

# Exploring local meaning-making resources

## A case study of a popular Chinese internet meme (*biaoqingbao*)

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This study examines various combinations of visual and textual meaning-making resources in a popular Chinese meme. The meme features an exogenous image – the grinning facial expression of a U.S. wrestler, D’Angelo Dinero – that has been recontextualized into numerous other visual texts, to create semiotic ensembles with local meanings, which are then distributed across Chinese social media platforms. We analyzed 60 of these image macros, and our findings show that local meanings are created when Dinero’s facial expression is blended with visual references to Chinese digital culture, Chinese popular culture, Chinese social class issues, Chinese politics, and Chinese institutions. The majority of textual elements in the image macros are Chinese; however, the handful of examples that also include other languages typically involve multilingual wordplay and carnivalesque themes. We argue that although the multivalency of the wrestlers’ facial expression invites interpretations of a wide range of affective meanings, an overarching rebellious or transgressive stance is consistent across individual texts.

**Keywords:** multimodality, humor, image macros, Chinese social media, resemiotization

### 1. Introduction

The term *meme* has its origin in Ancient Greek *mīmēma*, meaning something that is imitated. First coined by biologist Richard Dawkins (1976), *meme* refers to a cultural unit of dissemination or imitation, analogous to a gene, that travels from one person to another. With the expansion of memes into digital contexts, the phrase *internet meme* is now used to “describe the propagation of a content item such as jokes, rumors, videos, or websites from one person to others via the

internet” (Shifman 2013:362). Nevertheless, rather than perpetuating themselves or being passively transmitted, as Dawkins’ original conceptualization would suggest, memes in digital contexts are constantly evolving through active human involvement and intervention. As such, memes are vehicles for users to engage in online “participatory culture”, a culture which is characterized by “relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement” and “strong support for creating and sharing one’s own creations” (Jenkins 2009:3). With a growing reliance on visual-textual artifacts to express and evaluate viewpoints in online discourse, internet memes have become a popular means of communication, often conveying humorous meanings (Dynel 2016; Dancygier and Vandelanotte 2017). As bricolages of multiple semiotic elements, each of which may convey different connotations, memes have potential to reveal cultural norms, values and ideologies (Milner 2016).

One cultural context which has evolved its own unique set of memes and memetic practices is China. According to China’s Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC 2018), the number of Chinese internet users rose to 772 million in December 2017, surpassing the entire population of Europe. Due to both political and practical factors, numerous social media platforms have emerged in China, which are, for the most part, exclusively used by Chinese netizens. Among the most popular Chinese social media platforms are: Weibo, a microblogging site with many affordances similar to Twitter; WeChat, a platform that enables group chats and that is roughly analogous to WhatsApp; and Baidu Tieba, a popular Chinese bulletin board forum. The enormous number of online users and their heavy internet usage has made China “a fertile terrain for the study of digital culture, unmatched perhaps by any other area in the contemporary world” (Blommaert, Lu and Li 2019:5). As one prototypical form of contemporary digital culture (Shifman 2012, 2013; Wiggins and Bowers 2015), the creation and circulation of internet memes takes place on all the above-mentioned Chinese social media platforms as well as on many others. As we will show, Chinese netizens actively draw on elements originating in both local and foreign/global contexts during the process of meme creation, modification and diffusion. Our study sheds light on the ways in which a wide range of global and local elements are combined and recontextualized in one popular and productive Chinese internet meme.

In this study, our focus is on a Chinese meme which features American professional wrestler, D’Angelo Dinero, and more specifically, a now-iconic image of his grinning face (Figure 1). This popular image of the wrestler’s smile derives from screenshots made from videos and GIFs featuring D’Angelo Dinero looking furious immediately after defeating his opponent in a match, and a second later, breaking out into an enigmatic, and possibly menacing, grin. These videos and GIFs have gone viral in China and, as we will show, the wrestler’s grinning face

has been recontextualized into numerous images and multimodal ensembles that are shared by Chinese users in their online communication. Despite being a highly popular and productive meme in China for a number of years, the image of D'Angelo Dinero's grinning face has not received the same amount of attention in the U.S. context, which is where the image originated. On the popular website Know Your Meme,<sup>1</sup> an English-language database of online phenomena, a search with the text query "D'Angelo Dinero" only generates the aforementioned GIF associated with the wrestler's smile. However, Dinero's grinning face has been variously recontextualized into literally hundreds of internet memes in China.



Figure 1. D'Angelo Dinero

To obtain a general sense of how people in China evaluate the wrestler's smile, we searched D'Angelo Dinero's name translated in Chinese (德安杰洛·德内罗) on Youku, one of the most popular video sharing and streaming websites in China. The search returned 400 results across 20 pages, and the main evaluative language that uploaders frequently used to address the wrestler's smirk in the title of their videos was quite consistent: most people considered the grin “魔性”. As a popular internet slang word, “魔性” is widely adopted by users to describe an action or object that is so amusing and catchy that it sticks in one's mind, yet is simultaneously absurd, as it somehow deviates from social norms. Consequently, content evaluated as “魔性” often conveys some sort of rebellious, inappropriate or transgressive stance. Although many users on Youku commented that they considered D'Angelo Dinero's grinning face to be exceptionally hilarious, very few peo-

1. See <http://knowyourmeme.com>.

ple explicitly explained why they think the smile is funny. Just as is the case with popular so-called “reaction GIFs” as well as with many Western image macros, the visual representation of an extreme emotional expression may have something to do with the productivity and spread of this particular meme. Our study addresses the question of how this exogenous image – that was not as popular as in its original context – has been localized to gain such popularity among Chinese social media users.

## 2. Humor in internet memes

Although not all memes are humorous, humor has been identified as a salient feature of many internet memes as well as one reason for their proliferation (Shifman 2014; Milner 2016; Tsakona 2018; Piata 2019). As Piata (2019: 4) points out, humor in memes is not only used for playful effect, but it can also often be employed as “a powerful means for voicing critique vis-à-vis contemporary social and/or political issues”. A number of empirical studies have validated this claim. Researching memes as a form of political participation, Adegaju and Oyeboade (2015) discover that humorous memes were widely circulated by internet users during Nigeria’s 2015 presidential election campaign to increase voter participation and delegitimize unfavored candidates. Similarly, Ross and Rivers (2017) show how humor in memes functioned to delegitimize both candidates during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Beyond national politics, humor in memes can also convey critical commentary about other kinds of political and social issues. For instance, Nichols (2016: 83) finds that “Mexicans Be Like” memes contest racial stereotypes and challenge “dominant narratives around immigration, the border, and the histories of interaction between Mexico and the United States”.

Shedding light on how the multimodal mechanics in internet memes function to achieve humorous effect on their viewers, several scholars have invoked the incongruity-resolution model (e.g., Dynel 2011, 2016; Piata 2019; Yus 2019a). For instance, in her analysis of “Advice Animal” memes, Dynel (2016) explains that the meme receiver first recognizes incongruity in the joke and then resolves it by relying on “resolution enablers” that lead the meme receiver to accept the incongruity based on some cognitive rule. The humorous meaning is generated once the incongruity has been resolved. Dynel’s (2016) analysis shows that many image macros rely on both the visual and the textual elements to generate a humorous effect. Similar to Dynel, Piata (2019: 5) uses the incongruity-resolution model to show how humor in Classical Art Memes emerges from “stylistic incongruity”, which results from the misalignment between the classical style of the image and the contemporary colloquial style of the text. The stylistic humor in Classical Art

Memes is, therefore, inherently multimodal. This notion of “multimodal stylistic incongruity” is relevant to our own analysis, as will be seen below.

### 3. Meme localization, resemiotization and multimodality

According to Androutsopoulos (2010:205), localization refers to “a discourse process by which globally available media content is modified in a (more or less salient) local manner, involving some linguistic transformation to a local code and an orientation to a specific audience”. As the localization of an internet meme often involves its combination with various semiotic resources that reference local cultures and events (Shifman 2014; Laineste and Voolaid 2016), focusing on localization processes can be extremely useful in shedding light on digital discursive practices, as well as ideas, values and issues specific to that particular culture. Yet, to date very few studies have examined the localization of internet memes across cultures and languages, and the global-local interface in the digital context of China specifically remains under-researched.

Drawing on insights from scholarship on multimodality, we conceptualize internet memes as “multimodal ensembles” (Jewitt 2009, 2016), and we recognize that in most, if not all, internet memes, each mode (i.e., visual/image and verbal/textual) – and the interplay among various modes – contributes to the overall meaning of the larger text. We also consider semiotic resources to be products of cultural histories as well as elements used by individuals for generating and interpreting meanings. Defined as “means for meaning making”, semiotic resources are simultaneously material, social, and cultural resources (Jewitt 2016: 72).

Meme replication and modification always entails some changes in the semiotic resources used. Several scholars have observed that (re)-entextualization is involved in the creation and meaning making process of internet memes (e.g., Varis and Blommaert 2015; Nichols 2016; Laineste and Voolaid 2017; Piata 2019; Sultana 2019). According to Sultana (2019: 4), entextualization involves first, the extraction of a unit (e.g., text, semiotic object) from its original context (also known as “decontextualization”), and then “recontextualization of it in a newer context through integration, adaption and reorganization”. As a result of entextualization, multimodal elements appropriated from existing sources, and added to a new context, are thus given new meanings. This process is also referred to as “resemiotization” (Sultana 2019:5). As noted in previous research on internet memes, content that is resemiotized in this way often contributes to humor. In internet memes, humor can be deployed to not only convey critical commentary on various topics, such as politics, stereotypes and everyday life, but it can also contribute to an overall theme, or stance, that is intertextually and interactionally

recognizable by specific audiences (Varis and Blommaert 2015). As we will show in this paper, Dinero's smiling face – which is now very familiar to Chinese social media users, due to its extreme popularity and longevity (i.e., it has been used as a memetic resource for well over three years) – is the single semiotic element that coheres all of the data in our corpus. When combined with a very broad range of culturally-specific Chinese visual and textual elements, the image of the wrestler's grin (i.e., a “non-local” semiotic resource), is re-textualized and resemiotized across different multimodal texts and becomes a resource for communicating an irreverent, rebellious, anti-authoritarian or otherwise transgressive stance.

#### 4. Chinese memes? *Biaoqingbao*

The term *meme* has been translated into Chinese as 模因 (*mo yin*, literally meaning *imitation* and *gene*) (He and He 2003). However, the use of this term, 模因, seems to be extremely rare outside of academia. In fact, very few Chinese users are familiar with the “Western” concept of meme or with its Chinese translation. Instead of having a term that describes the circulation of a content item in various modalities (e.g., text, image, audio, video, remix, etc.), Chinese internet users are more likely to use the term *biaoqingbao* (表情包, literally meaning *facial expression package(s)*) to refer primarily to images and animated GIFs that are generated and shared among users.<sup>2</sup> In terms of the existing literature, *biaoqingbao* have remained relatively underexplored; however, they have been defined in at least one article as “(like memes) compound signs consisting of an image and – usually – a caption” (Blommaert, Lu and Li 2019: 5). One salient feature of *biaoqingbao*, as the English translation of the term suggests, is that they very often include some type of facial expression.<sup>3</sup> Although text is not a necessary feature of *biaoqingbao*, in many cases, some text is overlaid on the visual. The concept of *biaoqingbao*, therefore, overlaps with that of image macros, which include both static images and text (Dancygier and Vandelanotte 2017); yet the two terms are not completely synonymous, because unlike image macros, text in *biaoqingbao* seems to be more of an optional component. However, for the purposes of our study, we

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2. Since nouns in Chinese are the same in singular and plural forms, the term *biaoqingbao* can be both singular and plural. In this paper, we treat the term as plural.

3. Originally, *biaoqingbao* seemed to refer to visual content circulated and adapted online that included representations of faces. However, based on our more recent observations, the meaning of this term seems to be shifting to cover an even broader range of visual content, which (more often than not) *does* include some text. Clearly, further research is needed to determine more precisely what types of content can be considered *biaoqingbao*.

focus only on those *biaoqingbao* that *do* include text. For this reason, the *biaoqingbao* that we discuss in this article can also be considered image macros, which is why we use the terms interchangeably here – while, at the same time, acknowledging that these two terms are not always equivalent.

The extensive use of *biaoqingbao* in Chinese online contexts has started to attract attention from scholars of digital media. For instance, Ma (2016) explores the localization of Rage Comics in the Chinese context. Rage Comics, which originated from the image board, 4chan, in 2008, are characterized by “a stick figure-style character” featuring a “rage face” to express rage or other emotions (Ma 2016:18). A rage face can be a freehand sketch in simple and crude style or can be extracted from online sources such as photos and videos. In addition, Ma found that by adding semiotic resources drawn from everyday life, Chinese internet users actively engage in sharing, customizing and reproducing localized Rage Comics and creating associated image macros. In many cases, the original rage faces are replaced by the facial expressions of local (online) celebrities and the classic stick figure body is often substituted with other characters that Chinese internet users are familiar with. Of particular relevance to our own study are Ma’s observations about why these images are so popular in China. She points out that, in addition to easy replication and customization by internet users, these *biaoqingbao* simultaneously satisfy users’ need for self-expression within China’s socio-cultural context. Ma explains that expressing negative or extreme emotions is considered face-threatening and a violation of cultural norms in China. However, *biaoqingbao* provide a socially acceptable means of emotional cathartic release due to their humorous effect. Along similar lines, we speculate that Dinero’s enigmatic and possibly menacing grin may appeal to so many Chinese internet users because it, too, represents a type of extreme emotional expression.

In another study that takes a slightly different perspective, Lu (2018) argues that Chinese users’ preference for particular *biaoqingbao* is driven by the ideal persona they aspire for, as *biaoqingbao* can convey moral values (e.g., positivity, hard work, etc.). In a similar vein, Blommaert, Lu and Li (2019) examine how *biaoqingbao* are used to construct and negotiate online identities. They observe that many Chinese netizens actively participate in replicating and customizing a set of memes that comprise classical painting fragments and Chinese captions describing the painting style. These digital resources allow users to construct a cultivated persona in online contexts.

However, beyond these few studies, there is still much to explore related to Chinese memes, such as what types of semiotic resources are employed specifically by Chinese internet users, as they engage in meme creation, modification and reproduction. In order to address this question, as well as to identify some of the meanings and social functions expressed by one meme that became very pop-

ular in the Chinese internet context, we focus on a set of related image macros that Chinese users would consider to be *biaoqingbao*. Simultaneously, our study takes up the call made by several prominent scholars in a recent issue of this journal (e.g., Fetzer 2019; Yus 2019b), who argue that researchers of internet pragmatics must engage seriously with issues of multimodality. Furthermore, our study also addresses calls from digital media scholars to investigate memes which feature languages other than English (e.g., Zenner and Geeraerts 2018) as well as memes that emerge from non-Western contexts (Shifman 2014).

## 5. The data

Our analysis in this study focuses on a corpus of 60 different image macros collected from Baidu Tieba, a popular discussion-board platform in China, on 10 September 2018. The search was conducted with the text query “德安杰洛·德内罗表情” (“D’Angelo Dinero’s facial expression”) and generated 38 pages of results based on relevance. From these, we identified and collected 60 unique *biaoqingbao*, or image macros, featuring D’Angelo Dinero’s face that also included some textual features. Repetitive image macros, animated GIFs, and images without text were excluded. Considering both visual and textual elements (and the interplay among them) in the 60 image macros we collected, our analysis addresses how Chinese users recontextualize D’Angelo Dinero’s face into multimodal texts which convey culturally-specific local meanings that are relevant to Chinese social media users.

## 6. Data analysis

In analyzing the semiotic elements employed to localize D’Angelo Dinero’s image, we grouped the 60 image macros into several categories based on the dominant visual element(s), excluding the wrestler’s grinning face. These categories include “*diaosi*”, *digital culture*, *popular culture*, *politics* and *institutional contexts*. We explain and illustrate each of these categories in the following section.

### 6.1 “Diaosi”

One category of visual elements that often appear in combination with the wrestler’s face is “*diaosi*”. *Diaosi* (屌丝, which literally means “the pubic hair around the male sexual organ”), commonly translates as a person who is a “loser”.

The term *diaosi* was originally coined by fans of the Chinese soccer player, Yi Li, as a derogatory self-mocking nickname to call themselves. Later, this term was adopted more widely to describe a person (usually male), who is the polar opposite of *gaofushuai* (高富帅), referring to a “tall, rich, handsome” male, who is often born into the second generation of a privileged family. Serving as a distinct contrast to *gaofushuai*, *diaosi* may manifest some or all of the following characteristics: “they may be poor, short, and ugly; are of rural origin; and have a low education level, low income, blue-collar job, no house, no car, no girlfriend. Their leisure activities include playing video games, spending a lot of time online, and excessive masturbation” (Szablewicz 2014: 264). In our meme corpus, the visual elements in numerous image macros in some way index the concept of *diaosi*.

For instance, the image in Figure 2 is comprised of various semiotic elements, which, in combination, point to the *diaosi* identity of the young Chinese man in the image. The young man’s unfashionable clothes, the way he wears his shirt, his unpopular hairstyle and skinny body, as well as the underdeveloped suburbs in the background all suggest that he is a *diaosi*. The text, “吾虽浪迹天涯却未迷失本心” (literally, *I roam all over the world but haven’t got lost*) is a famous quote from a popular champion named Yasuo in the Chinese version of the MOBA (multi-player online battle arena) game, *League of Legends*. The corresponding English version of this expression is “A wanderer isn’t always lost.” However, the text in this example is phrased in the style of Classical or Literary Chinese (i.e., the standard written language in ancient China), an extremely formal register that indexes a high level of education and erudition. This is a clear instance of multimodal stylistic incongruity, as the extremely formal written register – with its cultural associations of superior knowledge and refined intellect – stands in sharp contrast with the low-resolution image of clearly “lower class” subject matter from contemporary China.<sup>4</sup> With the background knowledge that the text comes from a popular video game, Chinese meme viewers are able to resolve the incongruous clash and appreciate the humor. By suggesting that the young man’s obsession with video games is the reason that he can memorize and produce a phrase in Literary Chinese, this multimodal ensemble further indicates that the man is a *diaosi*. Additionally, as an example of viewpoint (Dancygier and Vandelanotte 2017), the first-person pronoun *I* in the text invites viewers to perceive the image macro as self-deprecating humor initiated by the meme maker and/or the meme sender.

Combined with an understanding of the self-deprecating humor embedded in the image macro, meme viewers would likely process the wrestler’s smile super-

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4. This is interesting, because the distribution of register and modality is the opposite to what is found in Classical Art Memes (Piata 2019).



Figure 2. “A wanderer isn’t always lost”

imposed on the figure of the young man, in this particular context, as a further indication of self-mockery. Szablewicz (2014: 267) has argued that Chinese youth’s disillusionment with the limited possibilities for elevating their socio-economic status is what motivates *diaosi* to mock themselves, and that this type of humorous satire empowers them by establishing group bonding and gaining social recognition. While the larger *diaosi* phenomenon might have parallels elsewhere in the world, as far as we are aware, the semiotic means used to index a *diaosi* identity are unique to contemporary China. Appearing to make fun of one’s lowly socio-economic status in the Chinese cultural context can be considered an outward rejection of the dominant social value of upward mobility: thus Figure 2 bears potential for criticizing social stratification in contemporary China. As it combines multiple elements, textual and visual, which will hold a range of meaningful associations for Chinese internet users, Dinero’s grin here contributes to the overall message of self-mocking.

## 6.2 Digital culture

By “digital culture” we refer to a category that includes cartoon-like figures that originated in online contexts and that were created or appropriated through simple drawings by internet users. The majority of image macros in this category include some variation of a panda figure onto which D’Angelo Dinero’s smiling facial expression has been photoshopped (e.g., Figure 3). While the panda is a well-known symbol of China in general, this particular drawing of a panda’s head has remained extremely popular in the Chinese online context for the last several years, often appearing with different human faces superimposed on it (it is referred to by Chinese users as “panda’s head *biaoqingbao*”). Therefore, we were not surprised to find many memes featuring this panda image in our corpus. In

the example shown in Figure 3, the panda meme is blended with the D'Angelo Dinero grinning expression meme to create a “combined meme” or a “mashup meme” (Varis and Blommaert 2015: 40). The juxtaposition of the human smirk on the cute panda figure gives rise to at least some part of the overall humorous effect. According to Ma (2016: 19), “wacky appearance along with anarchic wit” is a unique type of aesthetic that users have established in Chinese digital contexts.



Figure 3. (in Cantonese) “What the heck are you looking at? Fuck your mother”

In addition to humor generated through stylistic incongruity, “carnavalesque” practices (Bakhtin 1984), which involve taboo, and often vulgar, socially transgressive expressions, are also often employed by meme creators to achieve a sense of playfulness. The text here is not written in Mandarin; rather, it is written in stylized Cantonese, and can be loosely translated as “What the heck are you looking at? Fuck your mother.” Relying on their frame knowledge about the social meanings of Cantonese used as a discursive resource in Chinese online contexts, Chinese internet users are likely to associate this representation of a vulgar and offensive expression in Cantonese with stereotypical “gangster style” talk featured in Hong Kong movies. The text “丢你雷谋” (*diū nǐ léi móu*), is a frequently-used expletive in Cantonese, meaning *fuck* (*diū*) *your* (*nǐ*) *old* (*léi*) *mother* (*móu*). However, the more standard meaning of the first Chinese character 丢 (*diū*) in this expression is *throw*, and – in an instance of multimodal wordplay – this action is illustrated by the panda throwing away the icon of QQ, a popular online chatting software in China. Although the exact meaning behind throwing away the QQ icon remains indeterminate,<sup>5</sup> this unexpected action along with the use of a Cantonese expletive in this multimodal context adds to the humorous effect as

5. It is possible that the gesture of tossing aside the icon for QQ is conveying a rejection of “the old”, or the status quo. QQ was first launched in 1999, and since then has struggled to compete for users with a multitude of newer digital platforms appearing in China.

well as to the playfully subversive, or carnivalesque stance. As is apparent by comparing the previous example to this one, the precise emotional or affective meaning that the wrestler's facial expression indicates varies depending on the other semiotic elements that it is combined with. In this instance, Dinero's smile – when combined with the other visual and textual elements included – may be interpreted as an indication of teasing, conveying a feeling of playful irreverence, or perhaps even some degree of contempt as well.

### 6.3 Popular culture

By “popular culture” we refer to a category that comprises images which come from mass media sources, such as movies, television, music videos and so forth. All of the examples in this category incorporated various elements from Chinese popular culture along with Dinero's facial expression. In Figure 4, the image of Taiwanese singer and actor, Nicky Wu, appears with the wrestler's smiling facial expression photoshopped onto it. Since Wu is well known for his facial attractiveness, the wrestler's smiling facial expression may be interpreted here as confident, which appears to be consistent with Wu's image. However, the text at the bottom of the image voices Wu as saying “If being good-looking is a mistake, I have been making mistakes all the time,” thus constructing a persona of someone who is over-confident, vain or egotistical. What is perhaps most culturally relevant here is that the narcissistic persona being projected through the interplay between image and text in this particular semiotic ensemble deviates from Chinese cultural norms, in which humility is regarded as a virtue, while self-elevation is considered a face-threatening act. Relying on this frame knowledge, Chinese viewers are likely to find that, in this instance, the wrestler's smile communicates a sense of teasing as an additional affective meaning. Once again, the first-person pronoun *I* positions the meme maker, or the meme sender, in a self-mocking stance. Often centering around the topics of appearance and beauty, many examples in the popular culture category generate self-deprecating humor by combining Dinero's smiling face with an image of a local celebrity.

There are also a few examples from this category in our corpus that incorporate *non*-local visual elements (besides Dinero's grinning face). Although these visual components may originate in and have associations with foreign contexts, they are nevertheless well-known among Chinese online users and have some connection to the local culture. For instance, the image in Figure 5 features a scene from a Japanese anime series that is popular in China, *Initial D*, which focuses on illegal street racing. In this example, the wrestler's grinning face is superimposed onto the main character of the anime. Deviating from the majority of examples in our corpus, which include only Chinese text, this image macro incorporates



如果帅是一种错，那我简直是一错再错！

Figure 4. “If being good-looking is a mistake, I have been making mistakes all the time”

both Chinese and English texts which represent the anime character’s voice. Having the two languages appear together creates the potential for different interpretations of the Chinese expression. The Chinese expression that is superimposed on the image, 上 (*get in*) 车 (*the car*), is a common colloquialism used in daily life to invite others for a ride in a car. However, in the Chinese online context, the figurative meaning of these characters (i.e., 上车) is “I will show you porn.” This contextually-specific meaning of *get in the car* originates from a Chinese folk music video with the title of “老司机，带带我” (“*Old driver, give me a ride*”), which features women who indicate their willingness to trade sex for a ride with a countryside driver (Zhang 2017). According to Zhang (2017), this video went viral due to the sexual connotations of the song’s lyrics, and subsequently, the expression 上车 (*get in the car*) became an internet buzzword that euphemistically refers to inviting someone to discuss or watch pornography. Moreover, the popularity of this phrase in the Chinese online context is also likely due to its potential for evading government censorship.

In this example, the sexual connotation of the expression “上车” clearly becomes the most relevant interpretation after reading the English expression that appears immediately below it, i.e., “fuck car”. While this ungrammatical English expression is more emblematic than meaningful,<sup>6</sup> in this context the English *fuck* serves as a verbal cue that activates the non-salient meaning of “上”, reminding the viewer that “上” is polysemous and can also mean *fuck* in Chinese vernacular speech. Therefore, the literal Chinese text 上车 (*get in the car*) is resemi-

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6. Dynel (2016) has observed that non-standard language often appears in internet memes. We have observed many similar instances of ungrammatical English expressions appearing in Chinese memes.



Figure 5. “get in the car!!”

otized through multilingual wordplay (Zenner and Geeraerts 2015) to convey a completely different meaning in this online context. In this example, the wrestler’s facial expression – combined with the other elements in this multimodal ensemble – can be understood as an indication of doing something socially transgressive, yet simultaneously exciting: offering pornography. The overall affective meanings evoked by the semiotic assemblage in this example thus become obvious to Chinese social media users – i.e., enjoyment and excitement about doing something that is considered inappropriate. Being able to interpret the range of meanings that contribute to producing humor in this case is highly context-specific, since it relies on several intertextual references, linguistic ambiguity, as well as familiarity with discursive practices specific to Chinese digital context (e.g., using figurative language to evade internet censorship).

#### 6.4 Politics

Compared to the previous categories, there are only a handful of examples in our corpus which include Dinero’s grinning face and contain visual elements that are overtly political. For example, Figure 6 features a recognizable portrait of former political leader of the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin, whose face has been replaced by the wrestler’s. While Stalin is associated with Russia – and can therefore be considered a non-local element – his portrait nevertheless remains familiar to most Chinese people due to their knowledge about the history of Sino-Russian relations. In Figure 6, Stalin is voiced as asking, “Looks like you want to develop socialism in Siberia?” Successful processing of the meme requires meme viewers to evoke the frame knowledge of Stalin as supreme leader and absolute power in

the former Soviet Union, as well as knowledge of Siberia as an extremely harsh place to live that is associated with prisons and labor camps. With this knowledge in mind, viewers are prompted to treat the text as a verbal threat from an authority, through which Stalin is delegitimized (Ross and Rivers 2017). Furthermore, the mismatch between Stalin's image and Dinero's grin serves to intensify delegitimization: through relying on the inference that the wrestler's smirk here is an indication of scheming, and the emotion evoked accordingly might be enjoyment of political power, online users are prompted to view the political leader as deceptive and hypocritical, and to appreciate the humor of this mismatch.



Figure 6. "Looks like you want to develop socialism in Siberia?"

As Yang and Jiang (2015) have pointed out, there are more political jokes in Chinese online contexts referring to the former Soviet Union than to China, which is very likely related to internet censorship. Yang and Jiang (2015: 228) further note that "the circulation of Soviet political jokes targeting its political system and top leaders has its own political thrust in China as they are thinly veiled allusions to Chinese realities". Drawing on their own viewpoint and experiences evoked by this image macro, Chinese viewers may make sense of Figure 6 as an indirect allusion to, and critical commentary on, local politics and/or politicians in China. Once again, Dinero's grinning face appears as an incongruous element in this semiotic ensemble, and once again, it is one of the visual elements that combines several other meaning-making resources to communicate an anti-authoritarian stance that is immediately legible to Chinese internet users.

## 6.5 Chinese institutional contexts

In addition to the previous categories, we also identified a few instances that incorporated Dinero's grinning expression into images which included visual components referencing local institutional contexts (e.g., medical, educational). Figure 7 provides a rather complex example of this category, in the sense that it includes numerous levels of intertextual references. This historical image, which is often reproduced in Chinese language textbooks used by Chinese schoolchildren, depicts education in China around the 1900s. The illustration shows the private schooling experience of Lu Xun (1881–1936), a well-respected short story writer and literary critic. In Figure 7, Lu Xun, who is wearing a blue *changshan* (a traditional Chinese garment worn by men during the Qing Dynasty), stands facing his teacher and the wrestler's grinning face has been photoshopped onto his face. The faces of the other four students in the original image have also been replaced with different celebrities' facial expressions, generating additional visual intertextual references.



Figure 7. Teacher, Lu Xun and 4 students

The carnivalesque interaction that is represented in the text can be roughly translated as the following (from left to right):

**Teacher:** You bunch of stupid cunts. No one of you is good-looking and you don't even feel ashamed. You guys keep claiming you're too handsome to fall asleep and keep posing everyday, fuck.

**Student 1:** I'm nervous, and I pretend I'm reading.

**Student 2 (i.e., Lu Xun):** What the fuck are you looking at.

**Student 3:** You don't have a penis.

**Student 4:** Fuck.

**Student 5:** [*in Cantonese*] You go eat shit.

In what is perhaps the most striking example of multimodal stylistic incongruity in our corpus, the humorous effect here arises from the clash between the very formal and disciplined context of the traditional Chinese educational setting presented in the visual, with the very colloquial, vulgar and highly disrespectful utterances of each of the participants depicted. This image suggests that when the teacher in this image macro is shown to “educate” his students with unexpected insults, many students, including Lu Xun, counterattack by swearing at the teacher. Because teachers in China are highly revered, the utterance attributed to Lu Xun is clearly a violation of a Chinese cultural norm. Consequently, the wrestler's smirk on Lu Xun's face, suggesting an attitude of contempt in this instance, conveys an anti-authoritarian and rebellious stance.

Moreover, the overall playful effect of this image macro also derives from a number of heteroglossic features found at the textual level. For instance, Student 3's utterance (i.e., *you don't have a penis*) is an example of multilingual wordplay, or a playful linguistic blending of more than one code. The *JJ* that appears in romanized Chinese Pinyin letters – when pronounced in English, as the repetition of the letter *J* – produces a homophone in Chinese for “鸡鸡” (*ji ji*, literally *chicken chicken*), which is a Chinese colloquial term for male genitalia (Zhang 2017). Next, the fake quotation attributed to Student 5 (i.e., *you go eat shit*) is associated with a particular Hong Kong celebrity whose face is superimposed on the figure of Student 5, which adds yet another layer of intertextuality to the image macro and contributes to the overall sense of transgressive playfulness. Furthermore, Student 5's utterance (i.e., *you go eat shit*) is written in stylized Cantonese, which not only refers to the specific actor who produced the utterance in a popular Hong Kong movie, but which – as mentioned previously – is also used in Chinese digital contexts to index a gangster style of talk. Finally, the utterance attributed to the figure of Lu Xun is a common expletive expression in Chinese, and can be glossed as *looking at your mother's sexual organ* (it has been translated above with its more idiomatic meaning). In this expression, the character “逼” (*bi*) – meaning *push* in standard Mandarin – is often adopted by online users as an euphemism and homophone for “屄” (*bi*), which literally refers to female genitals (Zhang 2017). Therefore, adding to the multimodal stylistic incongruity created through the multiple expletives and insults, which are outrageous and clearly inappropriate in a traditional Chinese school setting, this use of homophony and wordplay also contributes to the overall carnivalesque, or playfully transgressive, humor of the image macro. Because all the semiotic elements (visual and verbal,

as well as intertextual references) contributing to the meaning of this image macro are highly culture-specific, the humorous meanings and the anti-authoritarian stance that it communicates – while apparent to Chinese social media users – may remain quite opaque to viewers who are unfamiliar with the Chinese (digital) context.

## 7. Discussion and conclusions

By focusing on several instantiations of a popular meme featuring U.S. wrestler, D'Angelo Dinero's enigmatically grinning face, our study has investigated the nature of several culturally specific semiotic resources used for meaning-making in Chinese online contexts. Our analysis has illuminated how Chinese internet users have variously recontextualized this multivalent exogenous element (i.e., Dinero's grinning facial expression), by combining it with local (and locally relevant) linguistic and visual resources, to create a range of multimodal texts that resonate with Chinese audiences. While the overwhelming majority of the image macros in the dataset appear with Chinese captions only, a few instances also incorporate Cantonese expressions or even some English text. In these instances, users engage in creative, multilingual language play, often involving relations of polysemy, homophony or transliteration, as well as socially taboo "carnavalesque" meanings. This language play, in some cases, may have a practical dimension as well. As other scholars (e.g., Wang 2012; Rea 2013) have previously shown, in China, non-literal meanings may be employed online to evade government censorship of non-sanctioned (e.g., political, vulgar, pornographic) internet content.

Our analysis has also shown that the overwhelming majority of visual components have their origin in a broad range of local Chinese contexts, which include digital culture, the everyday lives of people from lower social classes (in the case of *diaosi* imagery), popular culture sources (such as movies or music videos), political events and figures, as well as institutional settings. Although a few examples in the corpus center around visual elements of non-local origins (e.g., Stalin's image, or the scene from Japanese anime, *Initial D*), these references are familiar to many Chinese people, and have therefore become locally relevant. Our findings support previous literature indicating that localization of memes involves online users' active selection and integration of both global and local elements into a coherent and meaningful unit (e.g., Shifman 2014; Laineste and Voolaid 2017). Indeed, the successful diffusion of memes requires them to fit within their particular socio-cultural environments (Adegoju and Oyeboode 2015).

In addition, similar to other scholars who have examined humor in memes (e.g., Dynel 2016; Piata 2019), our analysis has demonstrated that humor is often

achieved through the juxtaposition of two (or more) incongruous elements and has shown that incongruity often arises across modalities. Additionally, as we hope to have shown throughout our analysis, the humor in these image macros is highly context-specific. Just as the literal meanings and connotations of individual linguistic and culturally embedded visual elements discussed here may remain inaccessible to non-Chinese viewers, how those elements combine to convey local meanings, local viewpoints, and local humor may also remain out of reach for cultural outsiders. Furthermore, similar to what has been discussed in prior research on memes (e.g., Shifman 2014; Milner 2016), our data are not merely playful, humorous and entertaining. In several cases, they simultaneously provide critical commentary on issues and topics in contemporary China, such as local politics, the structural realities restricting social mobility, and so forth.

We started our investigation curious about what made an exogenous visual element – i.e., an enigmatic smiling expression of a North American wrestler – such a productive internet meme in the Chinese context, especially when it seemed to be not at all popular outside of China. Our analysis has shown that the affective meanings associated with this particular facial expression not only vary across domains, but also emerge through interactions with other local visual and textual elements. Similar to many memes discussed by Milner (2016) and Shifman (2014), Dinero's smiling facial expression in this meme is polysemous and multi-functional. It does not convey one fixed meaning, but rather it is open to multiple interpretations, which depend on the other visual and textual cues that it is combined with. Due to this multivalent potential, in combination with other semiotic resources, the wrestler's enigmatic grin can generate multiple and diverse interpretations (e.g., deceptive smirk, confident smile, condescending sneer) along with specific affective meanings (e.g., enjoyment, excitement, contempt) that are "interactionally recognizable and ratified" between meme makers/senders and meme viewers (Blommaert, Lu and Li 2009: 5).

While the precise meaning of Dinero's grin is highly variable, we would nevertheless argue that the underlying stance that is communicated in all the examples discussed here is an irreverent, rebellious or transgressive one. In some cases, this transgressive stance rejects dominant or mainstream social norms and values (i.e., identifying oneself as, or with, the social category of *diaosi*); in other cases, this transgression has more moral overtones (i.e., in the use of highly vulgar expressions, or references to pornography); and in other instances, it conveys an anti-authoritarian perspective, which signals disrespect, or contempt, for traditional cultural institutions, such as education or politics. It is also likely that Dinero's grinning face – and the humor associated with it – may have the effect of mitigating the expression of a stance that, in other contexts throughout China, would be considered highly inappropriate.

One interesting pattern in our corpus is that the original image of D'Angelo Dinero's is never reproduced in its entirety. Instead, it is only his smiling facial expression, and not the rest of him (for instance, his hair or his body), which has been incorporated by Chinese social media users into different image macros. In them, Dinero's image becomes, so to speak, "bleached-out" while being photo-shopped by meme makers; consequently, the overall persona of Dinero is actually irrelevant for the meaning-making processes involved in interpreting these visual/verbal texts. Indeed, it is the versatility of his smiling facial expression – rather than any other features associated with Dinero as an individual (e.g., nationality, sports, success) – that may be key to explaining why this image became so popular and productive in China. As Chinese culture places great value on collectivism, individuals are encouraged to regulate and suppress their emotional expressions in order to avoid interpersonal conflict and social disharmony (Chen et al. 2005). As Ma (2016) has pointed out, one reason that rage comics were so successfully and productively localized in China was that they provided a socially acceptable means for emotional expression in a society where the expression of extreme emotions is considered face-threatening and a violation of cultural norms. Along similar lines, the popularity of memetic elements such as Dinero's grin may be related to Chinese users' desire to be free from the emotional suppression required by a collectivist culture, or perhaps to their desire for more unrestrained emotional expressions during interpersonal interactions. In addition, when deployed in digital contexts, depictions of extreme facial expressions in *biaoqingbao* also address the lack of nonverbal cues (e.g., facial expressions, gestures) during online messaging, commenting, story-telling, etc., and thereby facilitate more nuanced communication, by conveying a range of possible affective meanings. Yet, at the same time, we also want to stress that the visual focus on (human) faces – and facial reactions in particular – in online communication seems to be something that digital users in all cultural contexts find to be useful and productive, as can be seen in the diffusion and circulation of so-called "reaction GIFs" as well as the varied faces and expressions that appear in many Western image macros.

Productive memetic features are those that are open to recontextualization. They allow not just sharing but also the co-creation of cultural artifacts, which rely on ideas, emotions or stances that are recognized by individuals within a given discourse community. In the case of D'Angelo Dinero's grinning facial expression, a transgressive yet humorous stance is created when it is combined with a wide range of local semiotic resources by Chinese internet users. With each new combination of multimodal elements, the wrestler's facial expression is newly re-entextualized, and subsequently, resemiotized, to generate a new meaning, and often, a humorous effect. We hope that this paper raises awareness of, and stimu-

lates interest in, more of the intriguing discursive practices that are unique to Chinese social media.

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