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Title	Diaosi as infrapolitics : scatological tropes, identity-making and cultural intimacy on China's internet
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Citation	Yang, P., Tang, L., & Wang, X. (2015). Diaosi as infrapolitics : scatological tropes, identity-making and cultural intimacy on China's internet. <i>Media, culture & society</i> , 37(2), 197-214.
Date	2014
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10220/25438
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Diaosi as infrapolitics:

Scatological tropes, identity-making and cultural intimacy on China's Internet

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Abstract

This paper examines a recent bizarre phenomenon on China's Internet—the enormous popularity of a scatological Chinese neologism called *diaosi*, which literally translates as 'dick string'. Seeing the *diaosi* phenomenon as a case of 'infrapolitics', a space of nuanced discursive practices mediating overt online politics and benign online entertainment, we analyze the ways in which an infrapolitical practice such as the *diaosi* phenomenon fuses political critique, cultural processes of identity construction and meaning-making as well as cyber ritual communion. Specifically, we interpret the infrapolitics of *diaosi* as simultaneously: an instantiation of a prevalent scatological online culture that defies hypernormalization; a collective identity-making that seeks to create critical social solidarity; and a practice and politics of cultural intimacy.

Keywords: *diaosi*, China, Internet culture, identity making, cultural intimacy

Introduction

China's Internet space is characterized by a paradoxical combination of draconian government control and vibrant online activism (Yang, 2006). On the one hand, through formal regulation, surveillance technology, economic incentive, and punitive action, the authorities try to prevent and crush any online activities that are deemed to threaten social and political stability (Tsui, 2003). On the other hand, high profile cases of online activism erupt frequently and are still on the rise, challenging government policies, practices, corruption and abuses of power (Tang & Sampson,

2012; Yang, 2009). As such, China presents an interesting and unique case for studying the politics on/of the Internet, and related research has been burgeoning.

Much of this body of research so far tends to discuss the explicitly political aspects of Internet phenomena in terms of, for instance, control, resistance and activism; various scholars (Leibold, 2011; Meng, 2011; Wu, 2012) recently point out that this tendency overshadows our understanding of other domains of online activities in China, leaving them relatively under-researched. After all, while open sociopolitical contentions make the Chinese cyberspace energetic and sensational, explicitly confrontational discourses or contents constitute only a proportionately tiny part of China's cyberculture. Echoing Hindman (2009) whose study systematically maps the US online space and concludes that web traffic to political websites is almost negligible, Leibold (2011) points out that similarly, in China, it is also entertainment materials that really makes up the mainstream of online activities. Furthermore, because of the powerful cyber censorship regime that the Chinese state operates, people's interests in sensitive political and social issues are discouraged and suppressed, and their attention is often diverted towards online entertainment (Li, 2010; MacKinnon, 2008; Wang & Hong, 2010).

In this paper, we examine a recently emerged linguistic/discursive phenomenon on China's internet – that of *diaosi* -- taking the position that online practices in China (also elsewhere but especially in authoritarian societies) should not be seen in one-dimensional terms of either politics in the orthodoxical sense, or culture as pure entertainment and consumption. As the case of *diaosi* will show, there is a vast space of 'infrapolitics', i.e. an 'unobtrusive realm of political struggle' (Scott, 1990: 183), that is opened up by the Internet as an emerging public sphere in which politics not only can take the shape of open activism, but also (and perhaps more often) is intricately couched in mass cultural productions and played out on different levels in ways that may not easily be recognized as being political. We wish to highlight through the phenomenon of *diaosi* that, while online discussions of political issues are

discouraged in Chinese cyberspace, they are often incarnated either intentionally or unintentionally in cultural forms and spread widely in the process of playing and fun poking. Below we will first introduce the notion of ‘infrapolitics’ before taking a close look at the phenomenon of *diaosi* in China.

Culture as infrapolitics

While modern politics in liberal democracies is characterized by heated (and presumably rational) debates and strident public protests and demonstrations, James Scott (1990) points out that there has been a long history of less obtrusive political resistance and struggle. Throughout history and in cases where democracy does not exist, subordinate groups often have to hide their defiance in the presence of the dominant, and they are likely to play their role in compliance with the expectations of those who dominate. This is not to say that there is no political resistance or struggle, but to suggest that resistance can remain below the radar of the dominant, kept at the backstage or in disguised forms. To conceptualize such covert political activities, Scott uses the term ‘infrapolitics’, which is understood as particular sets of tactics of resistance adopted by the subordinate group that a) use disguised forms of language, such as rumours, jokes, linguistic tricks, folktales, ritual gestures, etc., as a critique of power or the powerful, b) do so ‘behind anonymity or behind innocuous understanding of their conduct’ (Scott, 1990: xiii), and thus c) are ‘low-profile forms of resistance that dare not speak in their own name’ (ibid: 19). As such, infrapolitics is ‘the cultural and structural underpinning of the more visible political action on which our attention has generally been focused’ (ibid: 184).

The idea that popular culture, such as trickster folktales and world-upside-down prints, can be interpreted as covert political struggle is more pertinent in the context of this paper. Popular culture as infrapolitics has also been shown to be central to the cultural approach to mediated citizenship in the public sphere in Western democracies (Hermes, 2006; Jones, 2006). Jones (2006) challenges the assumption that politics through the media is primarily associated with news and information acquisition. He

points out that encounters with mediated politics by ordinary citizens 'are often related to pedestrian pursuits of pleasure, distraction, curiosity, community, sociability, and even happenstance' (p. 366). Communication, in his view, is not necessarily for the purpose of information acquisition, but to facilitate social integration, that is, to have a sense of identity, community, sociability, and fraternity. As entertainment and cultural programmes can often tap into affective feelings and beliefs more effectively than formalized discourse, they have arguably more political resonance with ordinary people than overt, rationalized political appeals. Scott et al. (2011), for instance, examined how young people in the UK use different forms of popular culture, such as television, video games and pop music, to express and make sense of their relationship to politics. They found that:

Popular culture, in its various forms, was found to offer young people particularly salient points of identification with the national and international arena in a way that news media do not, and young people appear to make connections between the private and the political far more easily in their talk about popular culture. (p. 513)

While this perspective does not imply that all culture is disguised political resistance and struggle, it does point to the fact that political engagement is potentially embedded in everyday cultural discourses and practices.

The cultural approach to mediated politics emerges from the contemporary media landscape in which entertainment and politics are converging and the boundaries between the two are increasingly blurred. The rise of satirical TV programmes provides perhaps the most vivid example (Gray et al., 2009). In a study of a US TV satire *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Baym (2005) argues that news satire represents a version of news that entertains, and entertainment in the context of satire means to give audiences pleasure while making them think about sociopolitical issues. This argument is supported by a number of other studies of TV satire (e.g.

Day, 2009; Gray et al., 2009; Königslöwa & Keel, 2012; Morreal, 2009). As TV satire becomes popular and attracts large numbers of audiences across the globe, it is argued to have ‘become an increasingly central mechanism for public engagement with the state, and the formal realm of legislative and electoral politics’ in democratic countries (Baym & Jones, 2012: 10).

It has been widely observed that the Chinese cyberspace is a hilarious and delightful place full of jokes, parodies and puns (Tang & Bhattacharya, 2011; Tang & Yang, 2011; Yang, 2009). ‘Participation culture’ and ‘collective intelligence’ (Jenkins, 2006) enabled by the Internet in the sociopolitical environment of China, argues Tang (2013a), fosters an online ‘satire culture’ in China. Internet satire, or ‘*e-gao*’ as is known in China, has lately attracted a considerable amount of research attention (e.g. Li, 2010; Meng, 2011; Tang, 2013a; Tang & Bhattacharya, 2011; Tang & Yang, 2011). *E-gao* shares some similarities with the *diaosi* phenomenon that we are going to examine in this paper in that both are forms of mockery; but they also differ: While the former tends to mock the powerful and/or the authorities and therefore borders activism, the latter—our subject matter in this paper—is closer to entertainment and is a practice of self-mockery which can be understood to be an act of spontaneous collective identity-making, albeit inevitably also politically infused.

As such, the *diaosi* phenomenon is worth examination for two reasons: first, it offers a concrete case study of infrapolitics in the cyber context, and second, as we will explain below, it allows us to take a more nuanced approach to online cultural politics than *e-gao* or satire does. As our foregoing review of literature has acknowledged, many recent researchers have rightly called for broadening the interpretive scope of the ‘political’ into the context of media ‘prosumption’ (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010); responding to this call, we pay due attention to the politicality of the cultures of scatological flaming/self-flaming by examining the embeddedness of these cultures in China’s specific sociopolitical conditions and events. On the other hand, as the cultural approach to studying media advocates, it is equally important to understand

communication *ritually*—in addition to *instrumentally*—as a form of social integration aimed at achieving communion, commonality and fraternity (Holmes, 2005; Jones, 2006); thus, in this paper, we also look at the intersection of scatological flaming/self-flaming, as in the case of *diaosi*, with identity-making through the conceptual lens of *cultural intimacy*.

The rise of the *diaosi* phenomenon in China

In early November 2012, when the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) was in session in Beijing—which marked China’s transition into the current leadership of Xi and Li—another in-its-own-way momentous event of a linguistic/discursive nature took place: a bizarre two-character Chinese expression ‘*diaosi*’ (屌丝 in Chinese) (figure 1) appeared in a commentary in the Chinese state’s flagship mouthpiece, the broadsheet *People’s Daily*. This appearance drew wide attention and indeed universal surprise from society,¹ not least because the scatological neologism seemed one unlikely to have found its way into the highly formal and propaganda saturated official discursive space of the *People’s Daily* newspaper.



Figure 1. ‘*Diaosi*’ appears in *People’s Daily*

With *diao* (屌) meaning penis and *si* (丝) meaning string, hair, or line, *diaosi* might come across to an uninformed Chinese reader as an unfamiliar word that nevertheless conjures up unpleasant or embarrassing images associated with male genitalia, such as pubic hair. Inquiry into the provenance of this term, however, reveals that it has nothing to do with pubic hair as such.

The word *diaosi* first appeared in late 2011 on the online fan club of a Chinese soccer player named Li Yi, who was generally regarded as mediocre except for one or two not nearly redeeming qualities. Mediocre Li might have been, but he was narcissistic enough to have once famously compared himself to the celebrated French soccer player Thierry Henry, known as King Henry in China. This drew him widespread mockery from Chinese fans and netizens, who accordingly dubbed him King Li Yi, or *Li Yi Da Di* in Chinese, literally Li Yi the Great (*da*) Emperor (*di*). Because the Chinese word for '(rice) noodle strings' is *fensi* (粉丝), young Chinese people, especially netizens, have for some years used *fensi* as a playful transliteration for 'fans' because of the two terms' similarity in pronunciation. Accordingly, the *fensi* (fans) of *Li Yi Da Di* in the online fan club jocularly referred to themselves as *Di-si*, or *D-si* (D 丝) for short. Being followers of a soccer player of disputed reputation, these *D-si* became the targets of further flaming from other netizens who suggested that the letter D really meant *diao* or 'dick', and hence *D-si* were really *diaosi*. Thus, with several twists and turns that are not atypical to wordplays in a Chinese sociolinguistic context, the bizarre expression was born. But until this point, it would be fair to say that *diaosi* was a relatively unremarkable instance of flaming that happens daily in China's vast cyberspace, and the term remained a highly context-dependent label applicable only to a niche audience. It was the attitude with which the *D-si* themselves took to this derogatory term that marked the real turning point of the social meaning and subsequent life of *diaosi*.

Apparently, instead of feeling embarrassed about this term of mockery, the Li Yi fans actually embraced it and began to wear it as a badge of honour, proudly calling

themselves *diaosi* all the time, hence popularizing the term. This attitude of accepting a mockery, turning it into self-mockery and taking pleasure and pride in embodying the mocked character may be regarded as the spiritual essence of the *diaosi* phenomenon. Before too long, more and more people on China's Internet, most of whom had nothing to do with soccer fandom, started to call themselves *diaosi* as well. *Diaosi* hence came into full blossom in 2012 on China's Internet, spreading virally until it became virtually ubiquitous; it was also widely regarded as *the* 'buzzwords of the year' (Wang, 2012).

But what exactly does *diaosi* mean, now that it has been detached from its original soccer related context? And why has *diaosi* achieved such an astonishing level of popularity? The answers to these two questions may be the same: *diaosi* has become something of an identity label and perhaps even a galvanizing imaginary for a class of self-perceived urban underdog consisting of relatively young people in China. Cyber commentators and journalists seem to agree that *diaosi* broadly stands for the 'underprivileged loser' (Gao, 2013). According to Cohen's (2013) succinct definition, *diaosi* 'calls to mind a young graduate working a dead-end job, with little prospect of saving enough to buy a house and a car—basic trappings of middle-class life that are widely seen as essential prerequisites to finding a girlfriend and marriage.' The following excerpt from a widely read commentary article carried by ifeng.com—a respected news portal and forum based in Hong Kong—further offers some vivid descriptions as to what kind of people are considered *diaosi*:

They have no money, no background, no future; they all love playing DotA, they love Di fans club [...]; in front of 'tall-rich-handsome' (*gao-fu-shuai*), all they can do is to kneel down; gathering all their courage to strike a conversation with a 'goddess' (*niushen*), what they get in return is a mere 'hehe'; [...] they are *diaosi*. [...] *Diaosi* usually refers to young men; they are from humble backgrounds, and they call their work 'moving bricks' (*banzhuan*)... They share a low (socioeconomic)

status, a boring life, a hopeless future, and an empty emotional life; they are not accepted by the society.²

Here, it is worth pointing out that although there seems a consensus that *diaosi* refers to some sense of an underdog or underprivileged identity, the exact definition of the term cannot be easily pinned down, nor described in an exhaustive or precise manner. A certain degree of deliberate vagueness and flexibility in definition no doubt helped *diaosi* achieve the kind of popularity it had. For some, *diaosi* is more or less synonymous with another expression that has been popular in Chinese cyberspace of late: *ai-cuo-qiong*, meaning ‘short-ugly-poor’, which is the antonym to the triple-adjective *gao-fu-shuai*, or ‘tall-rich-handsome’, in the ifeng.com excerpt. The following cartoon (figure 2) which circulates widely on China’s Internet is a caricature of *diaosi* in this sense: the short phrases from top-left to bottom-right respectively mean: ‘(height) 1.68m’, ‘no girlfriend’, ‘scores 2 points for looks’, ‘monthly salary 2,000 yuan’, ‘cheap product from taobao.com [China’s equivalent of eBay—authors]’, and ‘fake gadget’. ‘Goddess’, as also found in the above quoted ifeng.com excerpt, refers to those ‘perfect’ girls (also known as the *bai-fu-mei*, or ‘fair(skinned)-rich-beautiful’) whose natural partners are the *gao-fu-shuai*; they therefore remain the unreachable idols for *diaosi*.

In other contexts, *diaosi* seems to also carry certain occupational connotations, in the sense that low-level computer programmers who spend long hours in front of the monitor and on the Internet, and who kill time mainly by surfing the Internet and playing computer games because they cannot afford otherwise, are particularly inclined to consider themselves *diaosi* and to be considered as *diaosi*. Their work is often arduous, boring, repetitive, and above all, poorly paid; these *diaosi* thus compare their work to ‘moving bricks’ (*banzhuān*) such as workers on construction sites would do. Suffice it to say, *diaosi* basically means someone of middle- or lower-middle class positions, working in a poorly paid and unsatisfying job, possessing few natural advantages such as physical attractiveness or wealthy family

backgrounds, and who as a result fits into the common imagination of a pitiable and contemptible loser in contemporary Chinese society.



Figure 2: diaosi caricature

Since 2012 the word *diaosi* has been virtually everywhere on China's Internet. This is partially reflected in the fact that a fair number of English blogposts and reports about the *diaosi* phenomenon have even been written, by both Chinese and foreign observers (e.g. Cohen, 2013; Marquis & Yang, 2013; Zhang & Barreda, 2013). (So far we are not aware, however, of any academic publication that specifically addresses 'diaosi' and certainly hope this paper will plug this gap.) Jokes, satires, mockeries and parodies, either in textual, visual or multimedia forms, proliferated in the cyberspace. The appearance, behaviour, and mentality of the *diaosi* are often caricatured, and contrasted with equally exaggerated performances of *diaosi*'s antonym identities, the *gao-fu-shuai* or *bai-fu-mei*, creating alternately humorous and satirical effects. Soon, anyone and everyone on the Internet seemed to enjoy calling others as well as themselves *diaosi*, and these people by far exceeded the scope of 'underprivileged losers' that the term supposedly refers to (Zhang & Barreda 2013). According to one source (Gao 2013), 529 million Chinese are said to identify with the term, which is virtually the size of China's entire netizenry. Even professionals working in banking/finance, PhD students at top universities, and overseas-educated returnees are

said to consider themselves *diaosi* (Cohen 2013). The pervasiveness of this wave of ‘*diaosi* mentality’ (‘屌丝心态’) was arguably the reason why the *People’s Daily* felt obliged to acknowledge it in one social commentary in November 2012, presumably to gesture the official publication’s relevance to new social trends.

The extraordinary level of popularity with Chinese netizens has made *diaosi* an ideal marketing vehicle for various cultural commodities. Increasingly, *diaosi* becomes a magical shibboleth the mere invocation of which incites interest and popularity, whether or not its use still pertains to its original semantics. In other words, it became, to some extent, a signifier without the signified. In early 2012, the German TV sketch comedy series *Knallerfrauen* found its way into Chinese cyberspace, and was subtitled and watched widely. Featuring abundant slapstick humor enacted by an award-winning comedian, Martina Hill, who does not shy away from the most embarrassing and absurd performances, the show was a huge hit with the Chinese public. Significantly, instead of a translation more faithful to the original title of the show, it was known in China simply as ‘*Diaosi* Lady’ (屌丝女士). While embarrassment and laughability are shared between the *diaosi* imagination and the comedic heroine of the show, the connections seem to end there.

This was also true of a subsequent Chinese sketch comedy show that was directly inspired by *Knallerfrauen*—some would say a copycat of it—the *Diors Man* show, where apparently the French fashion brand Dior is appropriated into its English title, while the Chinese title remained ‘*Diaosi* Man’ (屌丝男士). Produced by soho.com as an online TV sketch comedy with a highly similar format to that of *Knallerfrauen*, the show’s first series was released in October 2012, ending after seven weekly episodes, each lasting about 16 minutes. The first episode was reportedly played some 4.4 million times within just 24 hours of its release online. After the phenomenal success of the *Diors Man* first season which ended in November 2012, in June-July 2013, a second season was released, in a similar format. By August 2013, the accumulated counts of play times registered on the show’s official hosting website soho.com stood

at over 300 million for Diors Man Season One, and over 200 million for Season Two. These figures do not even include the viewership counts on other online channels such as Youtube and so on. If we were to borrow a Chinese idiomatic expression for describing the popularity of someone or something, we might justifiably say that *diaosi*'s 'shine' has 'lit up half the sky' (*hongtou banbiantian*); and all this is despite the fact that in the Diors Man show there was only the very occasional humor associated with the original meanings of *diaosi*.

One final example shall suffice to conclude our discussion of the incredible popularity and influence of the *diaosi* cultural phenomenon. In April 2013, a digital poster with the words *diaosi*, both Chinese characters and pinyin, strikingly appeared on a digital billboard in New York's Time Square (figure 3). It was an advertisement for an online computer game called *The Mythical Realm*, made by Giant Interactive Inc., a Chinese software company based in Shanghai. Not only did the company leverage on *diaosi*'s popularity to appeal to China's vast netizenry, even the company's then CEO, a legendary Chinese entrepreneur-billionaire Shi Yuzhu called himself a *diaosi*. However, after realizing that the Chinese character *diao* means 'dick', embarrassed American authorities ordered the digital poster to be taken down for violating regulations governing the use of vulgarity in advertisement.³



Figure 3. Diaosi in Time Square, New York

Analyses: subversion, solidarity and sociality through scatology

The remarkable story of *diaosi* is yet another case of the immensely rich, vibrant, and oftentimes bizarre and carnivalesque cybercultures in China, which many researchers have thus far interpreted as deeply pregnant with sociopolitical meaning and significance (Meng, 2011; Tang, 2013a, 2013b; Tang & Bhattacharya, 2011; Tang & Yang, 2011; Wang et al., 2012). The *diaosi* phenomenon, we contend, shares similarities and common grounds with other cyber cultural events both in China as well as outside it; at the same time, it also possesses certain unique qualities of its own, which in turn reveal unique aspects of the sociocultural contexts in which it was spawned. In what follows, we offer an analysis of *diaosi* along three distinct yet interrelated dimensions.

Reacting against hypernormalization

The first impression one may have about *diaosi* is that it is scatological, and it instantiates a pervasive culture of indulging in scatological linguistic practices—jokes, puns, wordplays, etc.—on China’s Internet. We argue that part of *diaosi*’s immense popularity can be simply attributed to its reference to a most universal vulgarity: the dick. Regarding scatological tropes, Speier (1998: 1390) points out that

The extreme form of vulgarity and of undignified behaviour is the unrestrained performance of bodily function. Such instances, when they occur, are often funny in an entirely simple and natural way, so that no additional joke is required to produce mirth.

Not dissimilar to what Tang and Yang (2011) have argued regarding another linguistic event that swept through China’s cyberspace several years before—the Grass Mud Horse (or *caonima*, which is homophonic to ‘fuck your mother’ in Chinese) phenomenon—*diaosi* affords people the cathartic pleasure of swearing every time it is pronounced and reproduced textually. It has been previously noted (Tang & Yang

2011; Wang et al., 2012; Meng, 2011) that Grass Mud Horse could be primarily interpreted as netizens' clever and covert subversion against the Chinese state's authoritarian language policies and draconian control over online speech, but what this analysis leaves unexamined is the more general but surely more widely shared appetites for verbal obscenities among the Chinese netizens, which we believe partially underpins the popularity of *diaosi*. The notion of *hypernormalization* is helpful here.

It is a fact that seldom escapes the observers of public communication in contemporary China (e.g. Latham, 2009; Liu, 2011; Meng, 2011; Steinmüller, 2010, 2011, 2013; Tang, 2013a; Wang et al., 2012) that there exists a huge gap between the official discourses of the party-state, which are rigid, formalized/stylized, saturated with propaganda and ideological rhetoric, and the popular discourses such as those found in the cyberspace and people's daily conversations, which are decidedly informal, creative but often also 'coarse' and 'vulgar'. Boyer and Yurchak (2010: 181-182), drawing on their research on communication in late-Socialist societies, called 'the highly monopolized and normalized conditions of discourse productions' *hypernormalization*, the effect of which is 'that state-sponsored political discourse was saturated with overcrafted, repetitive and frequently esoteric formulations that distanced the authoritative discourse of socialism from its desired intimate connections with the language and thinking of its citizen subjects'.

Since China remains formally a socialist state, these descriptions stay highly pertinent. Not unlike its former counterparts in Eastern Europe, the CPC party-state today still invests enormous amounts of energy and time into achieving the 'perfect language of political communication' (ibid. 182): endless slogans are created, disseminated, discussed and studied in order to mobilize party cadres and ordinary citizens to act in line with official policies; empty-sounding clichés and stilted expressions are packed into state policy documents and leaders' speeches which are then mass-circulated to the general public through state mouthpiece media such as the

People's Daily newspaper and the daily 30-minute evening News programme (*Xinwen Lianbo*). Although it must be acknowledged that the macro social and communicative environments of the late-socialist societies in the 1980s vastly differ from that of present-day China, not least thanks to the advent of the Internet, hypernormalization is nevertheless still a tangible reality in Chinese social life. Most people are impacted by this discursive hypernormalization, usually through the propaganda work in the contexts of school education and workplace/grassroots political organization; if not so, people at least come into contact with it through the aforementioned mass media channels.

In their account of the *Stiob* culture in the late-socialist Eastern Europe, Boyer and Yurchak (2010) focused on people's one way of reacting to hypernormalization: mimicking it with such earnestness and authenticity that it becomes impossible to know whether ridicule or homage was intended, thus trapping the state with regard to how it could react. *Stiob*-like parodies of the hypernormalized political communication certainly exist in abundance in China; for instance, the 30-minute-long daily evening news programme is perennially satirized online and offline (Meng 2011). However, 'irreverence and subversion can certainly entail imitation and irony, but they can also take the form of outright rejection and mockery' (Herzfeld, 2005: 53). Accordingly, we argue that an even more common and straightforward reaction of the Chinese public is to simply go to the extremes of vulgarity/profanity to counter the alienating and arguably *inhuman* languages of the dominant power. Scatological tropes, in a sense, are the most *human* expressions of all, because they blatantly refer to bodily parts and functions. They are the most straightforward reaction to state hypernormalization.

Many puns and wordplays that have been recently popular on China's Internet were precisely such scatological ones with a certain political edge. For example, the term *pimin* (屁民) was originated when a CPC cadre in a drunken brawl called ordinary people around him 'fart', or *pi* in Chinese, implying that they were insignificant

compared to himself, a high-ranking party cadre. Correspondent to the English portmanteau ‘shitizen’, *pimin* captures a widely shared sense of powerlessness and disenfranchisement felt by ordinary Chinese citizens. Not surprisingly, soon it was adopted by many to refer to themselves, in exactly the same logic by which *diaosi* became a badge of self-identification for millions (see next section). Another example is the phrase *dangzhongyang zongshuji*, which when pronounced in the correct intonations and written with the correct Chinese characters (党中央总书记) means ‘General Secretary of the CPC Central Committee’, i.e. the most powerful position in the Chinese political hierarchy. This set phrase appears so often in propaganda materials and official political discourses that it is inevitably satirized through puns. One such pun works through changing the tones of several characters and re-writing them as ‘裆中央总竖鸡’, which now means: a permanently erect penis at the centre of the crotch. There are many more such scatological puns and wordplays on China’s Internet that we cannot afford to examine here, but our point is that obscene linguistic tricks seem to be one widely deployed tactic with which Chinese netizens react to the official discursive hypernormalization. Such a reaction creates an endless appetite for vulgarities in China’s cyberspace, and we argue, it is firstly against this background that we should understand *diaosi*’s enormous popularity.

Identity-making amidst social stratification

The second and arguably the most important explanation for the *diaosi* phenomenon is the extent to which it resonated with widely shared sentiments in contemporary Chinese society. As none of the English commentaries/reports on *diaosi* failed to point out, *diaosi* is how a vast number of relatively young urban Chinese citizens currently see themselves: the underprivileged and the losers in a society that is undergoing rapid economic growth but also treacherous social stratification. China’s *fait accompli* embracing of capitalist mass consumerism (and all its associated cultures) together with the highly unequal distribution of wealth- makes for a society of conspicuous consumption, money-worship, pride and haughtiness of the ‘haves’ and, envy and discontent in the ‘have-nots’ (Liu, 2011; Yan, 2009a). When such a society is

‘turbo-charged’ with the instant connectivity afforded by the Internet, social media, and portable communication devices, everybody suddenly becomes conscious of what they have and have not vis-a-vis others. This explains why a huge number of *diaosi* related humour is based on *diaosi* people’s supposed lack of material possessions, in contrast to the *tall-rich-handsomes* and *fair-rich-beautifuls* who seem to ‘have it all’.

This widely shared sense of discontent and dispiritedness rooted in having no wealth, no privilege, no security and no hope in a society where these are most prized possessions may be regarded as what James Scott (1990) has called the ‘hidden transcript’ carried by the simple epithet *diaosi*. *Diaosi* gained such popularity because it is a pithy, funny dirty word that amounts to the ‘public declaration’ (ibid.) of the social discontent, yet in an indirect and inexplicit manner. Because *diaosi* is an encrypted and indirect form of social critique, in its process of viral spread it encountered virtually no intervention from the state censorship regime.

Given the spontaneity, the diverse contexts, and the massive volume and rapidity of its uptake by the grassroots, *diaosi* constitutes arguably the most significant *identity-making* event in China’s in recent years. David Buckingham’s (2000: 72) argument that ‘claims to identity are essentially claims to social power’ is useful here for understanding the complexities in *diaosi* identity-making. If *diaosi* is an underdog identity, and therefore presumably suffers from a deficit of social power, then why do people still flock to claim it? It is here important to distinguish between the connotation of powerlessness of the term when applied to a single social agent and its potentially radical powerfulness when claimed by a large *collectivity* of social agents. Indeed, for the sake of argument, an analogy may be drawn between *diaosi* and the *proletariat* identity, one that served as the foundation for the Communist revolutionary consciousness and action, and one that has gradually disappeared in China since the country’s post-Mao reform from the late 1970s. Both identities declare the claimers of the identities to have *nothing* and *no power*, but precisely by doing so, they launch scathing social/political criticisms and stake out their claims for

power. While it would be stretching our argument way too far to suggest that *diaosi* is revolutionary or even deeply subversive (see next section), it should be nevertheless clear that it critiques the social conditions in which it first arose. Another analogy can be drawn is the discourse of ‘99% vs. 1%’ that has been prominent in some of the Occupy movements and social justice movements in the West of late (see Roos, 2013). In this regard, the logic underlying *diaosi* as a popular, politically infused identity is not unique.

But the complexity of *diaosi* identity-making manifests in the varying and nuanced ways in which this term has been put to use by people. *Diaosi* first emerged as a derogatory term that was applied to others, but it soon turned into something that many were willing to wear for themselves. In other words, it is an identity label that is simultaneously used for identifying *others*, identifying *with others*, and *self-identification*. As Marquis and Yang’s (2013) analysis of *diaosi*-related *Weibo* [China’s equivalent of Twitter] posts shows, at any given moment, the term is always used in simultaneously *positive*, *neutral*, and *negative* ways, although generally there was a shift from the negative to the positive over time. When someone or some behaviour is labelled *diaosi*, it is never quite easy to disentangle the mockery (contempt/aggressive), the fun-poking (indifferent/benign), and the solidarity-building (conciliatory/convivial) that are typically coexistent in that act of labelling. When millions of Chinese netizens self-identify as *diaosi*, it is equally difficult to disentangle the self-deprecation, the social critique, and the pre-emptive self-protection (since one has now called oneself *diaosi* in the first place, it would be redundant for others to point that out) that are often braided together. Such rich nuances in the identity-making practices associated with *diaosi* are not usually found in other popular Chinese identity labels, not even in *diaosi*’s opposite numbers: *gao-fu-shuai* or *bai-fu-mei*.

Cultural intimacy and the craving for the collective

Having discussed the political and critical aspects of *diaosi* in the two foregoing sections, we want to stress in this final section that the phenomenon should not be over-politicized either. While its popularity is undoubtedly grounded in social issues and conditions, it does not aim for social transformation but stops at merely illuminating social malaise. No revolutionary sentiment is kindled, nor any rigorous analytical penetration of social structure/condition achieved, precisely because it is not supposed to achieve these. It would be unrealistic to expect a term like *diaosi* to have political teeth, for otherwise instead of becoming popular it would have already been crushed in the censorship machine. In fact, the political edge of *diaosi* is much more hidden than other aforementioned scatological mockeries such as ‘grass mud horse’ or ‘the permanently erect penis at the centre of the crotch’, both of which directly target the authorities. It is precisely because of this that *diaosi* can be featured in the *People’s Daily*.

Yet, it would be unfair to suggest that *diaosi* achieves nothing either. It serves the millions of Chinese people who adopted and adored it in the realm of the emotional, because it provides them with a device through which they could achieve *virtual* feelings of bonding, communion, and fraternity in a context where they have been structurally deprived of such feelings. As anthropologist Yunxiang Yan (2008, 2009b) has pointed out, the post-Mao reform has triggered a massive process of individualization of the Chinese society, where people have become disembedded from former social categories and relations without being reembedded into new categories or networks of security. According to Yan, in contrast to the individualization processes in Western welfare societies, the Chinese version of individualization was not undergirded by an adequate social safety net and hence plunged people into an insecure and anxious state of individuality. *Diaosi* not only vividly captures this widely shared sense of insecurity and anxiety, more importantly, it provides a common imaginary basis through which people can experience collectivity—no matter how virtual or contingent—something that has by and large vanished in today’s Chinese society.

This craving for the collective leads us to speculate on the possible connection between *diaosi* and the notion of Chinese citizenship, taking a route provided by anthropologist Michael Herzfeld's (2005) seminal idea: *cultural intimacy*. When the giant *diaosi* digital billboard appeared in New York's Time Square in early 2013, arguably it was not just the American authorities who should feel embarrassed, but the Chinese people, too—after all, what does the fact that an essentially scatological vulgar term has become so widely popular with an entire people that it is being used as an effective marketing catchphrase say about that people? Herzfeld (2005) calls those aspects of a cultural identity that could be considered a source of *external* embarrassment but that nevertheless provide *insiders* with an assurance of common solidarity *cultural intimacy*, and he argues that such cultural intimacy is a crucial force that binds the nation-state community together. This shared, intimate embarrassment, in addition to idealized national 'virtues', co-constitute the basis for senses of belonging to an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 2006).

In 1985, Taiwanese author Bo Yang wrote a book entitled *The Ugly Chinaman* (*Choulou de Zhongguoren*; English version published in 1992) which railed at what he perceived to be the 'fundamental corruptedness' (*liegenxing*) of the Chinese people's characters. The book was a huge success across the Taiwan Strait in Mainland China, and many people genuinely agreed with Bo Yang's scathing assessment of the Chinese as a people and culture. Several years later, in 1988, Mainland China's state television station, CCTV, produced a documentary series called *River Elegy* (*He Shang*) which, in tones very much echoing *The Ugly Chinaman*, lashed out at the 'backwardness', the 'feudal' and 'slavish' ethics of the Chinese people that the documentary's producers believed was hindering China's modernization at that point.

Both the book and the documentary can be considered extreme cases of cultural intimacy in the Chinese context, and fit well with Herzfeld's (2005: 6) remark that '[e]mbarrassment, rueful self-recognition: these are the key markers of what cultural intimacy is all about.' Crucially, we wish to point out, both these exercises of cultural intimacy were carried out by *insiders* who were considered Chinese; had it been foreigners of non-Chinese ethnicity who dared to levy the same criticisms on the Chinese, the public response would probably not have been agreement and approval but severe censure and protest. This strongly speaks to the significant role of the culturally and socially intimate in constituting people's experiences of nation and their sense of belonging.

Diaosi is certainly intimate. Embarrassment and self-recognition are no doubt integral to it, although in this case, playfulness and joviality seem to take the place of ruefulness. People who mirthfully identify each other as well as themselves as *diaosi* achieve a sense of intimacy in the impersonal space of the Internet, regardless of the likelihood that outsiders might find millions of people calling themselves 'dick string' a situation for embarrassment. In line with Herzfeld's argument that cultural intimacy contributes to national solidarity and belonging, here we wish to tentatively propose that the *diaosi* identity can be regarded as one newest interpretation of the Chinese citizenship/membership, because it captures at least one prominent dimension of so many Chinese people's self-perception as to what it means to be an ordinary Chinese in this day and age. In other words, *diaosi* can arguably be seen as one fluid and dynamic edge along which innovative negotiations and imaginations of the very meaning of being Chinese are taking shape.

In all of this cultural politics of intimacy, the Chinese state occupies an ambiguous and as-yet indeterminate position. To participate in this spontaneous, bottom-up intimacy that *diaosi* invokes may help to secure the *state* by tapping into the bonding forces of the *nation*; in light of this, the *People's Daily's* apparently surprising act of using the expression *diaosi*, as we mentioned earlier in the paper, can be read as an

attempt by the state to show that it endorses and shares with the ordinary Chinese public in this cultural intimacy.

Finally, cultural intimacy may also explain why many people who are in fact wealthy and powerful nevertheless do not mind or are even eager to identify themselves as *diaosi*. The more one is actually removed from what *diaosi* originally describes, i.e. underprivileged losers, the less legitimate it would be for him/her to identify *others* as *diaosi*, because doing so would amount to an unambiguous insult; instead, for these relatively privileged ‘winners’, a profitable option is actually to self-identify as *diaosi* so as to share the cultural intimacy, thereby achieving a social solidarity/bonding that arguably protect their vested interests in a stratifying Chinese society that favours themselves. We believe this is also the reason why, as *diaosi* spread wider and wider on China’s Internet, i.e. into demographic groups who were not really *diaosi*, the term more and more tended towards self-identification.

Conclusion

In this paper, we examined why a bizarre vulgarity, the cyber-term *diaosi*, became enormously popular in China. We argued that, on the one hand, it became popular because it invokes as well as pokes fun at sociopolitical problems and malaise that ordinary Chinese people collectively experience, while on the other hand, it responded to the cravings for as well as the strategic deployments of cultural intimacy against the backdrop of the individualization of the contemporary Chinese society. As such, we believe, as a phenomenon of cyberculture and public culture, the story of *diaosi* vividly reflects sociopolitical realities and public moods and longings in China.

Diaosi achieved widespread popularity under China’s draconian censorship regime because the sociopolitical critique it offers is hidden in self-mockery, and transformed into other cultural valences. This may be regarded as a case of what Scott (1990) calls the ‘infrapolitical’, an in-between space that is neither benign online entertainment nor overt political activism, but mediates the two and blends them together. In this

space, sociopolitical issues are incarnated either intentionally or unintentionally in various creative cultural forms and spread in the processes of linguistic play. We believe that the infrapolitical has become a central feature of China's Internet today, and argue that to adequately examine and understand this feature, a more nuanced approach sensitive to both the political and the cultural is needed, as we have attempted in this paper.

Notes:

1. See for example:

<http://www.ministryoftofu.com/2013/06/the-diaosi-social-class-presage-of-impending-social-changes-in-china/> and

<http://tech.sina.com.cn/i/2012-11-17/07037806732.shtml>

2. See <http://news.ifeng.com/opinion/special/diaosi/>

3. <http://www.wantchinatimes.com/news-subclasscnt.aspx?id=20130421000007&cid=1103>

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