

# The Politics of Naming: The Online Carnival in China

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**ABSTRACT:** This article focuses on the carnival aspects of Chinese Internet culture, but it goes further by suggesting that the productiveness of the online carnival leads to the politics of naming in China's specific context. This article illustrates the questions of how Chinese Internet users name themselves *diaosi* ("losers") to separate and distance themselves from the governing power, how they identify the Zhao ("elites") to form an internal antagonistic frontier in the "us vs. them" context, and how the *diaosi* are "floating" and appropriated as *xiaofenhong* ("little pinkos") to identify the external enemy rather than the rulers inside. This kind of online carnival is not merely a cultural issue, but is also a political and governing theme that has its roots and routes in contemporary China's governing rationality.

**KEYWORDS:** Bakhtin, carnival, *diaosi*, Internet, naming.

## Introduction

With the technological and economic development of the Internet, a rich and varied Internet culture emerged in China. One of the most prominent online cultural products in China is carnivalistic production, which has been conceptualised as an "online carnival" by Herold and Marolt (2011) under the rubric of the "Bakhtinian notion of the carnival." The online carnival has been interpreted as a form of contestation, resistance, and subversion in the Chinese context. For example, Meng (2011: 44) argues that it represents a "collective attempt at resistance" that transforms the political participatory practice in contemporary China. Li (2011: 72) asserts that the online carnival marks the "suspension of all hierarchical ranks, privileges, norms, and prohibitions," where power relationships can be suspended temporarily. Gong and Yang (2010: 3) believe that the online carnival provides "an alternative locus of power, permitting the transgression of existing social and cultural hierarchies."

This article goes further by suggesting that the productiveness of the online carnival is not only the politics of resistance, but also that of naming in China's specific context. By 2012, China had the largest number of Internet users in the world. However, besides "netizens," there were no particular "names" attributed to the users. Some scholars have argued that Internet users in China are just "users" and not "netizens" because their practice online and the grand political context in which they are situated did not imply a particular degree of citizenship (Herold 2014). Other "names" such as "the people" (*renmin* 人民, *min* 民) and "the masses" (*qunzhong* 群眾), were not fully accepted by Internet users as a way of naming themselves. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) have long positioned

themselves as a party for the people and a country of the people, and being supervised by the people, with traditions and policies of "serving the people" (*wei renmin fuwu* 為人民服務), "mass line" (*qunzhong luxian* 群眾路線), and "mass supervision" (*qunzhong jian du* 群眾監督) on behalf of the interests of "the broad masses of the people" (*guangda renmin qunzhong* 廣大的人民群眾) (Sorace, Franceschini, and Loubere 2019). As put forward in this article, such naming has become the politics *from above* that paradoxically employs the names of "the people" and "the masses" but could not really represent them and be accepted by them – especially the Internet users, thus leaving a space for the politics of naming *from below* by the Internet users themselves. The politics of naming, for example, the naming of new media events, has been argued to serve as a field of power that structures an action of definition and interpretation, thus engaging symbolic struggle and interaction over the construction of sociopolitical reality in China (Wu and Liu 2018). That said, the politics of naming as a site of contestation over discursive power involves different sociopolitical actors in the expression, construction, negotiation, and contention of the meaning of sociopolitical reality to legitimise themselves and to control the institutional order.

Therefore, naming is crucial for the practice of the carnival on the Chinese Internet. As Ernesto Laclau argues, "the impossibility of fixing the unity of a social formation in any conceptually graspable object leads to the centrality of naming in constituting that unity, while the need for a social cement to assemble the heterogeneous elements once their logic of articulation (functionalist or structuralist) no longer gives this affect its centrality in social explanation" (2005: X). It may be fine for Internet users without such naming and social cement to create a carnival to amuse themselves and others. However, if they want to push the carnival

to challenge the dominant governing normality, they do need this kind of naming as a social cement to build their hegemonic or popular identity as a form of empty signifier to homogenise all their particular demands online into an equivalent chain to challenge the opposite of the frontier (ibid.).

This article therefore focuses on the phenomenon of the online carnival to investigate the “naming” of Internet users who practice the online carnival as a means of identity building. It specifically addresses three particular strands of the online carnival, namely *diaosi* (屌絲, “loser”), Zhao 趙,<sup>1</sup> and *xiaofenhong* (小粉紅, “little pinkos”), as case studies to illustrate the inner richness and complexity of the practices of the online carnival, and the accompanying struggles of the naming process. In this sense, this study employs case studies to strategically condense theoretical and empirical elements to elucidate a specific, and singular practice, but looks forward to a rich account of the phenomenon resulting from the case studies. To examine the complex dynamics of these cases, this article mainly applies critical discourse analysis (CDA) – a textually oriented approach that examines the relations between language, power, ideology, and social change by undertaking in-depth readings of a small sample of texts (van Dijk 2006; Fairclough 2013; Wodak and Meyer 2015) – as the research method, to unearth the hidden political structures invested in naming practices and discourse conventions. It allows us to critically describe, interpret, and explain how discourses of naming construct, maintain, and legitimise governing power in China. To be more specific, we purposively chose the three cases of *diaosi*, Zhao, and *xiaofenhong* and the related virtual digital landscapes – especially the Baidu Forum (*baidu tieba* 百度貼吧) – to record Internet users’ carnival practices and collect related texts in regular and systematic ways for further critical discourse analysis.

## The online carnival in China

Bakhtin’s concept of the “carnival” (1984a, 1984b) has been used widely as a framing device to study Chinese Internet culture, specifically to inquire how Chinese Internet users escape the constraints of their normal lives to create grotesque events in which rules of propriety are set aside so that they can express, enjoy, and amuse themselves in a particular area at a particular time (Herold and Marolt 2011).

Bakhtin noted (1984b: 129) that a person in the Middle Ages had two lives: “One was the official life, monolithically serious and gloomy, subjugated to a strict hierarchical order, full of terror, dogmatism, reverence, and piety; the other was the life of the carnival square, free and unrestricted, full of ambivalent laughter.” Similarly, an Internet user in contemporary China seems to have “two lives,” in which apart from the government’s “normal” life of governance, there is still the possibility of setting aside normal governance and entering the “online carnival” (Herold 2011: 11). This online carnival allows Chinese Internet users to rebel against the rigidity and “fixedness” of “normal” life in multiple ways through a series of semiotic tools of parody, laughter, and so on (Bakhtin 1981: 21-3; 1984a: 11-32). In other words, the “life of the carnival,” the online carnival in contemporary China in particular, is not only a possible way for Chinese Internet users to passively

escape the “normality” of the government’s governance, but also a possible antithesis to “normality,” and a provocation of and rebellion against the “normal” power hierarchies (Bakhtin 1984b: 129).

Therefore, scholars have employed this concept in multiple contexts to illustrate the characteristics and features of Chinese Internet culture, which is more mundane in form, more diverse in content, and more playful in style. For example, Yang argues that new forms, dynamics, and consequences of carnivalistic Internet culture in China “marks the appearance of a new sensibility of citizens’ relationship to power and authority” (2009: 101), reflecting the Chinese people’s autonomy in the Internet age. Therefore, Yang argues that we need to take such playful Internet activity seriously, and not just as Internet entertainment but also as playful, Chinese-style Internet politics:

It is against this culture of official-centricity that the Internet culture of humor and play assumes special significance. Play has a spirit of irreverence. It always sits uncomfortably with power... Much online activism, and much Chinese Internet culture in general, is enlivened with this spirit. (2009: 224)

Meng (2011) also argues that as a kind of semiosis and discourse, Internet carnival culture is transforming political discussions and participatory practices in contemporary China because political engagement such as Internet carnival culture may not necessarily lead to immediate political consensus and changes, but may fuse politics and entertainment in China’s context. Gong and Yang were also interested in the Internet carnival culture, and believe it provides “an alternative locus of power, permitting the transgression of existing social and cultural hierarchies” (2010: 3). Liu further examined the politics of the Internet carnival, and interprets it as “politics by other means,” which opens up a field of political possibilities that “allow a segment of the governed to make their own ‘political statements’ as critique” (2013: 264).

More recently, scholars have begun to examine the semiotic perspective of this Chinese Internet carnival. For example, Szablewicz highlights the semiotic carnival and says that it is not just a humorous and playful Internet meme – Chinese-style “playful Internet politics” – but also includes new forms of “participatory politics,” “counter-publics,” and “politics of emotion” (2014: 260-3) that are pregnant with the political possibility inherent in the everyday uses of the Internet. Yang, Tang, and Wang (2014) define such a semiotic carnival as infrapolitics that fuse ritual communication, meaning creation, identity construction, and political critique through which a new form of nuanced discursive practices emerges. These practices mediate benign entertainment and overt politics. Following this approach, this article also investigates the meanings of the online semiotic carnival on the Internet in China, with a particular focus on specific case studies of *diaosi*, Zhao, and *xiaofenhong*.

1. Zhao, a family name, refers to the politically powerful and wealthy elites in contemporary China, the dignitaries, leaders in-system and their descendants, and the top bureaucrats and the rich, who have many privileges such as special provisions of food, license plates for their cars, and residences located within guarded compounds.

## Diaosi: The new lost generation?

In 2012, several Chinese Internet users began to call themselves *diaosi*, a derogatory term on the lines of “loser” or “sucker,” an originally humiliating title implying that they were poor, unattractive, had no power, no money, and no self-respect, and that they were not ashamed of this status. The self-mockery of *diaosi* became a phenomenon, as well as one of the most popular Internet memes of 2012 and buzzwords of the year (Szablewicz 2014).

Although *diaosi* is usually translated to mean “loser” in English, there are some distinctions between these two terms. Literally, the Chinese word *diao* (屌) means penis, while *si* (絲) means threads, hair, line, or string. Therefore, *diaosi* literally means “pubic hair,” which may propose embarrassing or unpleasant images associated with male genitalia. However, *diaosi* as a phenomenon does not have much to do with pubic hair or male genitalia. Rather, it was created by large social forces, and turned into a dynamic and complex cultural meme. The provenance of *diaosi* in 2011 suggests that the meme itself had a complicated genealogy (Yang, Tang, and Wang 2014). The term *diaosi* first appeared in one of the most popular Baidu forum, “Li Yi Ba 李毅吧.” Li Yi was a former Chinese football player, who was so narcissistic that he once compared himself to Thierry Henry, a famous French football player usually known as “King Henry” (*Hengli dadi* 亨利大帝) in China. This comparison drew mockery from Chinese Internet users, who dubbed Li as “King Li Yi” (*Li Yi dadi* 李毅大帝). Accordingly, Li’s fans or Li Yi Ba’s members were self-named as *di-si* or *D-si* 帝絲, because the word “fans” in Chinese is pronounced in a manner that is quite similar to that of *fensi* (粉絲, rice noodle strings) in Chinese. Therefore, *di-si* or *D-si* meant “fans of (*Li Yi da*)di.” However, there was an episode of “trash talk” between members of Li Yi Ba and members from another Baidu forum, who insulted *D-si* by saying that the “D” here really meant *diao* 屌 or “dick,” and therefore *D-si* was really *diaosi*. However, the *D-si* did not feel affronted by the name-calling, and gladly accepted the title. This turned the term into one that represented self-mockery and a sense of pride and pleasure in embodying the mocked character of *diaosi*. At that point, the bizarre term was born, producing millions of searches on Google, Baidu, and Sina Microblog.

From then on, an increasing number of young Chinese Internet users declared their status as *diaosi*, which finally became an Internet meme and a carnival in 2012. The term came to be seen as a signifier that represented the original members of Li Yi Ba to young Internet users who felt marginalised in society and who lacked good looks, wealthy parents, and powerful connections. Eventually, it spread to all Internet users in China. According to a survey, more than 526 million people self-identified as *diaosi*,<sup>2</sup> which was virtually the number of China’s Internet users at the relevant time, and Internet memes about *diaosi* flourished online:

They have no money, no background, no future; they all love playing DoTa, they love Di fans club (...); in front of “tall-rich-handsome” (*gaofushuai* 高富帥), all they can do is to kneel down; gathering all their courage to strike a conversation with a goddess, what they get in return is a mere “*hehe*” (呵呵); (...) they are *diaosi*. (...) *Diaosi* usually refers to young men; they

are from humble backgrounds, and they call their work “moving bricks” (*banzhuan* 搬磚)... They share a low (socioeconomic) status, a boring life, a hopeless future, and an empty emotional life; they are not accepted by the society. (Yang, Tang, and Wang 2014: 202)

These underdog images became markers for *diaosi*. Peking University, one of China’s top universities, also released a national survey and report to provide a quantitative description of *diaosi*: working for a monthly salary of 2,917 RMB at a workplace away from their hometowns; giving 36.9% of their salary to their parents, while spending less than 39 RMB a day on food themselves; 50.4% of them were still single, and 72.3% of them were unhappy with their lives.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to these detailed criteria and quantitative descriptions, *diaosi* was more often used by the *diaosi* themselves as a form of self-deprecatory humour (*ziwo tiaokan* 自我調侃) to highlight their defining feature as coming from humble backgrounds rather than their current circumstances. They used this term to portray themselves as being at a fundamental disadvantage in terms of background and to distinguish themselves from the second generation rich (*fu’erdai* 富二代), who are the privileged sons and daughters of government officials (*guan’erdai* 官二代), party members with deep ties to the Communist Party (*hong’erdai* 紅二代), army officials (*jun’erdai* 軍二代), and superstars such as famous actors and actresses (*xing’erdai* 星二代) (Szablewicz 2014). Usually, they refer to second generation individuals who are already successful because of their powerful family backgrounds and who embody all attributes of “tall-rich-handsome” men and “pale-rich-beautiful” women (*baifumei* 白富美). They also use “short-ugly-poor” (*aicuoqiong* 矮挫窮) for self-mockery, voluntarily belittling and denigrating themselves.

Despite such self-mockery, the *diaosi* created a series of online carnival works about themselves. For example, they created in cyberspace their own history (*diaosi chuan* 屌絲傳), music – “Song of the *diaosi*” (*Diaosi zhi ge* 屌絲之歌), “Love of *diaosi*” (*Diaosi zhi ai* 屌絲之愛), video games (“*Diaosi* online,” 屌絲 online), movies (*Happiness of diaosi*, *Xingfu de diaosi* 幸福的屌絲, *Counterattack of diaosi*, *Diaosi de nixi* 屌絲的逆襲), and novels (*The story of the diaosi counterattack*, *Diaosi nixi ji* 屌絲逆襲記; *Muddling as a way of life*, *Hun ye shi yi zhong shenghuo* 混也是一種生活). An online TV sketch comedy of “*Diaosi* man” (*Diaosi nanshi* 屌絲男士) lasting about 16 minutes per episode achieved phenomenal success; its first episode reportedly attracted 4.4 million views within 24 hours (Yang, Tang, and Wang 2014). Despite the carnival of the *diaosi*, the meaning of *diaosi* was never fixed and cannot be pinned down easily. Rather, it has evolved over time, with different degrees of emphasis and meanings for different people in different periods of time.

2. A survey released on 1 April 2013 indicates that China’s “*diaosi* population” reached 526 million, which accounted for 40% of the country’s population. See “To Be or Not to Be ‘Diaosi,’ its Population Amounts 526m,” *China Economic Net* (中國經濟網), 3 April 2013, [http://en.ce.cn/National/Local/201304/03/t20130403\\_1054031.shtml](http://en.ce.cn/National/Local/201304/03/t20130403_1054031.shtml) (accessed on 12 July 2018).

3. Wen Ru 溫薈, “超六成職場新人自認‘屌絲’” (*Chao liucheng zhichang xinren zi ren ‘diaosi’*), “Over 60% of newcomers in the workplace consider themselves ‘*diaosi*’”, *BJ News* (新京報), 31 October 2014, <https://www.bjnews.com.cn/news/2014/10/30/339398.html> (accessed on 10 February 2021).

Owing to the mutating meanings of *diaosi*, some traditional elites or superrich were involved in the carnivalistic production of such *diaosi* phenomena. For example, Feng Xiaogang 馮小剛, one of the most famous Chinese movie directors, posted on a microblog that he was ashamed of those who called themselves *diaosi*. The post was forwarded about 60,000 times and drew more than 20,000 comments in just one night and was ranked as a hot topic in Sina Microblog's hot topic list. However, other members of elite groups such as director Chen Kaige 陳凱歌, celebrity Han Han 韓寒, and entrepreneurs Shi Yuzhu 史玉柱 and Zhou Hongyi 周鴻禔 all supported the carnival of *diaosi* and publicly identified themselves as such.<sup>4</sup>

Shi Yuzhu in particular, as a superrich technology entrepreneur, said that his firm, Giant Interactive Group, had registered the term *diaosi* and "*diaosi* online" game as trademarks, and had provided a custom-made online game, "The mythical realm" (*xianjian shijie* 仙劍世界) for *diaosi*. To promote this online game and to draw attention to the *diaosi* in China, Giant Interactive Group posted an advertisement mentioning *diaosi* on digital billboards in New York's Times Square. In this sense, the *diaosi* phenomenon was not only a carnival for Internet users alone, but also one for business in which companies actively co-opted the *diaosi* for their gain. For example, Lei Jun 雷軍 defined the business philosophy of his company, Xiaomi, as "winning *diaosi*'s hearts to win market competition" (*de diaosi zhe de tianxia* 得屌絲者得天下); he believed that his company succeeded because it managed to capture a huge slice of *diaosi* spending power.<sup>5</sup>

Other highly successful technology companies such as Tencent and Alibaba also relied on the *diaosi* market. As they did not have enough money to buy houses, cars, and other luxury items, *diaosi* chose affordable entertainment online and spent money on virtual versions of the things they could not afford in real life. For example, Tencent's 89 million customers spent on average 20 USD each in the third quarter of 2013 on virtual clothing and accessories to dress up their avatars on Tencent's chat application QQ. Alibaba's money market fund had already garnered 49 million customers (the average age was 28 years and the average account size was 800 USD), who contributed over 40 billion USD in investments for Alibaba, making it the world's largest money market fund in just six months.<sup>6</sup>

However, despite the market's welcoming attitude, the state seemed unwilling to embrace *diaosi* at first, and even criticised the *diaosi* carnival. For example, *People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao* 人民日報) posted an essay titled "Self-deprecation – It's time to stop" (*Ziwo aihua – keyi xiuyi* 自我矮化 – 可以休矣), which argued that being *diaosi* was nothing to be proud of, and that the *diaosi* should face up to reality and focus on their independent struggles and individual efforts rather than systemic inequalities.<sup>7</sup> Another official newspaper, *Nanfang Daily* (*Nanfang ribao* 南方日報), argued that the term *diaosi* had caused a failure in communication between the people and the government, and this had the potential to lead to social instability and uncertainty.<sup>8</sup>

## The Zhao: A political other?

When *diaosi* not only identified themselves as such, but also specified the tall-rich-handsome and pale-rich-beautiful as a more

political "other": the Zhao (*Zhao jia ren* 趙家人, literally "the Zhao family"), the state immediately intervened to tighten censorship to stop this politics of naming. This naming was argued to indicate China's looming identity crisis in transforming from "our country" to the "state of Zhao."<sup>9</sup> The Zhao refers to the politically powerful and wealthy elites in contemporary China.

The name Zhao was borrowed from the celebrated novella *The True Story of Ah Q* (*A Q zhengzhuan* 阿Q正傳) published in December 1921 by one of China's most famous authors, Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881-1936). A particularly prominent moment in the story is when old Grandpa Zhao (*Zhao taiye* 趙太爺), a rich, powerful landlord in Zhao village, spits at and slaps Ah Q, who shares the surname Zhao but comes from a poor rural family. When Ah Q dares to cheer along with the Zhao to celebrate Grandpa Zhao's son passing the imperial examination, Grandpa Zhao asks, "You think you are worthy of the surname Zhao?" (*ni ye pei xing Zhao? 你也配姓趙?*).

The online carnival of the Zhao grotesque event went viral as a mode of representing the powerful and wealthy elites, when an anonymous article titled "Barbarians at the gate, the Zhao Inside" (*Menkou de yeman ren, beihou de Zhao jiaren* 門口的野蠻人, 背後的趙家人) was published by a WeChat public account on 19 December 2015. It explained the hierarchical Chinese capital market, focusing especially on "the Zhao," the dignitaries occupying the highest rank, and the "Barbarians," the plutocrats who are rich, but politically powerless.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, the muckraking about the Zhao went far beyond the capital market; rather, it directly targeted the political system itself. Later in February 2015, an Internet user with the nickname of Program-think in GitHub, the largest open-source code platform in the world, collected public information from Wikipedia, Baidu Encyclopaedia (*baidu baike* 百度百科), *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and so on to draw up more than 130 family trees of Zhao, including more than 700 political elites, from Chairman Mao Zedong to President Xi Jinping. The author even created a discussing forum in GitHub to call for more exposure of powerful families of Zhao, attracting hundreds of anonymous followers with 342 responses and comments to further dig into the Zhao.

- Gu Wei, "China's Self-described Losers Play a Winning Role," *The Wall Street Journal*, 13 February 2014, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china8217s-selfdescribed-losers-play-a-winning-role-1392307922> (accessed on 20 April 2016).
- He Hui Feng, "Top 5 Most Popular Chinese Internet Entrepreneurs," *South China Morning Post*, 6 May 2015, <http://www.scmp.com/lists/article/1780064/top-5-most-popular-chinese-internet-entrepreneurs> (accessed on 20 April 2016).
- Gu Wei, "China's Self-described Losers Play a Winning Role," op. cit.
- Li Yiguan 李壹觀, "人民日報評青年自嘲'屌絲': 自我矮化 – 可以休矣" (*Renmin ribao ping qingnian zichao 'diaosi': Ziwo aihua – keyi xiuyi*, *People's Daily* discusses youth's self-deprecating term of *diaosi*: Self-deprecation – It's time to stop), *People's Daily Online* (人民網), 2 December 2014, <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n/2014/1202/c1003-26128810.html> (accessed on 10 February 2021).
- Wang Yongqiang 王勇強, "屌絲'濫用'也能導致社會不穩" (*"Diaosi" lanyong ye neng dao zhi shehui bu wen?*, Can the abuse of "diaosi" also lead to social instability?), *Nanfang Daily* (南方日報), 22 February 2014, <https://hlj.rednet.cn/c/2014/02/22/3279125.htm> (accessed on 10 February 2021).
- Bo Zhiyue, "China's Looming Identity Crisis," *The Diplomat*, 5 January 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/01/chinas-looming-identity-crisis/> (accessed on 15 August 2016).
- Kiki Zhao, "Leveling Criticism at China's Elite, Some Borrow Words from the Past," *The New York Times*, 4 January 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/05/world/asia/china-lu-xun-zhao-family.html> (accessed on 15 August 2016).

This naming practice was welcomed by many Chinese Internet users, who began to use “the Zhao” to refer to powerful figures, and used carnivalistic production to come up with related usages (Table 1). During this online carnivalistic production, the “Zhao” and its opposite, the “non-Zhao” became rather vivid expressions. An “us (non-Zhao) versus them (Zhao)” distinction emerged, representing the oppositional and confrontational relationships between the rulers and the ruled, the elite and the ordinary, and the officials and the public, which was not tolerated by the Chinese state. In this sense, the Internet users did not just create a “world inside out” in Bakhtin’s terminology (1984a: 11), but a “name inside out” that politically separated the “world” into two.

**Table 1.** The meanings of the Zhao

| Original words                                                      | Words after deconstruction of official language |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| People’s Republic of China<br>Chinese Communist Party               | The Zhao family empire<br>The Zhao family       |
| Paramount leader, or<br>General Secretary of the<br>Communist Party | The Zhao king                                   |
| People’s Liberation Army                                            | The Zhao’s army                                 |
| People’s Police                                                     | The Zhao’s police                               |
| Serve the People                                                    | Serve the Zhao families                         |
| People’s Daily                                                      | The Zhao’s Daily                                |
| National Security Law                                               | The Zhao’s security law                         |
| Inciting subversion of<br>state power                               | Inciting subversion of<br>the Zhao’s power      |

Source: authors.

This online carnival was not only a grotesque event at which Internet users laid aside the rules of propriety to express, enjoy, and amuse themselves, but was also a provocation of and rebellion against the power hierarchies. Thus, this naming was considered “a rebellious deconstruction of official language in the Internet age,”<sup>11</sup> a taunt to make an indirect criticism: “Chinese people have long used what are known as ‘oblique accusations’ which enable them to express their opinion when it would not be possible to make a direct criticism of those in authority.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the phrase was soon censored by the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the CCP. The use of such words was prohibited, and media using them were held liable for punishment. Accordingly, these words were rarely seen on mainstream websites in China. This suggests that the online carnival in China is usually *unsanctioned celebration* but never *uncensored celebration*, because the Chinese Internet is heavily subject to the substantive censorship imposed on it (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013; Mou, Wu, and Atkin 2016; Yang 2016). This censored online carnival also challenged the three defining antecedents of the folk, revolution, and freedom (Bakhtin 1984a), and proposed new questions on how the conditions of the

carnival can be rethought without or with limited freedom, such as, for example, in the context of online censorship.

### Xiaofenhong: The new red generation?

Not all *diaosi* targeted the Chinese government as “the other.” Rather, many became supporters of the Chinese government, and were identified as “little pinkos” (*xiaofenhong* 小粉紅) because they usually follow the propaganda of the “red” Communist Party. There have been some previous studies on *xiaofenhong*, mainly from the nationalistic perspective, especially on the dynamic relationship between cyber-nationalism, national identity, and digital activism demonstrated by interactions, negotiations, and contestations between different online groups and the state in contemporary China (Wang, Li, and Wu 2016; Liu 2017, 2019; Fang and Repnikova 2018). Following and adding to this research strand, this section would like to propose a more nuanced historical recapitulation of the phenomenon of *xiaofenhong* from the perspective of the politics of naming.

A typical event for the identification and naming of *xiaofenhong* was the “Diba Expedition” (*diba chuzheng* 帝吧出征) in early 2016. The leader of Taiwan, Tsai Ing-wen 蔡英文, Chair of Taiwan’s Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), won a landslide victory in Taiwan’s 2016 general election. The DPP is widely considered an independence-leaning party that is less friendly toward Beijing, while China considers Taiwan as a breakaway territory that must be brought back under its control one day. Therefore, some *diaosi* from Li Yi Ba or Diba planned to launch a counterstrike to show the Taiwanese people the “real situation” in China and the “real thoughts” of the Chinese youth.

The trolls planned to start their “crusade” at 19:00 on 20 January 2016, and aimed to flood the Facebook pages of Tsai Ing-wen and pro-independence news websites such as *Apple Daily* (*Pingguo ribao* 蘋果日報) and Setn.com with comments in conversations. The Diba slogan for the campaign was “When Diba goes into battle, nothing will grow” (*Diba chuzheng, cuncao busheng* 帝吧出征 寸草不生). Although Facebook was blocked in China, *xiaofenhong* used virtual private networks (VPNs) to access Facebook and flooded it with messages stating that Taiwan was part of China. The “crusade” was surprisingly well-organised, with its headquarters located in two QQ groups to direct the action, and a “frontline” taking direct action such as posting stickers on targeted Facebook pages. Other participants were separated into five groups or “columns” in the military sense to support the “frontline” by gathering information, recruiting participants, making graphic stickers and emojis, translating Chinese content into different languages, and other tasks on Facebook such as liking posts.

Before the formal launch of the campaign, the organisers established a few rules. The participants had to be “civilised” (*wenming* 文明) and “reasonable” (*lixing* 理性) in their posts, could not use pornography, and had to show their disapproval of Taiwanese independence without attacking Taiwan residents.

11. Kiki Zhao, “Leveling Criticism at China’s Elite (...),” op. cit.

12. “The Latest Codeword Used to Beat China’s Internet Censors,” *BBC*, 5 January 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-35236725> (accessed on 15 August 2016).

Some of the organisers also called for participants to use the same image that said, "Taiwan belongs to my country; Taiwan is an inalienable part of China." The translation groups were responsible for translating the related statements or information into English, Japanese, Korean, German, French, and so on, hoping that the world would hear their "true voices" and realise that their arguments were reasonable. Besides sharing on the Diba and QQ groups, they also live broadcasted the campaign on several video streaming platforms. Before the campaign began, about 1,000,000 viewers gathered on one of the platforms, DouYu (鬥魚), waiting for the appointed time to start the attack.

At 18:56, the WeChat discussion group of Column One asked everybody to log into Facebook in two minutes. The action started at exactly 19:00. Tens of thousands of posts spammed *Apple Daily's* Facebook page first. After 15 minutes, they spammed Setn.com's Facebook page. Finally, after 30 minutes, they spammed Tsai Ing-wen's Facebook page.

Most of the posts used a series of appeals by former Chinese President Hu Jintao 胡錦濤 as well as CPP slogans on "eight honours and eight shames" (*barong bachi* 八榮八恥), which primarily encourage love for the motherland: "Honour to those who love the motherland, shame on those who harm the motherland" (*Yi re'ai zuguo wei rong, yi weihai zuguo wei chi* 以熱愛祖國為榮, 以危害祖國為恥). Besides this, other slogans such as "Dare to talk back to your father?" (*Gan gen ni baba dingzui?* 敢跟你爸爸頂嘴?), "You are so stupid but your father still loves you" (*Suiran ni shi shade, danshi baba ai ni* 雖然你是傻的, 但是爸爸愛你), and "For Chinese father's use only" (*Zhongguo baba zhuan yong* 中國爸爸專用) positioned China as Taiwan's "father" and Taiwan as the "son" with a poor sense of filial piety. Another important technique was using emojis or stickers (*biaoqing bao* 表情包) to make comments. Some participants chose to post pictures and texts that showed and explained China's history, culture, society, and economy. They also used photos of food and famous scenery in mainland China, but with the stamp "Only printed to attack Taiwanese independence dogs" (*Diba fan Tai du gou zhuan shu yin zhang* 帝吧反台獨狗專屬印章).

In more recent times, a special genre of *xiaofenhong*, "fan girl" (*fanquan nühai* 飯圈女孩), has emerged online and has caught the attention of both the West and the Chinese government. The "fan girl" is a colloquial term in Chinese online communities to describe China's celebrity-obsessed young generation that engages in posting *en masse* in order to boost the profiles and reputations of their celebrity idols. They have been doing the same with their country, personified as *A Zhong ge* (阿中哥, Brother China). In this case, China has been described as a pop idol who debuted 5,000 years ago and now boasts of a fan base of 1.4 billion. Accordingly, fan girls are also labelled as *A Zhong nühai* (阿中女孩, Girls of China), which indicates a common identity for ardent nationalists and patriotic youth.

These young fan girls came from all backgrounds and banded together for their idol "Brother China," in order to "guard the best brother" by defending their country just like one would defend their celebrity idols. They allied with the Diba to form new online "armies" with an online carnivalistic production similar to the ones discussed earlier. This new, young, passionate, patriotic, vocal, and

unpaid online group of "warriors" was usually at the vanguard of the Mainland's online attacks. For example, in 2018, they hit out at a Swedish TV station that hosted a show that "insulted China." In 2019, they crashed the Facebook page of the World Uyghur Congress. The most recent carnival of this new "army" was their new carnivalistic production to "defend the best Brother China in the world" (*shouhu quan shijie zuihao de A Zhong* 守護全世界最好的阿中).

On 14 August 2019, at the peak of the Hong Kong anti-extradition bill protests, these fan girls formed a virtual army to launch their attack from behind China's Great Firewall. They flooded and patrolled social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, which are banned in mainland China, with carnivalistic memes, comments, and posts, to pounce on perceived slights and to "defend their country." They labelled China "the best in the world" and Hong Kong as an "ungrateful child" who "sucked up to the enemies" and broke the heart of *A Zhong ge*. The "Girls of China" were all that "Brother China" had, so they had to unite to form a nationalist front to guard "the best brother."

Similar to the "Diba Expeditions," the "Fan Girls' Expeditions" were also a particular carnivalistic performance based on emotional mobilisation, tight organisation, and passionate execution online. They had a massive force that divided into diverse battle groups and assigned different tasks for action – for example, a technical group that taught other new recruits how to use VPNs and bypass the Great Firewall to reach the "battlefield" – which was advertised in advance on their social networks. They also created a mass of carnivalistic memes, comments, and posts – "ammunition" (*danyao danle* 彈藥) in their terms, similar to those in the Diba Expeditions – which were then sent out for the troops to copy, paste, spam, and spread across social media networks, portraying and denouncing the Hong Kong protesters as "terrorists," "extremists," and "separatists" manipulated by Western powers and radical forces. The entire action was broadcast live on a Chinese streaming platform from the time they got over the firewall all the way through the regular encouragement to the troops to stay on the attack. There were regular updates of glory data with a sense of pride, as they noted the number of people assembled, posts per minute, posts that had gone up on targeted sites, and pages that had been conquered.

This carnivalistic expedition won high praise from the Chinese authorities. For example, the mouthpiece of the Party-state, *China Daily* (*Zhongguo ribao* 中國日報) led a trending hashtag #WeAllHaveAnIdolCalledChina (*Women dou you yige aidou jiao A Zhong* #我們都有一個愛豆叫阿中#) on the Sina Microblog Weibo. It also pinned a post on top of Weibo that read: "When national dignity is challenged, those born after 1995 and in the 2000s express their love for the country, to our nation, and to the world in their own way."<sup>13</sup> The Communist Youth League of China (CYL) also wrote on Weibo that the expedition had achieved overwhelming success, and that the patriotic actions of the fan girls of China were orderly, rational, and deeply touching. The CYL

13. Zhou Youyou, "China's Fan-girl Culture is Mobilizing Against the Hong Kong Protests," *QUARTZ*, 18 August 2019, <https://qz.com/1689589/chinas-fan-girl-culture-mobilizing-against-hong-kong-protests/> (accessed on 10 February 2021).

also led the trending hashtag #TheFanGirlsExpedition (*Fanquan chuzheng* #飯圈出征#), with a caption that read: "Protect our best China. Fan girls fight against Hong Kong protesters."<sup>14</sup>

In this case, the Party-state no longer considered the self-organised online carnival taboo. Rather, they worked hand-in-hand with each other. By defending them, the fan girls gained legitimacy, while the state endorsed this online carnival and won its own legitimacy of governance. The political potential of fan culture has long been argued by Jenkins (2006, 2012). However, the fan girls of China are quite different from the "textual poachers," to borrow Jenkins' term, and the carnivalistic production is also distinct from "participatory culture." The convergence of popular fan culture and its carnivalistic production, and online nationalism in the Chinese context, has emerged as a new political formation of carnivalistic fandom nationalism. Therefore, the political potential of the fan girls of China is not only distant from the Western fan consumers, but also different from the previous Internet *diaosi* masses. The revolutionary and resistant potential of the online carnival had been entirely tamed, co-opted, appropriated, and utilised by the Party-state, which was no longer the political other of the *Zhao* but the intimate elder brother of *A Zhong ge*. Accordingly, such an online carnival produced new names such as "Girls of China" and "Brother China" that constituted an entirety, a political name in which they were combined, entangled, and intertwined together.

## Discussion and conclusion

This article addressed the questions of how some Chinese Internet users named themselves *diaosi* to separate and distance themselves from the governing power; how they identified the *Zhao* to form an internal antagonistic frontier in the "us vs. them" context; and how some *diaosi* were "floating" and appropriated as *xiaofenhong* to identify the "external enemies" rather than the internal rulers. This process suggested that the naming process was never straightforward, but rather dynamic and open-ended. As Melucci argued, the collective became thus through "multiple and heterogeneous social processes" (1996: 20).

In the process, the online carnival as a cultural practice contributed primarily to the "naming" of Chinese Internet users who turned it into a means of identity building. Nevertheless, this kind of naming and identity, whether *diaosi* or *xiaofenhong*, could neither be simplified into a form of cynical culture nor equated to the "lost generation," "loser," "sucker," or "we are the 99%" of the West. Rather, it had particular populist reasons in the Chinese political context. This naming process involved forming an internal antagonistic frontier that separated the "people" from what Laclau (2005) called "the dominant ideology," "the institutional system" (ibid.: 73), "an institutional 'other'" (ibid.: 117), or even "power" itself (ibid.: 74). In this sense, Chinese Internet users strategically avoided using the name "people," because it no longer means "the people," but has become an "empty signifier," in Laclau's term, that assumes the order of hegemonic or popular identity serving only the nationalist naming of the Party-state from above rather than of the people from below. Against this naming strategy, Chinese Internet users tactically chose the name *diaosi* as their popular identity and reflection of their political subjectivity on the populist

Internet. Through the cultural practices of the online carnival, Chinese Internet users seemed to not only create a carnival as a possible means to escape normality, but also to celebrate the carnival in order to build an alternative identity to the traditional nationalist identity of "the people." In this sense, the politics of naming has become a tool utilised as a set of knowledges, discourses, and techniques employed by Chinese Internet users to shape possible political identities and actions.

However, the political potential of such popular identity and naming practices based on the online carnival should not be overestimated, as we can see from the case of *xiaofenhong*. Especially in the context of Party-state governance, although the *diaosi* can identify the *Zhao* as their opposite party across the frontier, the *Zhao* were never the Party-state itself; or in other words, the Party-state was never on the opposite side, either. Instead, the Party-state seemed to still serve as the concrete terrain and framework for political struggle in China. The Party-state machine as an integral state and hegemony armoured by coercion is too big to target or confront. In most cases, Internet users do not confront the Party-state machine directly, but maintain a safe distance and an ambiguous relationship with it. Therefore, it is the "reified" portions of the Party-state, the *Zhao* for example, that are targeted as the opposite side. The ambiguous frontier and ambivalent antagonism form a grey zone rather than an "irretrievable chasm" (Laclau: 86), leaving more space for the "interplay" between these two sides (Hall 1982: 9). More importantly, the Party-state is regrouping rather than retreating from the contestation of the politics of naming in China, because it has strategically appropriated and reinvented the *xiaofenhong*'s political naming to contest its political visions, especially transforming the naming tactics from below into naming strategy from above to encompass Chinese Internet users as broadly as possible. This appropriation process is changing and evolving, leading to a possible governing rationality, a kind of "governing at a distance" in Zhang and Ong's words (2008: 1), because within such a new politics of naming, the ordinary Internet users are not only to be governed by the Party-state; rather, they must also learn to govern themselves to be new nationalists and patriots.

In this sense, such an online carnival is not just a carnivalistic or cultural issue, but a political and governing theme that has its roots and routes in the governing rationality of the CCP. As Perry (2017) argued, the CCP leans heavily on "cultural governance." In the revolutionary period, cultural governance was an instrument of mobilising and ruling, and despite monumental ideological and institutional changes, it remained the main instrument of the CCP's political authority: "culture is the life blood of the nation" (ibid.: 32). Accordingly, cultural governance figures in the legitimisation of the CCP and its "right to rule." The CCP thus established a highly effective and systematic revolutionary "culture of the masses" (*qunzhong wenyi* 群眾文藝) with nationalist objectives among the Chinese "common folk" to help "create a self-conscious collectivity and an identity of 'the people' in the masses by mobilizing mass participation in those events" (Liu 2003: 61). This kind of culture of

14. Ibid.

the masses and cultural governance have constituted a practical and theoretical legacy and an essential component of the governing rationality of the CCP in contemporary China, which is deeply ingrained in today's governing system.

The culture of the masses demands active engagement rather than an exit by society, in a manner authorised by the Party-state (Hirschman 1970; Perry 2007). That is, the masses that play by the official rules are encouraged to express their voices and loyalty, but such public engagement cannot pose challenges to the new governing discourses of stability. Accordingly, Internet users seem to seek legitimacy from the CCP's own revolutionary past of the culture of the masses to establish their own culture of the masses through the practice of the carnival online in contemporary China. They have not only created the carnival as a possible means to escape and utilise it to rebel against the Party-state's governance, but have also tried to celebrate the carnival to build an alternative identity to the traditional nationalist identity of "the people" in the CCP's inherited culture of the masses.

Scholars such as MacKinnon (2008) and Hassid (2012) argue that such a carnivalistic online space may "allow enough room for a sufficiently wide range of subjects that people can let off steam about government corruption or incompetence (...) before considering taking their gripes to the streets" (MacKinnon 2008: 33). The carnivalistic online space then does not become a "pressure cooker" that increases China's social tensions, but rather acts "as a safety valve in reducing and channeling social tensions" (Hassid 2012: 226).

Together, these conclusions prompt us to rethink the diversified nature of carnival and to reflect upon the naming process and even the political itself in China's specific context. They further open up debates of global significance about the politics of naming

and its entwinement with and embeddedness in governmentality, proposing imaginative power for us to rethink the intrinsic political nature of naming, especially in the Internet age.

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