Re-directing socialist persuasion through affective reiteration: a discourse analysis of ‘Socialist Memes’ on the Chinese internet

Ruichen Zhang¹

Received: 15 May 2020 / Accepted: 29 October 2020
© The Author(s) 2020

Abstract

Previous research has noted the ambiguous persuasive potentials of reiteration: repeating a statement, slogan or image can work both positively and negatively, can both help and hinder the effectiveness of a political message. Considering that repeated propaganda in China is broadly ineffective in generating wholehearted public support, this article is interested in how and when repetition does achieve meaningful persuasion. Drawing on affect theory to address these multiple potentials, it critically reconsiders the nature of persuasion itself, arguing that affective engagement is crucial in sustaining and consolidating temporary tendencies that lead to alteration in the social fabric. Looking at humorous ‘socialist memes’ popularised on the Chinese internet in recent years, the article conducts a discourse analysis on the patterns they reveal to break down this reiterative practice as an unfolding event, revealing how its humour disrupts official language and engages the public affectively. It argues that practice of repeating these memes produces interpretive ambiguities around the official language, and in doing so re-directs socialist persuasion towards a liberalised end.

Keywords Affect · Political persuasion · Propaganda · Humour · Meme · Internet · China

1 Introduction

Since the webisode series *Guardian* (“镇魂”) became a hit in the summer of 2018, the term ‘socialist brotherhood’ (“社会主义兄弟情”) has become a buzzword on Chinese social media. In the context of a previous lack of tolerance of LGBT stories, *Guardian* adapted one of the top gay fictional series on the Chinese internet, but strategically changed gay romance into ‘men’s friendship’ to safely comply with the supervision of the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT). Fans called this ‘brotherhood with Chinese characteristics’, a reworking of the ideological term ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’, using the phrase ‘with Chinese characteristics’ to mock the notoriously tight control of SARFT on all video production. Netizens were immediately amused by this clever use of socialist terminology, and this phrase, together with relevant memes, quickly went viral on Chinese social media. Since then, ‘socialist brotherhood’ has been widely applied in various contexts

to describe both male friendship and gay relationships in China.

This was not the first time that socialist terminology had been reworked for humorous effect. In fact, creative remakings of propaganda had already been a feature of popular internet culture in China for several years. Back in December 2015, a group of jokes adapting socialist propaganda went viral on Weibo, the biggest and most influential microblogging site in China. Netizens combined familiar propaganda phrases with popular conversational buzzwords, rendering the formulaic political language ridiculous. For example: ‘*You can diss me, but you cannot diss my Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of our nation*’ (你可以看不起我, 但不能看不起我实现中华民族伟大复兴的中国梦), ‘*Don’t bow your head, or your GDP will fall; don’t cry, or (our enemy) capitalism will laugh*’ (别低头, GDP会掉, 别流泪, 资本主义会笑).¹ They went on to create a variety of

✉ Ruichen Zhang
rz292@cam.ac.uk

¹ Department of Sociology, University of Cambridge, 16 Mill Lane, Cambridge CB2 1SB, England, UK

¹ This sentence was rephrased from a romantic cliché ‘Don’t bow your head, or your tiara will fall; don’t cry, or your enemy will laugh’, which is meant to encourage girls to fight for their rights and dignity when offended. The phrase ‘bow your head’ in Chinese means a physical gesture commonly seen in East Asian societies as a polite greeting, and also means ‘to surrender’. The rephrased sentence of parody literally means as a socialist country we must stand firm for

memes by putting these words on Maoist propaganda posters, that entertain through sharp contrast of both visual and textual styles, and have also been a big hit across online communities. The emergence and increasing popularity of these reworkings or adaptations of political terminology in China indicates that socialist ideology has moved beyond official spheres of control. In a digital era, it pervades society in a far more diversified context of public utterances than ever before. Practices of ideological language are no longer subject solely to the strict regulations of the party-state for political purposes, but open to diversified re-workings by ordinary netizens as a means of self-expression.

The development of digital new media that encourages public participation in this rewriting of discourse allows for a wider transmission, sharing and exposure of these re-workings than ever before. In an authoritarian country used to relying on the manipulation of representations to exert political control, this change in patterns of reiteration of official language has important implications for political persuasion and the power dynamic between state and society. Previous research has noted the paradox of reiteration as capable of both reversing and reaffirming meanings, and has emphasised that the persuasive effects of repetition can vary widely. This article focuses on the potentials of these ambiguities themselves to interrupt dominant structures and enable affective engagement. Using methods from critical discourse analysis (CDA), it breaks down humorous ‘socialist memes’ as unfolding events, and examines how their humour disrupts official language and engages the public affectively, making reiteration persuasive. The article argues that practice of these memes, by producing interpretive ambiguities around official language, re-directs the previously successful symbolic control of socialist persuasion towards a liberalised end.

2 Political persuasion in China: ‘socialist newspeak’

Persuasion pervades politics, perhaps in a more overtly observable way in non-democratic countries. To convince its people of the legitimacy of authoritarian rule, a regime needs to frame its performance to be in line with the common interest (Holbig 2013). The framing project in China largely works through ideology and propaganda (Brady 2008; Holbig 2009). With its powerful control of the organisational infrastructure, the party-state is able to implement

its political values through institutional practices and public surveillance (Brady 2008).

Apart from these disciplinary practices on the administrative and institutional level, political persuasion in China mainly relies on language techniques, as both ideology and propaganda embed an essential dimension of language. According to Lasswell (1995, p.13), ‘propaganda in its broadest sense is the technique of influencing human action by the manipulation of representations.’ And by defining ideology as ‘a wide-ranging structural arrangement that attributes *decontested* meanings to a range of mutually defining political concepts’, Freeden (2003, p.54) highlights the necessary competition of ideologies over political language in coping with the indeterminacy of meaning. To eliminate interpretive ambiguity of political concepts, the party-state has crafted a rich repertoire of representations that include terminology, rhetoric, slogans, and their various symbolic forms such as posters, adverts, news programmes, all in a designated formation. Together they form a political language featuring semantic certainty and interpretive finality. To a limited extent, this language resembles what George Orwell in 1984 called ‘newspeak’, a controlled language of simplified grammar and restricted vocabulary that helps to maintain political order by eliminating alternative thinking. That is how ideology works as symbolic communication that sustains and reproduces power (Thompson 1987).

This political language in China is created via linking key vocabularies with political forces. By legitimating one meaning of the vocabulary and delegitimizing the others (Freeden 2003), and more importantly, dominating the right to use this language in the larger social world, the party-state denies alternative interpretations and uses of this language in alternative contexts (Brown 2012; Holbig 2013). Then, to impose this socialist discourse, the party-state pays considerable disciplinary efforts to enforce a top-down iteration of this formalised language in society, in an attempt for it to become accepted as the sole legitimate medium of political expression (Schoenhals 1992), and more importantly, people get habituated to its omnipresence in their daily lives. Official slogans ranging from ‘harmony’ (‘和谐’)² to ‘Chinese dream’ (‘中国梦’),³ for example, are not only repeated in official documents and speeches (Karmazin 2020), but also in public space on propaganda posters on the streets, billboards in shopping malls, local announcements in residential communities, etc. The verbatim repetition of

Footnote 1 (continued)

development (GDP) and show our strength to capitalist countries (enemy).

² This term is short for ‘harmonious society’, an ideal of social development promoted by former President Hu Jintao as one of the keywords of the CCP’s ideology under his leadership. It has been criticised for justifying suppression of dissent and rigid information control.

³ This term promoted by President Xi Jinping describes both ideals for Chinese people’s personal development and the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

slogans consolidating socialist language in material practice serves political purposes of cultivating loyalty to the party-state, organising certain cultural attitudes, delivering political goals promised by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and ultimately, mass persuasion of socialist legitimisation in a changing domestic and international environment (Brown and Bērziņa-Čerenkova 2018; Holbig 2013; Song and Gee 2020).

Moreover, this orchestrated system of language requires an equally elaborate system of maintenance that aims to ensure its interpretive determinacy and material omnipresence, that is, censorship. As part of public surveillance, censorship is a mechanism of information manipulation by imposing costs for accessing and spreading information (Roberts 2020). According to Roberts (2018), there are three types of censorship: threatening with punitive consequences, increasing the difficulty of access and distribution of information against authorities, and promoting distraction information to outweigh the undesired information. With these techniques to monitor information and how people react to it, the party-state is able to crowd out alternative interpretations of socialist language, and maintain its exclusive right of final explanation, which constitutes an important aspect of its authoritarian rule in China.

Powerful and well-rounded as it is, this whole system of persuasion through language is not necessarily effective in the way it is intended, or might appear, to be. The system relies on interpretive determinacy of socialist language, its omnipresence through repetition, and censorship mechanisms to monitor public utterances. While the authoritarian state is able to create a language of monosemy and make it pervasive if not inescapable in everyday lives, it can never eliminate all alternative interpretations by the public. According to Arendt's account of human action, 'acts performed in public are immediately submitted to the interpretation of others who will elaborate their meaning in ways impossible for the actor to anticipate or control' (Dolan 1995, p.337). The attempt to remove unpredictable public expressions is always partial and incomplete, however coercive and thorough it may be, as it contradicts the hermeneutic nature of social interaction. Various evidence suggests there is widespread scepticism about official discourse in China, as people manage to circumvent censorship and reiterate socialist language in different ways (see Lynch 1999; Scott 1990). Link (1993) noticed the use of 'authentic' official language in so-called 'wrong' contexts, describing it as 'playing the official language game in reverse'. More recently, scholars have examined how Chinese netizens have deployed humorous homonyms of 'harmony' (*hexie*) and memes to critique and subvert the ideology of 'harmony' and official discourse as a whole (Nordin and Richaud 2014; Wang et al. 2016). However, while such ironic reiterations criticise and reverse the official language through ridicule,

ironically, they are also repeating the very language they oppose, thereby confirming the symbolic hegemony of socialist China in the ideological sphere (Holbig 2013). This inherent ambiguity makes it problematic to accurately evaluate the socio-political significance of these political reiterations in China.

Regardless of the implications one might read into these reiterations, they undoubtedly indicate a degree of ineffectiveness in the official persuasion system in China. The state-produced political language of monosemy can easily appear obsolete and insipid, and thus less likely to engage the masses in a meaningful way. In this case, the very omnipresence of verbatim repetition may even undermine the effects of socialist persuasion. Chen and Shi (2001) find that respondents with more exposure to state media have less trust in the Chinese government, suggesting the failure of propaganda in nurturing political support among Chinese people. Likewise, Huang (2018) uses a survey experiment to show that crude and heavy-handed propaganda in China can backfire and worsen citizens' opinion of the state, which may have a negative impact on regime legitimacy in the long run. On the other hand, other scholars insist that propagandistic repetition works to enforce obedience and achieves persuasion in a different, more directly coercive way. Wedeen (1999) analyses how the Syrian government produces compliance by enforcing participation in rituals and habituating citizens to utter formulaic slogans and perform empty gestures. Roberts (2018) shows that the Chinese government can exert significant influence over the tenor of online discussion using coordinated information comprising mostly of cheerleading messages to divert netizens from negative information. These studies underscore the complexity of the persuasive effects of repetition.

The variable effects of repetition reveal complicated dynamics of political persuasion between state and society: repeated propaganda aims to convince the public of socialist values and regime legitimacy, while the humorous reiterations examined in this study subtly challenge the political authorities to tolerate diversified interpretations. Drawing on the concept of *affect* to distinguish the latter from either straightforward or ironic verbatim repetitions of official language, this article examines how persuasion in China is disturbed in new ways by humorous re-workings of 'socialist newspeak' in the form of digital memes.

3 Resilience to persuasion via incongruity humour: 'socialist memes'

As alluded to earlier, the socialist language of hegemonic monosemy is in conflict with the interpretive multiplicity of all human action, which, according to Dolan (1995) drawing on Arendt, is, inherent in the hermeneutical nature of

Fig. 1 Cartoon meme about being single

interaction. Markedly formulaic and rigid, the socialist language is in stark contrast with other language genres. This ideological boundary in language utterances remains clearly identifiable in contemporary China (Brown and Bērziņa-Čerenkova 2018). It is precisely from this fact that humorous reiterations of socialist language arise as a particular type of ‘incongruity humour’ on the Chinese internet. Incongruity humour normally comprises two elements that are sharply contrasted in conflicts yet at the same time cleverly fused to create the effects of disappointment and tension relief (Monro 1951). In a digital age, ordinary Chinese netizens are able to humorously reiterate the formulaic language by actively re-situating it in alternative contexts or attributing alternative meanings to it.

This ‘socialist humour’ of incongruity draws on a variety of ideological representations ranging from slogan texts and poster images to news videos of state media. For example, netizens create a set of words and memes of ‘river crab’ (homonym of ‘harmony’ in Chinese) to ridicule the so-called ‘harmonisation’ through information control in China’s cyberspace (Wang et al 2016). Chinese video artists have also made parody videos to mock the ‘Red Classics’ (红色经典), canonical Chinese socialist literary and theatrical works, in an attempt to subvert the values and aesthetics they promoted (Li 2011; Zhao 2009). But in addition to these satirical reiterations, there are in fact a wider range of less subversive and rebellious types of humorous remaking for sheer amusement, self-derogation, and even nonsensical pleasure—that nonetheless have a political effect. These humorous, popular re-uses of propaganda are known in China as ‘socialist memes’.

For example, the memes below are both about being single. Figure 1 captions a cartoon figure with ‘Everyone has their date, except for me, building socialism by myself’. This ‘image macro’ (a common form of a meme—basically a user-annotated image) about anxiety around being single, is particularly popular among young people, especially on holidays like Christmas or Valentine’s Day. Likewise, Fig. 2

Fig. 2 Soldier meme about being single

captions a figure of a socialist revolutionary soldier with ‘*I am a socialist successor, I can’t be bothered with romantic issues*’. The highly valued sacrifice of soldiers putting off romantic relationships or even marriage during war time to serve their country is reworked to justify being single in the present. Here, ‘socialism’ no longer refers to the ideological concept for political justification purposes; it simply means the factual state of living in a socialist country. On the simplest level, the memes say ‘Everyone has their date, except for me being single’, and ‘I’m devoted to my career, I can’t be bothered with romantic issues’. But the addition of the political commitment of ‘building socialism’ used here amplifies both the bitterness and amusement of this self-deprecation. Memes of this kind that remix the socialist ‘new-speak’ and other irrelevant contents from mundane utterances are called ‘socialist memes’ on the Chinese internet.

From these humorous recreations of socialist terminology on the Chinese internet, we can see that propaganda language is creatively (mis)used in non-political contexts despite strict censorship. These memes are accessible on Chinese social media to this day, and still popular among young netizens. It does not seem accurate to categorise these memes as political satire or ironic dissidence, as most of them are self-expression that is neither critical nor sensitive. On the other hand, nor are they non-political, as they do concern political language, albeit via reworked language formations. Attributing alternative meanings to ‘socialism’ is why people found these memes surprising and funny, and how they gained popularity in the first place. To quote a recent catchphrase in China originating from a popular Japanese manga *Attack on Titan*, with these memes, Chinese people can finally escape the ‘fear of being dominated’ by socialist propaganda.

This article looks at these humorous ‘socialist memes’ instead of other forms of better-researched political satire, because they have different communication potentialities and a broader social impact in their ability to reach a wider audience. They encourage a different, more vibrant participation in circulating mildly humorous reiterations. Political satire

with overtly critical and rebellious intentions is considered more threatening to the regime, and, therefore, is more likely to be—and is more—censored. The aforementioned videos mocking ‘Red Classics’, for example, were widely criticised by the state media following their successful public communication in 2006 (Li 2011). More recently, the official Xinhua news agency made clear that websites must ban video spoofs that violate socialist core values (Li and Jourdan 2018). These moves signal the party-state’s consistently powerful and extensive control over public expression. Humorous ‘socialist memes’, on the other hand, are more prudent in their choice of prioritising personal expression to the ridicule of socialist terminology and values. They are able to keep a low profile in online discussion and avoid attention from the state. In sharp contrast to online jokes and satire on Twitter, these humorous socialist memes on the Chinese internet are also highly decentralised and diffuse, with the result that they can circumvent censorship. It is a common mentality of Chinese netizens under political control to try to avoid actively publicising themselves using politics-related tags or increasing their visibility on the internet using identifiable keywords. Even political satirists in China are starting to avoid this identification by removing the label of ‘politics’ on their social media profile with tightening censorship (Luqiu 2017). This is even more so for ordinary netizens who are more interested in sharing their lives on the internet than in expressing political viewpoints. For them, what is more important is that memes, ‘socialist’ or not, can pass initial checks of censorship to be anonymously posted on the internet as a form of shared self-expression, and that they can stay there long enough for public display and interpersonal interaction on social media without being erased quickly for censorship reasons. Likewise, few online communities, groups, influencers or opinion leaders would share these memes regularly on the internet, as they too want to avoid political ridicule (however, friendly it may be) in their social media feeds which could lead to unwanted attention from the authorities. It is correspondingly difficult to search and sample these memes: they are simultaneously nowhere and everywhere, permeating online conversations in various contexts as everyday humour—for example, discussions of movies and TV dramas, comments on sports games, etc. They naturally merge with all other online content, looking like just another funny internet quote, another bit of sparkling wit and creativity—but in their own, different, way, i.e., in a ‘socialist’ way.

Partly to deal with the difficulty of data sampling, this article studies humorous ‘socialist memes’ not as a corpus of parallel data, but as an event in a process of emergence and development. Based on ethnographic observations on the most popular online platforms in China, notably Weibo and Wechat, this study uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) to reconsider the unfolding of this internet event. The

framework proposed by Fairclough (1992) situates discourse in the locus of practice, and combines analyses of social formations and structures, where discourse practices arise with language-oriented analysis. Using this methodology, what follows dissects the processes by which netizens create and circulate these memes, putting them in wider context and examining their formation and mutation as discursive practices.

But CDA as a methodological framework is not sufficient to address the paradoxical nature of public reiterations as simultaneously a reversal and reaffirmation of the dominant language. This article draws on affect theory to tackle this problem. Essentially concerned with in-betweenness, in a process of becoming, and concentrating on unfolding events instead of static things (Massumi 2015), the concept of affect provides a useful lens to probe into the micropolitical domain of ambiguities and multiplicity of interpretations articulated by these practices.

4 Humour as affect: the potential of ambiguities

Papacharissi (2015, p.125) observes that publics in the digital age are formed in ways that discursively render *affective publics*, i.e., ‘networked public formations that are mobilized and connected or disconnected through expressions of sentiment’. These expressions are discursively constructed through media texts and carefully staged in digital public space, reflecting and reshaping power relations in a larger social structure (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019). For analytical purposes, this paper distinguishes the concepts of emotion and affect, elsewhere often used interchangeably in relevant research. According to Massumi (2002, p.28), emotion is a subjective content whose intensity is owned and recognised and, therefore, can be defined as personal, while affect is unqualified; ‘it is not ownable or recognizable and is thus resistant to critique.’ Affect accumulates in habit and tendency in an all-rounded way, whereas ‘emotion is the way the depth of that ongoing experience registers personally at a given moment’ (Massumi 2015, p.4). This paper views humorous ‘socialist memes’ on the Chinese internet through the lens of affect rather than emotion for two reasons. First, the amusement of these memes to a large extent remains inexplicable and ambiguous compared with political satire or parody whose articulate ‘point’ is immediately recognizable. More often than not, people post these memes on social media simply because they just fit in that context without consciously thinking over and giving clear reasons why. These memes seem closer to an idea of ‘humour’ which gives aesthetic pleasure by appealing in a generalised manner to feeling (Bigelow 1953, cited in Gruner 1965), rather than ‘satire’ that persuades in a reasoned, therefore, more

specified process. Second, expressions of ‘socialist memes’ permeate online discussion, creating an always-on ambience, wherever everyday conversations take place. Different from satire that is transient because of censorship, ‘socialist memes’ are prudent enough to survive censorship so that their affective punches become a kind of sediment, in forms of a continuous flow of tendencies and potentials, rather than disconnected and fragmented instances of emotion.

From the perspective of affect, the ambiguity of reiteration is no longer the problem of a paradox that swings between a conservative reproduction of the status quo and a progressive subversion of established hierarchies. Instead, ambiguity *per se* has the potential of altering power dynamics. This potential can be consolidated through affective *engagement* in repetition. A theoretical analysis of the affective dimension of reiteration itself dissects how ambiguities mobilise affect to promote change by interweaving the insignificant individual with the dominant rhetoric, and accumulating intensity through repetition.

According to Papacharissi (2015), affect is about the intensity with which something is experienced specifically in an unconscious way. Drawing on the Spinozist definition of affect as ‘the capacity to affect or be affected’, Massumi (2015) explains that this ‘something’ comes from the point of *encounter* with a differential of force, which triggers the move of affecting or being affected. The affective hit is thus inevitably interrupting whatever continuities are in progress. Likewise, humour takes effects by disrupting expectations. Humour creates intellectual pleasure by building up an expectation destined to be frustrated (Eastman 1937). The expectation is essentially a feeling of taken-for-grantedness based on a set of internalised norms, which is why humour often embeds a reversal of values (Monro 1951). Freud (2002, p.102), too, understands humour as a means of outwitting our internal inhibitions: ‘the joke then represents a rebellion against such authority, a liberation from the opposition it opposes.’ The affective moment of humour, then, is essentially interrupting the dominant order of thought that individuals have come to accepted as natural without consciously realising its presence.

Moreover, Spinoza’s definition also reveals that affect is directly relational. Massumi (2015) explains that affective techniques are fundamentally participatory, as they apply more directly to situations which involve co-occurrences of individuals encountering this event in their own personal way. This process of collective participation is called ‘differential attunement’. Drawing on Guattari, Papacharissi (2015) further elaborates affective attunement as ‘polyphonic interlacings between the individual and the social’. While punctuating the beats of the dominant narrative, the streaming affective gestures of these ‘socialist memes’ are also weaving personal experience and storytelling into it. This interweaving via affect allows individuals to feel their own

place in the narrative and the ambiguity with its potential for contagion further invites others to tune in and develop the stories (ibid). This way, momentary interruptions actually can have an enduring effect of engaging a wider population via affect and amplifying visibility of repressed or under-represented interpretations.

Although the interlacing implies a permanent incompleteness of narratives-in-the-making that are still partial and temporary, there is a possibility of consolidating these very moving potentials and tendencies as a determinate drive for change in reality, effected through repetition. According to Butler (1999), repetition is crucial in sustaining and naturalising norms. Identities are always fluid. It is through the performance of acts that a certain identity registers, and through repetitive acts that this identity gets affirmed and consolidated. Wedeen (1999) in her study of political rhetoric in Syria finds that the regime facilitates obedience by enforcing a rhetorical excess, so that familiarity with this symbolic language and behaviours consistent with its formulas have become part of the experience of being Syrian. However, this imposed excess does not require identification with the rhetoric to be felt (partly because the rhetoric deprived of ambiguities cannot engage the public affectively), but only simulated. Participation without affective experience can be problematic and lead to mundane transgressions. Affective repetition, on the other hand, encourages active instead of passive reiterations. It connects and pluralises individual expressions (Papacharissi 2015), instead of isolating and regulating them. In short, monotonous repetition aims at contracting the public into a homogeneous entity, while sentiment-driven repetition mobilises the public to be more open and receptive to the new and to change. As Papacharissi (2015, p.54) draws on Deleuze, ‘the force of repetition augments the disruption introduced by a tweet into “an affective intensity capable of overthrowing the entire order of discourse in favour of transformation”’. In the always-on ambience created by affective refrains, individuals do not just *live* with the norms that abound their everyday lives; more importantly, they *feel* their way into the connective narrative and *structure* the ways in which affect as an event further unfolds. That is how repetition works through affect to make a difference.

5 Discourse analysis

5.1 ‘Socialist memes’ as an event

‘Socialist memes’ first came to existence on Sina Weibo in December 2015 and have gone through a process of mutation, reproduction, and ultimately normalisation. They have raised heated discussions on social media platforms, have been widely disseminated over the years, and remain

pervasive on the internet. Some of the original posts initiating the once-famous ‘sentence-making competitions’ (remixing rephrased socialist terms with romantic buzzwords) are now nowhere to be found after 5 years of internet change, but we can still uncover how they began by looking at some snapshots of the original Weibo threads that were taken and posted online by other Weibo users. According to these snapshots, it all started from a Weibo user then named @lill, who wrote this one sentence of ‘*I’m just so into the way that you don’t like me but have to build socialism with Chinese characteristics with me nevertheless*’ (“我就是喜欢你看不惯我 却不得不和我一同建设中国特色社会主义的样子”) on the 1st of December 2015. This prompted similar comments as a collection of clever, witty sentences. Most of them followed @lill’s lead, remixing ideological terms of ‘socialism’, ‘xiaokang’, ‘the great rejuvenation’, ‘the great banner’ etc., with famous lines from a particular type of romantic TV drama that typically features an innocent sweet girl and a pokerfaced boy pretending that he is not in love with her. The top five most liked comments are:

- i. *Don’t bow your head, or your GDP will fall; don’t cry, or (our enemy) capitalism will laugh* (别低头, GDP会掉, 别流泪, 资本主义会笑) (4598 likes)
- ii. *Come get me, if you catch me, I’ll take you to go for xiaokang (a moderately prosperous society)* (你追我, 如果你追到我, 我就带你奔小康) (3169 likes)
- iii. *Crush my heart all you want, but I’ll never allow you to give up holding high the banner of socialism* (你可以把我的心踩在脚下, 但是你不能扔下高举着的社会主义旗帜) (3090 likes)
- iv. *Forget me all you want, but don’t forget core socialist values* (你可以忘记我, 但请别忘记社会主义核心价值观) (2838 likes)
- v. *Don’t shed tears over my grave, you’ll spoil my way of comprehensively building xiaokang* (别在我的坟前哭, 我怕你脏了我全面建设小康社会的路) (2518 likes)

From these textual remixes, netizens went on to put these rephrased texts onto images to create memes. Four days later on the 5th of December 2015, Weibo user @M大王叫我来巡山 (8.26 million followers) posted nine image-macros, and these so-called ‘socialist memes’ immediately went viral across communities.⁴ This post currently has 16,358 likes, 5074 comments, 20,482 shares and counting. Figures 3 and 4 are two of the memes from this post. They use the most liked comment above and another popular one (‘I can’t take

Fig. 3 ‘Don’t bow, or your GDP will fall; don’t cry, or capitalism will laugh’

Fig. 4 ‘I can’t take my eyes off the way you work hard to build socialism’

my eyes off the way you work hard to build socialism’) as captions of two 1950-style propaganda posters to further emphasise the contrast and ridicule.

Once these memes were well-known, netizens began to tone them down by replacing propaganda posters with other non-political images or changing captions from the awkwardly rephrased romantic lines to more pragmatic ones. For example, this humorous style of remixing was applied to football players and Marvel heroes. Weibo user @从小就是埃及和塞内加尔人 shared 9 football memes on the 5th of December 2015 and said ‘Keep football away from politics’ (让足球远离政治).⁵ Among them, Fig. 5 captions Mario Balotelli in his shirt ‘Why always me?’ with ‘Why always CCP’. Figure 6 adapts Bill Shankly’s famous

⁴ See: <https://www.weibo.com/1720173771/D6YW7x7Sn?from=page1005051720173771>, accessed 23 September 2020.

⁵ See: <https://weibo.com/1663408253/D6ZKnvp9q?from=page1005051663408253>, accessed 23 September 2020.

Fig. 5 Why always CCP

Fig. 6 Core socialist values above life and death

Fig. 7 Black Widow meme

‘football is more important than life and death’ quote into ‘Core socialist values are not a matter of life and death, they are much, much more important than that’. This post was also widely spread among football fans on Weibo. Similarly,

⁶ See: <https://weibo.com/5284408940/D78tLyHTb?from=page1005055284408940>, accessed 23 September 2020.

Fig. 8 Thor meme

为了社会主义的建设
而操心的睡不着觉

Fig. 9 Insomnia meme

全世界都粗去玩了
只有我在独自建设社会主义

Fig. 10 Homebody meme

Weibo user @青红造了个白 posted 9 Marvel memes on the 6th of December and said ‘What belongs to a nation belongs to the world’ (只有民族的才是世界的).⁶ Figures 7 and 8 are two of the memes shared in this post. Figure 7 says ‘Be the kind of woman that men can never get hold of’ remaking a poster of a Chinese female peasant with her face photoshopped as Black Widow. Figure 8 is a revolutionary soldier photoshopped as Thor with his hammer saying ‘Mess

Fig. 11 Diet meme

with me again and it's hammer time'. With 9231 likes, 4042 comments, 22,774 reposts, this post was a great hit among Marvel fans.

These memes may appear obscure to those who are not familiar with Marvel stories or football. But the principle of meme-making caught on across different knowledge communities. As this style of socialist remixing spread to a wider public, more versatile memes appeared. For example, the memes below joke about insomnia, being a 'homebody', and diet. Figure 9 captions an image of a sleepless cartoon figure in bed *'Too worried about building socialism to fall asleep'*. Figure 10 says *'Everyone is going away on trips, except for me building socialism by myself'*. Figure 11 responds wittily to self-soothing humour around overeating, being on a diet, or being overweight: *'Only when you feel full are you able to build socialism with Chinese characteristics'*. Like aforementioned Figs. 1 and 2, here 'socialism' simply means the minutiae of everyday life. This embedding of ideological language in what appears to be ordinary memes is distinct from the overtly satirical re-use of well-known propaganda phrases and images.

Thus, the development of humorous 'socialist memes' as an event has gone through three steps: sentence-making competitions, image-macros based on these sentences and their mutations, and finally memes as a form of self-expression in daily communication. In this unfolding process, we can see how the humour of 'socialist memes' became increasingly useful in everyday conversations, with decreasing political irony and diluted political meaning of the socialist term embedded. With its popularisation on the internet and pluralised interpretations of the repeated political terms, it is able to reach and *engage* a wide public with affect, which, as the analysis below will reveal, has important effects in re-directing the persuasive effects of political language.

5.2 From interruption to attunement

At the very beginning of 'socialist memes', rephrased texts containing ideological terms in 'sentence-making

competitions' above were immediately interrupting the formation of official narrative that Chinese people had been habituated to accept as 'normal', just as jokes are by nature frustrated expectations (Monro 1951): when readers come across a joke, they would instinctively expect the sentence flowing towards the same old political cliché, and then surprisingly find it end in a romantic one. This interruption embeds a reversal of values. The texts of 'socialist romance' listed above and the memes based on these sentences (e.g., Figs. 3 and 4, only with its contrast enhanced by visual presentation) all imply an ironic value orientation of prioritising romantic relationships over socialist construction. This socialist morality that all personal feelings and actions be steered around political doctrines used to be highly valued in China before the reforms in the late 1970s, but is no longer popular in China today, or at least more likely to appear in neutral terms like 'devotion to society' rather than the more overtly political 'building socialism'. For these texts and memes, at first, the reversal was overt and crude, interrupting the socialist rhetoric in an abrupt yet non-offensive way. After all, in reiterating 'socialist construction above anything' in a creative way, they in fact 'reinvigorate' the obsolete socialist morality making an old-fashioned style from the Maoist era and slogans associated with it contemporary again.

As 'socialist memes' further unfold with diversifying types of mimesis, the interruption becomes less abrupt and more cleverly muted. Instead of collapsing political language onto romantic clichés or football news, interruption in subsequent memes reveals a more friendly interaction between self-expression and political terminology. In other words, netizens used the earliest forms of political reiteration to play and mess with the official rhetoric, whereas subsequent memes became part of normal communication on the internet. For example, while Figs. 5 and 6 are still directly ironic, Figs. 7 and 8 are much less to do with politics except for reworking Maoist propaganda posters. In addition, for Figs. 1, 2, 9, 10 and 11, the commitment to socialism in these memes is arguably not for greater ironic reversal, but simply to sound wittier.

The mutation of 'socialist memes' illustrates how the interruption of political language utterances has gradually become a comprehensive disturbance of the whole language structure, as reiterated socialist terms get increasingly re-contextualised and re-signified. With 'sentence-making competitions' and Figs. 3, 4, 5 and 6, socialist terms and posters are simply removed from their 'correct' language formations and implanted in 'wrong' contexts, yet their ideological meanings remain unchanged. Later, netizens started to explore creative ways of using the dominant messages of socialist values completely outside their typical repertoire. In doing so, they are weaving their own storytelling into the narrative about 'socialism', continuously expanding a

shared cultural language to account for their own concrete experience of living in a socialist country, like insomnia problems, homebody habits, diet plans in Figs. 9, 10 and 11. This is exactly what Papacharissi (2015, p.136) calls ‘attunement’: when individuals ‘seek semantic agency by trying to determine how their personal narrative connects to normative and evolving narratives for understanding the world’. ‘Socialism’, then, is no longer a symbolic field strictly guarded by the authoritarian regime where only ‘socialist newspeak’ is allowed, but instead, evolves into a public space, where ordinary people find their way in and make their own connotations.

In this regard, individuals’ attunement to the dominant narrative has great potential for reconstructing political discourse and disrupting hegemonic power structures. As Wedeen (1999, p.45) observes in Syria, the authoritarian regime imposes a dominant rhetoric to ‘destroy the possibilities for public expressions of contingency, frailty, and interpretive ambiguity, thereby fixing meanings and censoring facts in ways that silence or render irrelevant people’s understandings of themselves as publicly political persons’. Likewise in China, the system of political persuasion is orchestrated via this symbolic manoeuvre of denying individuals’ entries into this field. However, with ‘socialist memes’, Chinese netizens are able to claim semantic agency within a political discourse that has been rigidly restricted by the state, thus also claiming their own subjective position in politics. This article will further explain that their access to this fluid form of power, seeking to break into the ideological mainstream, is enabled by affect. It is in this sense that we argue the affective humour of ‘socialist memes’ has the potential to liberalise political discourse in a socialist hegemony.

5.3 Affective engagement in reiteration

From the analysis above, how socialist humour contributes to the liberalisation of political discourse remains a possible tendency, a temporary potential waiting to be activated. As previous research suggests, it is inherently ambiguous whether this potential can be realised or not. But tendencies *cumulatively* can produce great energies to undo symbolic structures of political persuasion, which, this article argues, is achieved via affective engagement. This is what makes the humour of ‘socialist memes’ fundamentally different from other disciplinary repetitions of propaganda. It is able to grasp propagandistic repetition and re-direct it towards interpretive pluralism.

Rather than simulating official narratives, reproducing forms and content devoid of any meaningful interaction with their receivers, the practice of ‘socialist memes’ reproduces *feelings* that connect individuals to each other, thus creating a sensation of being in a public. For example, look

at two Weibo posts, one posted by @人民日报 (*People’s Daily*, the official newspaper of CCP, 0.12 billion followers on Weibo) on the 3rd of July 2016 sharing correct English translations of socialist slogans for international communication (1835 likes, 18 comments, 4678 shares),⁷ and aforementioned meme-sharing post by @M大王叫我來巡山 (Weibo influencer, 8.26 million followers) on the 5th of December 2015 (16,358 likes, 5074 comments, 20,482 shares). With the former, among the 18 comments, 6 were making notes for English exams in China that often include translations of political news or official documents, 5 tagged other users, 1 said ‘Are you sure foreigners are interested in this?’, the rest of them used tags #politics, #CCP95Anniversary and said nothing. The 4678 shares are deliberately made invisible by the Sina Weibo platform so that nobody knows what others say about this post, which is very common on Chinese social media with posts related to CCP and other highly sensitive topics. The post sharing memes, by contrast, received more meaningful interactions. This post is not ‘protected’ by Sina Weibo platform: the more than 20,000 shares are visible to all and most of them are texts or emojis of ‘hahahahaha’ and ‘lol’, so are the comments. Many comments also tagged other users for sharing and said something like ‘look how funny it is’. Both reiterations of socialist slogans, it is hard to tell if netizens sharing and commenting on the Weibo post of People’s Daily were connected in a meaningful way, while with ‘socialist memes’ of witticism, netizens reacted vividly with laughter and actively shared it with their friends on social media, forming a widening public connected via amusing feelings.

Previous research has proved that Chinese people have been generally tired of the repetition of state-produced narratives (Chen and Shi 2001; Huang 2018). Studies of repetition also suggest that the sensory intensity of affect wears off through repetition, and its power to ignite active responses declines (Sontag 2003). Mechanical repetition of the same old political discourse, therefore, seems unlikely to increase positive affective input. This sheds light on why socialist memes evolve and change, and why Chinese netizens welcome memes making fun of political language with such enthusiasm. Living in an environment overflowing with socialist language, people easily identify with these kinds of jokes and memes and want to see more: perhaps in a backlash effect against precisely monotonous and monosemous socialist persuasion. The affect of memes encourages popular participation and thus facilitates *ongoing* iteration of ‘socialist memes’ across online communities, a process likely to be fed by further iterations of official propaganda.

⁷ See: <https://weibo.com/2803301701/DD3cj8G6o?from=page1002062803301701>, accessed 23 September 2020.

Indeed, although feelings of amusement may gradually fade away, the always-on ambience created by the *anticipation* of repeated exposure to a saturated repertoire of memes is key. According to the official statistics in 2020, there are more than 0.9 billion netizens in China and on average they spend 30.8 h on the internet every week.⁸ Digital content has become an indispensable part of their life experience. The influence of repeated exposure to online content, and the expectations it creates, constitute extremely powerful potential forces. While Chinese people still *live* with political sessions at work, state-produced programmes on TV, and posters on billboards (as they have been living with them for decades), now in the digital age they also start to *live* with floods of state propaganda (Roberts 2018)—as well as, for the first time, humorous ‘socialist memes’ reworking that very content. The affective engagement with ‘misused’ political language on the internet gradually habituates netizens to alternative interpretations, or at least to *the fact that alternative interpretations exist*. For people living in China, this is absolutely crucial. It is a moment ‘when ice starts to melt’. Next time they see the twelve words of core socialist values on an outdoor billboard, it is as likely they prompt a memory of the humorous memes they have previously seen on social media as of slogans on official documents. Without socialist memes permeating the internet enabling alternative imaginations of political language, they would probably still be bound to accept these words as they are authoritatively defined, in the same way they accept socialist hegemony. The weakening of this experiential reality is precisely how affective humour makes a difference.

6 Concluding remarks

Previous studies of political rhetoric have noted the paradoxical nature of language iteration and the ambiguous effects of repetition in achieving persuasion. Discourse analysis dissects how ‘socialist memes’ as an event unfold on the Chinese internet and reveals how its humour interrupts the structures of language, encourages interweaving between personal experience and dominant narrative, and engages the public affectively in continuous repetition. This article argues that by claiming semantic agency in political discourse via practices of reiteration, netizens are breaking into the political dominant to claim their position in politics. In addition, while affectively engaged in repeated exposure to diversified interpretations of political discourse, they are

reframing this diversity of interpretation as natural, which cumulatively can lead to habitual acceptance of these publicly-produced alternatives as opposed to state-produced rhetoric. Thus, reiteration is not only disrupting hegemonic language structures, but also re-directing political persuasion in China towards a liberalised end.

This study contributes to existing literature in two ways. Theoretically, it argues that ambiguity *per se* has the potential of disrupting established power structures, if consolidated through affective engagement in repetition. Discourse analysis points to how the ambiguities of reiteration can mobilise affect to promote polyvocality in political discourse. Empirically, it enriches the understanding of political persuasion in China by looking at a largely neglected area of political humour, showing how the accumulated intensity of humorous tendencies can be activated to promote change. Previous research mostly focuses on subversive satire as grassroots resistance. However, these forms of overtly rebellious irony and criticism are much less likely to survive censorship than friendly jokes and memes like ‘socialist memes’. With more and longer exposure on the internet, more muted, indeterminate, and anonymous political humour has important political potentials not yet fully explored in relevant research. The analysis of ‘socialist memes’ in this article reveals how modest and mundane political humour is altering the official language and re-directing political persuasion from regulated monosemy to open-ended polysemy. This contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the transformation of political discourse in a digital era, towards the perception of contested culture as a dynamic interaction, rather than a dualism of obedience or subversion.

In response to the humorous re-workings of propaganda language popular among Chinese netizens, the party-state is now starting to change propaganda strategies, trying to persuade its people with emotion. Many non-conventional forms of socialist propaganda have emerged in recent years, such as the webcomic *Year Hare Affair* promoting nationalist pride, as well as several emotional advertising videos of the Communist Party, etc. The alteration in propaganda techniques seems to be bringing about changes to the dynamic between state and society and the ongoing self-adjustment of socialist hegemony in China. Future studies can work on these aspects and further refine understandings about the political dynamic in the complicated context of China, in a digital age characterised by iterative practices driven by affect.

⁸ China Internet Network Information Center, April 2020, The 45th China Statistical Report on Internet Development, <http://www.cac.gov.cn/rootimages/uploadimg/1589535470391296/1589535470391296.pdf>, accessed 23 September 2020.

Funding This paper is supported by China Scholarship Council PhD Studentship.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Bigelow GE (1953) Distinguishing rhetoric from poetic discourse. *Southern Speech J* 19(2):83–97
- Brady A (2008) Marketing dictatorship: propaganda and thought work in contemporary China. Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham
- Brown K (2012) The Communist Party of China and ideology. *China Int J* 10(2):52–68
- Brown K, Bērziņa-Čerenkova UA (2018) Ideology in the Era of Xin Jinping. *J Chin Polit Sci* 23:323–339
- Butler J (1999) Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity. Routledge, London
- Chen X, Shi T (2001) Media effects on political confidence and trust in the People's Republic of China in the post-Tiananmen period. *East Asia* 19:84–118
- Dolan FM (1995) Political action and the unconscious: Arendt and Lacan on decentering the subject. *Polit Theory* 23(2):330–352
- Eastman M (1937) Enjoyment of laughter. Hamish Hamilton, London
- Fairclough N (1992) Discourse and social change. Polity Press, Cambridge
- Freeden M (2003) Ideology: a very short introduction. Oxford University Press, Oxford
- Freud S (2002) The joke and its relation to the unconscious. Penguin, London
- Gruner CR (1965) Is wit to humor what rhetoric is to poetic? *Central States Speech J* 16(1):17–22
- Holbig H (2009) Ideology reform and political legitimacy in China: challenges in the post-Jiang era. In: Heberer T, Schubert G (eds) Regime legitimacy in contemporary China: institutional change and stability. Routledge, London, pp 13–34
- Holbig H (2013) Ideology after the end of ideology: China and the quest for autocratic legitimation. *Democratization* 20(1):61–81
- Huang H (2018) The pathology of hard propaganda. *J Polit* 80(3):1034–1038
- Karmazin A (2020) Slogans as an organizational feature of Chinese politics. *J Chin Polit Sci* 25:411–429
- Lasswell HD (1995) Propaganda. In: Jackall R (ed) Propaganda. New York University Press, New York, pp 13–25
- Li H (2011) Parody and resistance on the Chinese internet. In: Herold DK, Marolt P (eds) Online Society in China: creating, celebrating, and instrumentalising the online carnival. Routledge, Oxon, pp 71–88
- Li P, Jourdan A (2018) No laughing matter: China regulator bans TV parodies amid content crackdown. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-media/no-laughing-matter-china-regulator-bans-tv-parodies-amid-content-crackdown-idUSKBN1GZ0J4>. Accessed 23 Sept 2020
- Link P (1993) Evening Chats in Beijing: Probing China's Predicament. W.W. Norton and Company, New York
- Luqiu LR (2017) The cost of humour: political satire on social media and censorship in China. *Glob Media Commun* 13(2):123–138
- Lynch D (1999) After the Propaganda state: media, politics, and "Thought Work" in Reformed China. Stanford University Press, Stanford
- Massumi B (2002) Parables for the virtual: movement, affect, sensation. Duke University Press, Durham
- Massumi B (2015) Politics of affect. Polity, Cambridge
- Monro DH (1951) Argument of laughter. Melbourne University Press, Melbourne
- Nordin A, Richaud L (2014) Subverting official language and discourse in China? Type river crab for harmony. *China Inf* 28(1):47–67
- Papacharissi Z (2015) Affective publics: sentiment, technology, and politics. Oxford University Press, Oxford
- Roberts ME (2018) Censored: distraction and diversion inside China's great firewall. Princeton University Press, Princeton
- Roberts ME (2020) Resilience to online censorship. *Annu Rev Polit Sci* 23:401–419
- Schoenhals M (1992) Doing things with words in Chinese politics: five studies. University of Berkeley Press, Berkeley
- Scott J (1990) Domination and the arts of resistance: hidden transcripts. Yale University Press, New Haven
- Song J, Gee JP (2020) Slogans with Chinese characteristics: the political functions of a discourse form. *Discourse Soc* 31(2):201–217
- Sontag S (2003) Regarding the pain of others. Penguin, London
- Thompson JB (1987) Language and ideology: a framework for analysis. *Sociol Rev* 35(3):516–536
- Wahl-Jorgensen K (2019) Emotions media and politics. Polity, Cambridge
- Wang X, Juffermans K, Du C (2016) Harmony as language policy in China: an internet perspective. *Lang Policy* 15:299–321
- Wedeen L (1999) Ambiguities of domination: politics, rhetoric, and symbols in contemporary Syria. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago
- Zhao Y (2009) When a Red Classic was spoofed: a cultural analysis of a media incident. In: Tao D, Yang X, Roberts R, Yang L (eds) Chinese revolution and Chinese literature. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle, pp 247–270

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.