! But knowing we can't get it, so we jest in this way.**

…(Talking about little fresh meat)

Lots of discussions: **tender…and handsome**.

W: (He'd) better be **born after 1995**.

P: He's so **tender that it feels one can squeeze water out of him. His hairline hasn't started receding. His belly hasn't started protruding**.

J: and they are all white.

…(*Omitting the serial of celebrities' names*)

C: I used to think little fresh meat's main point should be the 'meat' part—namely, good figure…those dry and thin boys cannot be qualified as little fresh meat…

H: Me too. But after talking with many respondents, I found that they don't really care about muscles.

P: **Asians don't pay much attention to muscles** (everyone laughs)

H: But for you, it's important?

C: Yes…For me, little fresh meat are those who are a bit younger than me, having a good figure, looking handsome. The meat part is quite important.

W: But it's quite scary to imagine those 95s and 00s generation to have muscles (laugh).

P: For me, the main point is 'fresh'—namely he has **enough collagen**—tender to enough to squeeze out water. And he should have **clean (pure) appearance, not sophisticated**.

N: When I was in high school…at that time, when we like certain stars, we sincerely wanted to marry him…And then when we **become aunties**, bumping to a little fresh meat one day, for example…Like one day, I opened the Weibo of W (a star's name). After turning it off, I went to the group chat with my best girlfriends, saying I really want to sleep W (laugh, knocking the table)…This kind of feeling.

H asks **if the respondents will look for someone according the image of Little Fresh Meat (agency?)**.

Both P and D say they man of older age: uncles, old men.

W: I'm the one who can separate the two aspects well. While I follow the stars crazily, I'm very rational in real life. But there some women who are completely immersed in following stars; and they like little fresh meat in real life.

N: **Everyone's different**. I do like the tender type.

C: For me, there's another thing about little fresh meat. If you call someone a little fresh meat, you surely want to sleep him…**You want to eat the fresh meat. You want to possess it**.

P: hm…having desire.

W: How come you are so savage! (burst of laughters)

…

H: Will you regard being a warm man as important?

W: What, **who's still talking about warm man now**?

D: It depends on to whom he's warm, OK.

W: I feel nowadays, saying someone's warm man is like saying he's a **green-tea bitch in men** (everyone laughs).

P: Yes.

D: It's a derogatory term.

W: The term **'warm man' has gone stale** (变味, Bianwei) for a long time.

D: There's a term called 'central air conditioner', because he's warm to anybody.

W: Yes, the term doesn't mean its original meaning anymore.

C: I heard of this before—saying warm man is male green-tea bitch. But I don't think this comparison is accurate. Because **a Green-tea bitch is likely to be both pretty and smart, and then a little bit bitchy. Basically she belongs to the shinning type of person**. But warm man seems not to belong to this type. His condition is just being good to you. If that's the biggest feature of warm men…

P: It shows that he doesn't have other features.

C: Yes, it shows that he's probably quite ordinary, so **not qualifying as such as high-class titled green-tea bitch**.

J: OMG…

W: I think everyone has quite a different definition of green-tea bitch.

N: Yes, for me, green-tea bitch just wears white skirt, and not necessarily that shinning.

W: Just appearing relatively pure…

C mentions two female celebrities—a host and a writer—as her examples: they have both intelligence and beauty. Green tea means elegance and freshness…bitch just means she is a bit calculating, or she wants something more by using some irregular means. I think ordinary people cannot be called green-tea bitch.

P: A green-tea bitch requires some appearance and capabilities; it has some thresholds. But **warm man…he doesn't have any other feature except for being warm**. **And it's common to see the combination of diaosi plus warm man**.

W: I think **warm man needs to have some scale of appearance. Otherwise, one will only feel he's obscene**, not warm (laugh). (Some others agree)

…

P: Anyway, I feel that only when a man doesn't have any other feature will he be associated with warm man. But if you speak about a woman as green-tea bitch, my first impression is definitely that her appearance is above the average.

…

H: Interesting. I thought women won't like the term green-tea bitch.

N,D: When someone calls me this, it will surely offend me.

D: But most cases are that women dislike (看不惯) women, right. It's more the **non-green-tea-bitch group don't like the green-tea-bitch group**.

N: My initial understanding is that green-tea-bitch refers to those girls who always wear white cloth shoes, apparently innocent, but just…

D: being calculating…

N: Always wearing make-ups that don't look like make-ups.

H: Calculating about what?

D: Mostly about **relationships** (感情, *Ganqing*).

N: Yes, typically relationships.

P: **relationships and jobs**…To share with you what an elder colleague of mine said: in fact men don't care if this person is a green-tea bitch, as long as she's pretty. **Green-tea bitch is merely used by a woman to morally judge another woman**.

D: That's true. That's true.

…

N: I just feel there exist two kinds of values. Some people are born to be fond of gaining things by some means, but others disdain this kind of behavior. So for me, those who gain things by utilizing some means are bitchy.

H: So will you use the term bitchy to describe men who behave in this way?

N: No. Bitchy is surely a term gendered towards women. Perhaps I will use a different term to describe men…

P: Because initially green-tea bitch probably refers to girls who, through appearing girlish and sweet (撒撒娇), though saying some words to men, let men help them do things. Their **original sin** is that they want to earn something without working for it step by step…(N and D agree)

D: Yes, probably using their face and appearance as their capitals…

H: Talking about this, we can naturally transit to the topic of 'female man' which seems to be the opposite…

D: Like the ones sitting here (everyone laughs)

P: Like we **female workers** (打工妹) (laugh)

N: I don't like the term 'female man' at all, although I know my personality and way of thinking are sometimes quite manly. The term just doesn't sound nice.

D: But you have never called yourself female man? I often call myself in this way. Only when I can't change the water bucket of drinking water machine will I feel I'm not manly. Under other circumstances, I always feel I'm a man.

C: I think this term sets boundaries on what men should do and what women should do. But in fact, a mature woman, like when we independently do something, like changing a water bucket or something like that, these are what women can do as well. So under this kind of circumstance, when (I'm) called female man, (I'll) feel perhaps **he doesn't think you are supposed to be independent, or indicating that you are not well dressed, not having feminine charms**.

J: I was just thinking, if this term can find an equivalent one in the other gender…and if yes, what kind of feeling it will trigger in the other gender; is it the same...

P: Sissy…

J: Because I think this has a lot to do with one's understanding of gender. For example I once read a novel by Higashino Keigo where he thinks being the features of men or women just constitute certain percentages in a person (omitting some details of the novel)…Those features of men and women are   stereotypical impressions…I also don't like tagging someone based on one's apparent features.

P: I think the term female man has some gender discrimination. Because you use it when a woman is especially independent or tackling something all by herself. **But I don't think being independent constitutes a criterion for defining men or women.** And when a woman is not well dressed and being called with this term…

D: So I'm the problematic one here, right (everyone laughs)

P: No no, **it can be used for self-mockery. But when lots of people use the term**, there seems to be some subconsciously gender distinction, I think.

…(*omitting the part when they talked about other terms related to femininity—soft girls and naïve-white-sweet. The group reaches the consensus that these terms are just to describe different states (状态) of a single person, not necessarily for describing a group. They also say they will never pretend to be soft or sweet just to win men's affection*)

P: when I talk to those **born after 90s, I tend to use this kind of term, to use their language**. Also when talking about news and gossips, I will use these terms more often.

W: I think these terms can make others immediately understand what you mean…they are mostly neutral, just describing some features; but **you still need to judge whether they are mean or not when using them**.

H: Do you think **black wood ear** is a mean term?

D: Very mean!

P: And I think it's a dirty term.

…

D: I think its intention is definitely vicious…women are likely to call themselves female man or naïve-white-sweet, **but will never call ourselves black wood ear**.

C: I think one's sex life is not supposed to be defined by others.

D: Yes, this is a question of lifestyle. One doesn't have the rights to judge others'.

N: Because when you say someone's black wood ear, this will surely be derogatory (because) in our understanding, the term has a derogatory tone. But the question is **why women choosing this kind of lifestyle should be criticized in this way, while…**

P: there is no equivalent term on the male side. (Theme: agency)

…

D: This kind of woman is also called a bus, because one can embark on a bus as one wants to.

C: This indicates an **active-passive relationship: women are to be acted upon, while men are to act upon others. But now we shouldn't have this kind of notion anymore**.

H: Men having lots of sex are called a seeder. Someone told me several days ago.

N: But I don't think the term seeder is that derogatory; it even has…

D: Men will feel proud when hearing this kind of term…They have a fundamental sense of superiority, spontaneously tending to degrade women.

…

Talking about **diaosi**

J: I remember when the term just came out, Feng Xiaogang criticized it on Weibo.

D: The origin of the term is actually quite dirty, but **its fate is very different from black wood ear** (everyone laughs).

P: diaosi now has nothing to do with Diao (penis). It's completely…

D: Independent.

N: Because it's so widely used. Everyone is using (it). I think behind it, there is…

D: Self-mockery. It's definitely related to self-mockery.

N: I think surely has something to do with **economic levels**. That's why it resonates among such a huge population.

J: **Is it like a grassroots version of loser**?

D: It equals grassroots.

P: It equals grassroots, but not necessarily the same with loser.

C: I recently got this feeling that one's salary and economic condition may not be very bad, but one's life habit and style can be diaosi-style. No matter how much one earns, he/she is still stingy under those circumstances when one should be stingy (everyone laughs). So when jI ust heard the association of diaosi with grassroots, I don't really feel in the same way. **Grassroots refers to a relatively objective class, while diaosi is a state you can decide by yourself**. You can also have Wang Sicong's wealth, but…

P: …live very diaosi(ly).

C: Yes, in terms of how you behave and deal with others.

P: **There's a saying that even after a diaosi achieves 'reversing and attacking', he/she's still a diaosi. It means economically, this person has got rid of being a diaosi, but his/her lifestyle is still the same**. (**Theme: from an economic diaosi to a cultural diaosi**).

C: Lifestyle and way of thinking. That was a joke between friends. One recently spotted a very good flat, and its location is also very good; that's a luxurious house (豪宅). Then someone said, the house is also very close to a tube station. We then said, this is a typically diaosi way of thinking. You know, those who can afford to live there, they perhaps don't need to think about taking tubes.

…H asks whether the group members feel that diaosi is gendered towards men. Most of them say no, since they also use the term to call themselves.

W: I use the term to emphasize my poverty in front of my boss. Basically, all of the people who are not the second-generation of the rich or of the official will say that.

N: When I use it, it represents, just as what C just said, a kind of style in life…like eating street food, foot pulling (抠脚)…

C: I think compared to eating street food and foot pulling which everyone does, ways of thinking vary more among different people. Some people will have a broader horizon and long eyesight, while others' horizon is narrower, just seeing the present. The latter is closer to diaosi…

H: When the term diaosi just came out, it was often used together with 'moving bricks', or saying diaosi's work is moving bricks. Will you use the term as well?

J: Yes, every day when we deal with data, we are **moving bricks**…Doing some **boring, mechanical and repetitive work that doesn't entail much technique is called moving bricks**. It's used to describe a state of having no choice but to remain and build the socialist…

N: For me, working for money is called moving bricks, no matter it's meaningful or not. Like when I start writing a news article, I will call myself as starting to move bricks…devoting labour (付出劳动) is called moving bricks (laugh), it has nothing to do with your personal intelligence.

H: Do you think those who do move bricks in real life (some light laughter)…are they diaosi?

J: Are you referring to migrant workers?

H: Yes.

N: I think our work doesn't have fundamental difference from theirs. It was previously said online that the **white-collar in office buildings are those who used to work in textile factories**.

P: those blue-collar workers.

N: **textile female workers**. I think this is exactly the case.

D: For me, I think migrant workers are those who are relatively old (middle-aged)

H: But there are also young migrant workers.

D: Young migrant workers…perhaps in terms of their clas..(unfinished word) life status, they are diaosi. But for those who are older, I won't use this term to describe them.

H: So you think diaosi refers to the younger generation?

D: Yes, the group of youth.

W. Why…there are also middle-aged diaosi, namely those who are **still mediocre** reaching the middle age.

D: **But the term itself is coined by youngsters. It is relatively more accepted by youth**. Middle-aged people will not use it to describe themselves, definitely.

C: I feel that diaosi is something for self-mocking. When you **still have the possibility of reversing and attacking will you call yourself diaosi**. The middle-aged tend to have a more stable state…And from the perspective of the whole society, depending on **what kind of reference you have in mind; if that's the so-called successful people**, most of us are diaosi. Perhaps at that moment, people won't have the interest in self-depreciating…I think when one's young, self-depreciating is alright; but you will feel desperate if doing so in the middle age.

H: Let's go back to the question: do you think migrant workers can be called diaosi?

J: er…

(four-second stop)

P: I don't know….

N: **I feel I had never thought about the question.**

D: Why do you single them out? (Others agree) **Everyone is diaosi.**

C: I think your evaluation of other people and self-evaluation should be separate. Because everyone's **self-expectation** is different.

H: You mean that migrant workers may not have such a high expectation?

C: Um…I think diaosi is something that **arises from comparison**. When we call someone a diaosi, perhaps we don't have this right of judgment. But perhaps it will only be used for self-mockery or for joking between friends. But to (long stop) those whose identity is much different from you, it's very hard to make judgment…**Because you don't understand them. We don't understand each other**.

N: The only people I regard as diaosi among those I contact are, except for myself, those who call themselves diaosi quite often. I won't call other…

P: People with whom I'm not familiar

N: Who have never expressed themselves as the diaosi group.

D: **I think when a white-collar really calls a migrant worker diaosi, this is likely to be seriously thinking this migrant worker is diaosi**. It's judging him/her. We don't have the rights to say so.

P: diaosi describes a certain state, not someone or the job someone takes…Also, I feel diaosi is just used among a group of close friends to describe each other's state. For example, when my colleague **is dressed very poorly**, (I will say) 'you look very diaosi today'. I won't dare to use it to describe who I'm not familiar with.

D: Yes, yes. (If you call someone you are not familiar with), you have some **sense of superiority**. You do think this person is a loser, so you call him/her diaosi.

W: So when we use this term, it won't carry a derogatory tone. It's more for self-mocking and jesting.

J: So when the term is used to describe others, it still has some discrimination. Except for describing oneself, if the term is put on others, its original intentional has some derogatory tone. That's how I feel after listening to what others just said.

N: Not really for me. I think one won't use a derogatory term to describe oneself, and this standard should be consistent. Describing oneself and describing others are the same.

D: **How to say, self-mocking and mocking others are different. Anyway, the most fundamental starting point of diaosi is to mock. Mocking others is seriously judging while mocking oneself is self-dissolution.**

H: Talking about migrant workers, there is another term, *shamate*…Do you agree with my association in this way?

N. No, I think shamate is a very minor group, who has its own (everyone laughs) distinct tastes.

P: I just want to ask, except for hairstyle, what else does the term point to?

W: **shamate should be related to wash-cut-dry,** right?

Everyone: yes!

W: How come it's related to migrant workers? I think they are completely separated.

D: I think every social group has different tastes. Those who can appreciate shamate are probably migrant workers, whose taste is relatively low.

N: Because I feel rural…

P: Urban fringe （城乡结合部）？

N: (I wonder) **those young people of the marriage age in rural areas, are their identities migrant workers?**

H: From the *hukou* perspective, they are migrant workers.

N: Yes, they are born in villages, but they have probably never got in touch with normal (agricultural life)…They have left villages for cities to do manual labour. I think shamate is part of that group, belonging to them.

D: (*shamate*) is what's popular among them.

P: I think shamate is the maverick (标新立异) group among them.

N: Maverick, are you sure with this wording?

D: You can think about how we went through initially. Like F4[68] who were also influenced by Japan-Korean, they were once at the stage of *shamate*. I think this is related to one's level of taste. And tastes probably reflect lots of things—your economic conditions, your social strata, your cultural strata, etc. For example, our popular culture 20 years ago, and ourselves in general were relatively **low**. Now that our tastes have become **mature**, we will look down upon (the popular culture in the past), regarding them as *shamate*. But those who are still struggle for subsistence, those coming from villages and small towns, their level of tastes remains there.

C: I think they have something that **lags behind**. For example, when we look at the styles of F4 at that time, we now think, how shamate they are. But when we were children, we saw them quite fashionable. Then, probably the perception of trend in villages slightly lags behind ours. Now if they appear in this kind of style, we think how unfashionable and foolish they are, a bit shamate. Meanwhile, as you said, maybe they have…I don't know…a quite complicated identification problem, since they are not traditional peasants, but still different from youngsters in big cities. Perhaps they want to be maverick, to be the (fashion) pioneer of that group, or they have some other complex thoughts. Lastly, I feel shamate are those work in the wash-cut-dry. They have the conditions to change their hairstyles, wearing tight pants…perhaps (these conditions) facilitate the emergence of shamate.

N: I absolutely don't agree that F4 are shamate (P laughs). So based on this, I don't think shamate's tastes lag behind…I just feel this culture belongs to them. And this culture is **not understandable** except for those who are located in that strata, this culture and having this kind of life experience.

C: The reason why I think there is something lagging behind is because these shamate are also upgrading…Perhaps they add some extra elements that appear redundant to the styles of male stars, but they are still proceeding. It can only be said their evolving tastes still lag behind.

N: compared to what?

C: compared to what we contact in daily life, the so-called popular culture.

N: Then why there exists this lag-behind, since their information-collection channel is now the same to ours.

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[68]A super popular band from Taiwan at the beginning of the 21[st]century.

H introduces that the migrant workers he interviewed usually use QQ much more than Wechat.

W: That's not a big deal. The post-2000 and post 1985 generations all use QQ, especially the post-2000s. **They think that Wechat is used by old people**, like us. You know, popularizing the stars favored by the post-1995 generation needs to resort to QQ zone[69]. **We didn't know what that was.**

D: Their means for collecting information may be same to ours, but what they receive is different.

N: Yes, this is related to their personal tastes.

D: Then tastes are largely related to educational backgrounds.

N: But this has nothing to do with lagging behind, right.

P: In fact for me, shamate are a group of people, how to say, who would like to embrace the city life. My old home (老家) is a town center where I can immediately spot that group of shamate. They are very easy to distinguish from the other local people. But their culture is also not the urban popular culture. It makes you feel they want to leave villages and small towns, to differentiate themselves, but they cannot mingle into the city either. I think they are open-minded, willing to experience new things, to experience cities. They don't want to be stuck in original birthplaces. I think shamate contains a certain attitude.

J: I agree. I think shamate is a kind of progress. In my impression, **their parents perhaps appear in the same image—carrying a sneak leather bag, wearing a helmet**. The younger generation wants to express themselves in a certain way; they want you to notice their aspirations. This is a very big difference from their parent-generation. But perhaps, they haven't reached another level, namely having not taken into account public moralities (公德心, *Gongdexin*) (burst of laughter)

H: What do public moralities mean?

P: Affecting urban scenes…(影响市容)

J: **In a most civilized society, you won't express your liberty at the cost of hindering others. That is, when they express their aesthetics, they haven't thought of others** (laugh)

H: Have you seen shamate in person?

J: No, I **just saw them in some news and pop-up webpages, not in real life**.

D: I don't think we have the rights to judge others appearance…we just respect their existence. But if they really affect other, for example, when taking trains…

P: **The train is indeed a place you can most see shamate** (laugh)

D: If they just sit there quietly (everyone laughs), I don't care. B**ut if they start using copy-cat mobile phones to play music loudly, I will mind. You bother the whole carriage**.

P: But generally, the old generation (in rural areas) will say they are slovenly (吊儿郎当). Yes, the older generations will use this phrase to describe them, regarding them as rebel teenagers who won't be like this after growing up. Like my cousin, when he does manual labour in cities, he wears red and long hairs, all pointing to the air. But when he goes home in Spring Festival to see his parents, he will be well behaved.

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[69]QQ Zone is the social media function of QQ.

…W talks about what she saw in the streets of Tokyo, those Visual Kei youngsters: So I kind of understand the tastes of shamate.

D: No, no, no the Visual Kei in Japan should be **discussed separately** (from shamate). It has its own aesthetical system.

W: But shamate has its own culture too (laugh)

…

N: I feel shamate perhaps represents a taste that common people have difficulties accepting.

…

P: Another thing is **that almost all the news related to shamate is a set of pictures**. It feels as if the elite or high culture is judging the aesthetics of another group. If it aims to explain a phenomenon, I don't think (that's wrong)…If that's just pictures, like during Spring Festival, shamate dominates the streets, I think this **is just a cultural judging or clamoring**

H: Let's talk about the last term 'cancer of straight guy'. Do you use this term in daily life?

N: Yes, when I accuse my male friends, I will always say **cancer of straight guy**.

P: Yes!

H: Under what kinds of circumstances, will you accuse your male friends?

D: When they offend women.

P: When they appear especially macho (大男子主义).

N: When talking about some social affairs and they indicate this macho tendency.

H: What do you mean by 'macho'

D: Having a sense of superiority as a man, putting women in the inferior position.

P: For example, when a girl wears little on a bus, some men would say you are offending me in this way. I will say, this is a cancer of straight man (knocking the table)

N: Like when a male celebrity said not allowing woman to have meal on the table will bring luck to the family. I think this is hopeless cancer of straight guy.

H: Do you think that Cancer of straight guy also includes the aspect of dressing.

D: I think using straight guy is enough. It doesn't need 'cancer'.

P: I feel one can categorize two types of male appearances—straight guy and sissy men.

D: Yes straight men perhaps just don't have tastes (lots of laugh).

N: I think cancer of straight guy has more to do with his notions than his tastes of clothes.

D: If I refer a man to cancer of straight guy, I'm surely criticizing him. But when I say straight guy, it's just an objective evaluation.

P: Yes, that' OK. I agree (laugh)

…

N: A friend of mine calls me cancer of straight girls, saying '**you call us cancer of straight guys at every turn. In this way, you have cancer of straight girls**'. (laugh)

D: I once read a post of 'popular science' saying cancer of straight girls refers to women who put too much attention to (men's) appearance, and their own conditions are not very good. They are bit like female diaosi, but they have very high requirements of men. This is called cancer of straight girls.

N: Sounds like me (everyone laughs)

H: you are mocking yourself again. Then do you think phoenix men all have cancer of straight guys?

D: **If he's a phoenix man, cancer of straight guy is already indicated in that term**.

C: I think there are overlaps.

D: I think most phoenix men have cancer of straight guys.

P: so serious?

D: If he's called a phoenix man, it means he has **simple-minded filial piety for his parents**, **regarding women as the instrument of reproducing**, etc. The proportion is especially big.

H: Do you understand phoenix men as those men who were born in rural areas and who manage to stay in the cities through individual struggling; and then they marry urban-born women…

P: Not yet married.

D: Er…Perhaps I have some misunderstanding of the term. I used to read lots of posts on Tianya.com[70] which tells stories of various extreme cases (极品).

P: Phoenix men are often associated with extreme men, not often with straight guys.

C: I feel the two terms overlap. I think phoenix man is an objective status. Perhaps his family background is relatively poor, but he achieves something through individual efforts…as D said, the proportion of having cancer of straight guys is probably higher among this kind of men. Perhaps the proportion is relatively high, so the two terms overlap, but surely not the same.

…Omitting the part where the group reaches the consensus that **phoenix man refers to a man whose family background is poor but manages to reach a higher status and to marry a woman whose social level he may not have been able to reach.** This woman then further helps him to move up along the social ladder.

…

N's understanding is the same to H's previous elaboration: **The problem is that the notions of their respective classes are completely different. I think the values of those rural grown-ups are very different from urban grown-ups. That's why people connect phoenix men with cancer of straight guys, because they are likely to be born in families that prioritize men over women. And this scenario is not typical to urban families. Their cancer of straight guy comes from the environment in which they were born. They have a very strong filial piety towards their parents. Also they insist a lot on reproducing the next generation. I think this kind of thing does exit, possibly (a very typical description of phoenix men by a urban female grown-up).**

Talking about **potent CEO.**

N: I think **women tend to, by nature, have a crush on authoritative men.**

P: Because women most like the feeling of admiring and adoring.

D: You mean women like being conquered?

H: Among the following four types—warm men, potent CEOs, little fresh meat and the tall-rich-handsome, which type do you prefer to contact first?

C: **It depends on what kind of purpose.**

D: All these terms are suitable for daydreaming (意淫). In real life, we won't really think…

N: It's so hard to choose between little fresh meat and potent CEOs (everyone laughs).

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[70] An online forum where people share lots of stories in life.

P: Potent president. It feels that little fresh meat just has appearance, nothing else.

N: No! (lasting laughter)

H: Will the terms affect you when choosing who you are going to date?

Everyone **says no**.

W: These terms are all **too partial**. They can only describe the tip of the iceberg of a person.

H: You won't hope that your boyfriends a bit warmer, more handsome, and meatier?

N: It does no avail by hoping (bursts of laughter).

D: Yes these groups are too high to touch, **so we all...tend to look up at them—like potent CEOs**.

H: The same with the tall-rich-handsome?

D: It depends on how tall he is, how rich and how handsome (laugh).

H: which is the most important?

D: Everyone is important (everyone laughs).

P: If you have to throw away one, which will you choose? At least the tall can be abandoned first.

N: No, I will choose rich (laugh).

D: No...what do I want a tall-rich-handsome for (bursts of laughter)

N: If you had the tall-rich-handsome, **you could let him do whatever you want**.

D: No, do you want to sleep him, or just simply...No, it's really hard to make a choice, from the perspective of sleeping him.

N: Why it has to do with money if you want to sleep him?

H: What do you mean by 'sleeping' him?

D: Not really wanting to sleep him...hm...also really wanting to sleep him.

C: It means having sexual urge with certain kind of men.

D: Between Jack Ma and Hu Ge, who do you want to sleep (lots of laugh).

Appendix 6.3 Transcript of an individual interview

Interviewee: Daniel (D), a 30-year-old white-collar man who identifies himself as gay. He was born and grew up in Shanghai.

Media use: Wechat, Weibo. I used to go to some bulletin boards when I was a student, not anymore. I usually react slowly to a hot social issue. First because I don't have time to follow it; second, I feel there is lots of misleading information when the issue just emerges. So I would prefer to wait for a while until some authoritative voices come out. Their opinions are more insightful.

D used to work in a state-owned institution, but he chose to leave. Now he works in a e-commerce company where he has to learn lots of new things: my weekends are used to read books or take lessons. I have to do this. **I feel there are many outstanding people surrounding me. If I don't work hard, I feel I can't catch them**. D likes reading psychological books and reflecting on his own identities. He feels that others' opinions can have some impact on his own mentality.

H: Is there any buzzword that has impact your mentality?
D: Male god (男神). The term is the opposite to diaosi. I like to call my favourite stars and my examples as male god. He's probably outstanding in terms of knowledge and social status. The term gives you a feeling that his position is way above (高高在上)...When I was a child, my parents and teachers always said I was shy and introvert. **These words affected how I behaved** under social circumstances or when I had to make a public speech. **I didn't realize the impacts of tags on me** until I went through a serious period of depression and talked with psychiatrists...I feel now have a very complex emotion towards the tag gay. First, the society generally indicates this tag is not positive. Second, even within the gay circle, people talk a lot about leaving the circle as it is very messy. Fortunately I got to know a gay NGO which held some lectures from time to time. I also resort to douban.com where I met my first batch of 'gay friends' (laugh).
H: Do you mean close friends when you say 'gay friends'?
D: Actually among the LGBTs, **we don't use the term gay friends a lot.** It is used more by non-LGBTs. In first-tier cities like Shanghai, people's acceptance of LGBTs is slightly better than second and third-tier cities. So they will joke with their friends, saying we are good gay friends, or we are having gay sex, or I will fuck your asshole. They are just using these to have fun. But we describe our relationship quite seriously. So we don't often use this term.
H: So you just use 'gay friends' to describe serious relationships?
D: No, we will use boyfriends or girlfriends to describe serious relationships. **In fact my best friend is a straight man, and I can call him my gay friend.** Between two gay people, if we temporarily use the concept of male-females, which I don't really agree with, we can say the **two female gays** when they are together, they call themselves good sisters or good gay friends. In fact, the phrase good sisters (好姐妹) is quite popular among the gay, similar to how straight people joke by using 'gay friends'. But **between two male gays, I don't know,**

maybe good brothers.

H: So you use gay friends quite rarely among the gay circle?

D: Personally, I don't hear it often. I just feel since we are already gay, why do we need to say we are good gay friends. It's a bit weird. **I feel this term emerged first from mainstream media which are oriented towards straight people.** It just describes two close friends who yet don't have serious relationship. 'Good sisters' is similar. That's the key point.

H: You mentioned that 'male god' gives you a feeling that he is way above. Do you think the tall-rich-handsome gives a similar feeling?

D: I think **tall-rich-handsome applies more to heterosexual people. Like some female colleagues of mine joke about their blind-dated men: this is people is tall-rich-handsome, is second generation of the rich, blablabla.** I feel, perhaps among the gay, male god is used much more than tall-rich-handsome. Because we are all men, we emphasize more on carnal desire (肉欲). Male god is now used as a gimmicky term by some gay social media, for example a male god's broadcasting. Before male god, a similar term is 'socialites' (名媛). It is very imagery: a typical gay socialite has crew-cut, muscles and moustache.

H: Talking about carnal desire, there is another online term 'little fresh meat'. Do you feel this term is more heterosexual oriented too?

D: No, we also use this term. There are two categories little fresh meat and uncles. The term is quite neutral, slightly commendatory. It describes **a young man who looks especially pure and sun shining**.

H invites D to click those terms that serve as influential tags on him. D chooses warm men and little princess.

H: Let's talk about warm men first.

D: I like warm men, their personality of caring others. I think the soft and caring features of warm men are especially attractive for women and gays. I think people generally feel a sense of insecurity in this society. I don't think a very strong or muscular person will make me feel secure. Instead, a soft and caring person, no matter as my friend or lover, he will make feel very comfortable. I don't think warm men are very obvious from their appearances. You can only find this feature through deep interactions.

H: So you don't warm men have much to do with appearances?

D: No. I even think those who don't look very good can also be warm men. I feel a person's interiority can really make a difference. But I don't know, **now mass media**…I once read an article saying: don't find a warm man to be your husband. Also don't find an economical man to be your husband. **It appears to be especially feminist**. It will analyze a variety of problems related to economical men. And warm men are warm to everybody. They are just spreading a very big net to catch fishes, not sincere with the relationships. **Only if he's warm to you only, he is really serious with you**. So you see, from different perspectives, a tag can mean quite different things.

H: Do you accept this logic?

D: Absolutely not. I'm critical. I don't know. Perhaps these girls are relatively independent. There are actually several warm men in our company. I once blurted out the term to someone. This boy is not strong and tall. But he appears to be very nice to girls subconsciously, like passing a pair of chopsticks to a girl during lunch time, or helping someone to carry something. These acts are very sweet. So Once I saw it, and I just blurted it

out: wow, warm man! He looked at me for a second, saying nothing. Perhaps for some girls, he is a green-tea bitch, very pretentious. But perhaps only those who care will care about this.

H: What about economical men? What's wrong with them?

D: Let me give an example. You know among Shanghainese, there is a group of people who look down upon outsiders. **They don't want phoenix men**. The man must have a house; he must include my name on the certificate of the real-estate. I despise these people a lot. I remember the article's opinion is that for the sake of a woman's own interests, you'd better not to find an economical man. An economical man struggles for many years, just being able to have a starbucks coffee equally with others. And you have to return loans together with him. It's better for you to find a tall-rich-handsome, something like that. These people are very pragmatic. I recently become interested in feminism, finding that it is still something very new in China. It also has lots of schools of thinking.

H: So you also tick the term Cancer of straight men.

D: Yes. Straight men are straight men. But if you use straight-men cancer, the term is not that adorable. I think straight-men cancer refers to a way of thinking that take for granted what women should do. Like women should stay at home; why women learn so many things, after all you have to rely on me. But I think it's mainly because of the social environment. Those having straight-men cancer are actually in fact are very low-esteemed. They need to put on a strong shell to protect themselves. I think they are in fact very fragile. But the corresponding term of straight-men cancer is cancer of straight women. It means that in some straight women's hearts, there exists a very serious straight-men cancer. They just feel we women should do this or that. By the way, **there is also a group of gays who have straight-men cancer. No matter it's related to the so-called male or female gays**. (

H: I was lucky enough to interview one…(omitting the part where H described what this interviewee thinks). In that kind of scenario, it's not really appropriate to describe them as straight-men cancer. #00:42:39-8#

D: Yes, not very appropriate, because they are not straight men (laugh). **So what is implied in this term (straight-men cancer) is some gender discriminations**. Some gay men just think they are women, quite many. I was also once confused with this issue, namely does gay equal female. If yes, what's wrong with being a woman. Then, I think after all, (one) looks down upon women. Because you discriminate women, you regard them as inferior to men, so once you are tagged with anything related to   women, you feel it's humiliating. For example, being called sissy. I used to be called sissy, and I would really ashamed and angry. But now, I just feel I don't care. That's your mouth. Also, I feel being sissy is perhaps becoming a trend in the gay circle. Because it somewhat feels like liberating one's nature. There are some gay men who just don't hide their identification with femininity at all. I won't feel they are sissy; I feel they manage to freely express themselves. But there are some people that make me uncomfortable. They have straight-men cancer--taking for granted women being subordinate to men. Since you feel women are inferior, and you identify with them, so you are willing to do inferior things. **You just look down on yourself by being a gay who identify with women but considering women as inferior**. They have gender dismicrination by themselves. I don't like this kind of gay, who are actually quite a lot. Like they will regard them as soft, dependent, in pursuit of a tall-rich-handsome, rich men.

#00:46:25-5#

H: In your opinion, those looking for a sugar daddy, for a tall-rich-handsome, they have straight-men cancer too? #00:46:24-2#

D: Yes, I feel they accept the gender discrimination that women are inferior to men and keep saying this kind of thing all the time--I want a sugardaddy (求包养)...(Omitting the part when D says he's passionate when reading feminist articles--the real feminism that advocates equality between men and women). I really think, in some ways, women are excellent! Why does one have to treat men and women differently? My mom is the most wonderful person in the world. I get far more spiritual comforts and encouragement from her, while what my dad gives me in terms of these are in fact negative. He just kept criticizing me, or giving me some materialistic rewards. But I didn't care about that. I want more a hug, from my father. In my opinion, I think women are greater than men. They are understanding, intelligent, flexible to changing situations. Men just have strong bodies, excelling in some fields. I'm not saying gay necessarily get along well with female colleagues, but it happens a lot (laugh). These female colleagues have so many merits while the straight male colleagues I've met so far, they are very hesitating in personality, not brave enough to try new things. So in summary, I don't think power, intelligence and leadership have anything to do with gender, but personalities.   #00:51:13-3#

H: Talking about this, do you call those who capable women '**female men**' in daily life? #00:51:12-0#

D: No, I don't. Unless she calls herself a female man, em...I will joke with her. But I won't use this term. Because I don't it is necessarily a good term. I have a colleague, who, on the first day saied to the company, don't treat me like a woman, I'm actually a female man. She's very independent, and we get along very well. She won't pretend to like 'oh, this bottle is very hard to open, can you do me a favour?' She just gives you this impression that people are all equal. So I won't feel I need to protect her deliberatively, as if out of a nature-born masculinity. Of course, as a man, I know sometimes it's necessary for me to use my strength. But I won't feel a sense of deliberation (刻意的感觉). She doesn't have gender discrimination. **And there was TV that got controversy. After that, I feel the term female man is not necessarily a good term for some women**.   #00:53:36-3#

H: Yes, some straight men will use this term to describe women who are not willing to dress-up as women. #00:53:29-9#

D: Yes, they don't have femininity. Also, **when straight men use this term, I don't think it's commendatory. It's real irony**. But I also know some colleagues, who are even more straight-forward than me; they seem to be not knowing how to be sophisticated in workplaces to deal with the complex relationship. And they associate being straight-forward with men. So they call themselves female men, and they don't care if this is mostly a derogatory term.   #00:56:29-3#

H: Do you think cancer of straight guy has an aspect related to dressing, tastes of clothes? #00:56:28-2#

D:Yes, it is to some extent related to that. **And I think this is also a kind of discrimination**. Gay men will sometimes also stand on a highland to judge those don't dress so well. And they will say, look, how **cancer-of-straight-menly** this person dresses. Perhaps, it's due to the fact that straight men have conventionally held most discursive power in the society...so

we are still in a patriarchal society right? So women's opinons can rarely have impact on men, unless it's between a couple. So the reason why straight men don't care that much about their dressing is that no one is gonna pick on (挑剔) them. Maybe their girlfriends don't care or they don't have girlfriends (laugh). But among the gay, perhaps it's because we are all men and quite visually focused, so we are a little bit like girls, dressing ourselves more decently, tidier, or to look more handsome. Because just as I said, men are focused on carnal desire. Being more muscular and sexier is more likely to attract others. So you will generally feel that gays look younger than straight men at the same age...**I feel that except for those business men, most straight men don't really care about their image**. So from a gay's perspective, my feeling is that when saying someone has cancer of straight guy, it's saying you are not good, a little bit discriminatory. It has something to do with tastes. But I don't think this is a big deal. You just buy some more clothes than others, and knowing how to dress up.   #01:01:32-9#

H: the previous interviewee also said that he feel he's obliged to dress up well so as to distinguish himself from straight men. And he also thinks that gays assume the responsibility of the society's tastes. Do you have the same kind of feeling? #01:01:19-6#

D: yes, to some extent. It's similar to those gays who express their nature to an extreme end. Since we are discriminated in this environment, and we know that this discriminatory force is so huge that we cannot confront you, so why not just living colorfully? So we take some pride in the fact that most people in the fashion industry are gay. We just have more tastes than you. We are more unconventional (标新立异) than you, this kind of feeling. Of course, I don't totally resonate with this. And also you mentioned that women would sometimes praise men by saying you dress very straight-manly today? #01:02:13-4#

H: No, they are actually criticizing. #01:02:12-0#

D: Listen, actually among the gays, **to say some looks very straight, it is a praise**. This is interesting, isn't it? Perhaps you feel that I don't really look like a gay man from the appearance and behavior. In fact, my features to some extent attract other gays a lot. Because they will feel I have some masculinities of straight men, and after all, gay men like men. Personally, I'm lazy; I don't care that much about cosmetics. I also do lots of sports. I also enjoy watching sports. All these seem very straight from gays' eyes.   #01:04:18-0#

H: This is very interesting. It can show that the same word signifes... #01:04:18-0#

D: **very differently under different circumstances, and among different identities**...**About straight-men cancer, I feel when some gays use the term, it's indeed a bit discriminatory**. Unless someone's is really macho and hurting others feelings, it is legitimate to describe him as having straight-men cancer. If someone just dresses up plainly, or doesn't look very nice, I just feel he doesn't really have the opportunity to develop his other potentials. It's not necessary to be so mean. Yes, I feel that lots of gay men are very mean.   #01:08:13-3#

...Talking about 'little princess' （小公举）, D feels that among the gay, this term is like the down-to-earth version of male-god (男神). It is to describe someone who's a bit masculine, but at the same time quite sensitve and soft. It combines both tones of teasing and cherishinng. #01:08:21-0#

D: I heard this term first from my gay friends. Then I realized that the mainstream society is also using it. Like when some e-commerce commercials also use 'little princess'. I sometimes feel that I can stand outside the gay circle, making comments on its various rules. Because I

also joked by calling myself little princess, because I have already internalized something. **So I don't think calling others and oneself husband and wives, little sisters, or little princess will make me feel degraded. Because I feel this is just a joke. It is just a form of address (称谓). If you don't internalize (the logic behind it) first, it will be just a form of address**, just like those loving words between a couple. #00:00:44-8#

...half-time break #00:00:44-8#

D: So previously I got serious back pain, and I could only stay on bed. At that time, I called my self little princess, jokingly. I didn't really mean it. I also jested by saying to those visiting me that I want to find a sugar daddy. #00:00:43-1#

H: So this is completely a joking? And you don't actually want to find a sugar daddy（求包养）? #00:00:33-8#

D: Yes. **Of course, there is a slight sense of seriousness that I really wanted to find a sugardaddy. Who doesn't want to embrace a thigh** (抱大腿) (laugh). #00:01:54-7#

H: Let's talk about a perhaps serious term, diaosi. How do you understand the term? #00:01:54-1#

D: For my, it's a negative tag. Because I think it seems **quite like an excuse** made by a group of people to justify them not working hard. Because I'm a diaosi, no matter how hard I work, I will never be like the tall-rich-handsome, who can manage to date the goddess as they want. Because I'm a diaosi, no matter how hard I work, my salary will never be increased. Because I'm a diaosi and my father is not Li Gang, so I will never succeed (出人头地）. **And those people around me who used to call themselves diaosi, from my eyes, they are not diaosi at all**. So I really don't like this kind of behavior. #00:03:00-5#

H: What do you mean they are not really diaosi? #00:02:58-7#

D: Because their family backgrounds are not bad. They are civil servants. **Because my family background is not good; I used to have a low self-esteem due to this. So I will never call myself diaosi. If I really call myself this way, it is to admit that I'm inferior**. And you are not diaosi, but calling yourself diaosi, for me....it feels like people who get fed well don't understand those who are startving (饱汉不知饿汉饥). This is, like you said, a bit serious. It's related to my personal experience. Perhaps some people won't feel (the) diaosi (phenomenon) is a big deal. But I just don't think diaosi is a good term. #00:04:07-5#

H: But objectively speaking, your understanding of diaosi is, first, this person comes from a humble family background. And now he/she is... #00:04:07-3#

D: Still struggling for success (奋斗). In fact, **I'm a diaosi, but I won't admit that I'm diaosi**. Also, the term gives me a slight impression that it is a kind of excuse for not working hard. Personally, I'm a quite self-motivated person. My friends also feel I have quite a lot of positive energy. So I don't like using this negative tag to describe myself. #00:04:34-1#

H: Do you use the term 'reversing and attacking' (逆袭)? #00:04:33-3#

D: the reversing and attacking of diaosi, right? Em...it this is a very motivating story, then OK. If **it's really about a diaosi, namely, a poor boy, manages to lead a good life through his efforts, then it will be quite motivating to call it the reversing and attacking of diaosi**. #00:04:52-5#

H: Do you think there is lots of possibility for a diaosi to reverse and attack? #00:04:55-6#

D: Not really possible. Talking about my personal experience, I used to work in a

state-owned institution. If you don't have a powerful family background, it is literally impossible, at all, for you to get promotion, even if you are more capable than someone working in the same department; but his background is much better than yours. It has been, and will be always like this, at least in the next decade...I just feel the corruption of power will never disappear, any maybe it has some objective reason to exist.   #00:06:36-5#

H: So you jump out of the state sytsem, because maybe outside the system, it's easier to reverse and attack? #00:06:41-9#

D: **Yes, outside the system, it's more likely that your capability counts**. Working outside the system will make your feel more tired, but you will feel you still have some hope to achieve your aim via your personal efforts. I think most of us know how deep the water is within the (party) system, and we don't have the power to confront it. So why not leaving the system and trying other opportunities? Maybe this is also a pitfall, but at least I will try, and I still feel there is some room for reversing and attacking. Within the system, it's literally impossible. All people, including my dad, used to ask why do you want to jump out of the system? You will have a stable life when you are 40, 50. But stablity is not something I want. You can't reverse and attack in that way. **Reversing and attacking has nothing to do with stability**. Breaking stability and reaching another level is called reversing and attacking. #00:08:59-1#

Talking about the term national husband, H proposes a hypothesis that the emergence of the term makes the phenomenon of 'fighting with father'(拼爹） less derogatory. #00:09:16-3#

D: I've never thought about that, because I don't resonate at all with the term 'national husband'. I don't care about him. Within the gay circle, it seems that we don't have this notion of national husband, not yet. We never talk about Wang Sicong, bur occassionaly, **we mention Ma Father (马爸爸). I will say I would like to go Alibaba to see Ma Father (Baba) (laugh)**. I don't think it differs among gay or straight people, **all of us hope to be not so tired, having a father already there. It's similar to 'My father is Li Gang'**.   #00:10:11-1#

H: When we say 'my father is Li Gang', the expression is more derogatory.   #00:10:11-8#

D: Yes, that's true. But it seems when we say Ma Father, we are not being derogatory (laugh). I actually I feel it's a good thing. Because the incident of 'my father is Li Gang' is a negative incident. **I feel the term national husband is used more by girls and they change the candidate a lot.**   #00:11:28-3#

H:How about potent CEOs (霸道总裁)? Is this term used by gays? #00:11:29-0#

D: Yes, **we will call someone potent CEOs if his career is especially good and he's especially capable. And perhaps his personality is a bit aggressive. It is also a neutral term, but it has some slight connotation of admiring this person...**We gay also like watching TV serials. Like I told you prevously, gay people also use the term *Sibi* (撕逼)   a lot. Some of them will identify with those famele characters in the TV serials who fight for power in the court. #00:15:25-8#

H: I'm curious, what kind of *Sibi* do gays mean in daily life? I know straight women sometimes fight for men in relationships, or something like that. At least that's how media construct. #00:15:25-9#

D: I think many gays are affected by media a lot. And **they internalize the logic that they are women. So they will identify with the kind of fighting between two girls for a man (laugh).**

They sometimes just talk and think like conventional women. Crudely speaking, you can just say they are women.   #00:18:16-3#

...D talks about **the importance of giving more voice to lesbians. He thinks that gay men constitute the hegemony in the LGBTs**. #00:19:51-7#

D: To some extent, I feel proud that you are coming to interview us, gay people. Because we are unequally treated, so some people who are self-reflective, like me, t**hey will think about the hidden logics behind these online terms and get lots of insights. Because they will let you notice something you will never notice in everyday life. In many heterosexual people's eyes, they will perhaps never think about these terms**. They just the terms as tools, for example to blacken others. **But some of us will reflect on the bearings of tags on me, on my identities, because we have been unequally treated by some tags**.   #00:21:35-4#

H: Do you know 'rotten girls' (腐女)？   Do you watch the BL genre? #00:21:40-9#

D: In fact, from my personal impression, I don't pay a lot attentions to this BL genre. Because **the world constructed by rotten girls is completely different from gays' in everyday life**. That's to say, **its plots are usually absurd**. They are just too fictional. I used to think rotten girls are those who just gossip about two men's relationship. After watching and reading a very popular BL novel recently, I feel rotten girls construct a world that's totally detached from the real world. I don't really like them. As people depicted in this kind of genre, I feel its plots are too fictional to make people feel this is real...I used to think rotten girls didn't have anything to do with us. But now they suddenly become so popular and appear in front of me, when I get into your works and intentions, I just don't feel their works are good.
#00:26:51-2#

H: What intentions do you think? #00:26:52-6#

D: Making money. Rotten girls are not lesbians. They have to go back to heterosexual life after all. And you daydream about two men all the days, which is just to meet your illusions. The audience of BLs is not gay people. It is not to say I hate rotten girls, I just don't relate to them...**And perhaps some rotten girls, after watching so many BL works, will get this impression that gay people are so handsome and nice, while straight men are unbearable.**
#00:29:44-9#

Some extra points outside the recordings: #00:29:44-9#

About if migrant workers can be called diaosi. D: **diaosi is a very broad notion that indicates a self-mocking tone. Migrant workers are even less likely to achieve reversing and attacking, so in this sense, they cannot be mocked. They are diaosi in the real sense. But they cannot be linked to the term. They are the real underclass, possessing least resource**s. The government doesn't have many methods do deal with them. There is a waying that miserable people must have some abject aspects (可怜之人必有可恨之处）. They also cause lots of social problems.   #00:29:44-9#

D: For me, a**chieving reversing and attacking has nothing to do with the tall-rich-handsome**. I don't aspire to become them. One should **depend on oneself** to reverse and attack. The government is only influential in terms of its policies.