Represented Dreams: Subversive Expressions in Chinese Social Media as Alternative Symbolic Infrastructures

Sulafa Zidani

Abstract
This article examines the creation and utilization of subversive expressions by Chinese Internet users amid heavy censorship. While these expressions may potentially lead to collective resistance, so far they have not been subjected to systematic examination. A grounded analysis of 270 Weibo posts that relate to nine prevalent subversive keywords demonstrates how sporadic modes of playful civic engagement consolidate as shared symbolic infrastructures. The expressions construct a systematic “counter-hierarchical” social ladder; participants express identification with the groups that are least governmental, while clearly dissociating themselves from those connected to the regime. At the same time, the expressions reveal a set of contradictory values, shedding light on the challenges facing both “the Chinese Dream” and the prospect of social change.

Keywords
creative civic engagement, language, subversiveness, censorship, China

To almost anyone in the world, the image of an alpaca galloping through a vast desert trying to fight river crabs would be unusual or even surreal. The average Chinese netizen, however, would easily identify it as a subversive image of resistance against governmental control in the digital sphere. While this employment of creative language to avoid censorship has been used in China since the early 2000s and has received notable scholarly attention, the actual expressions in use have not been studied systematically. Until now, researchers have either spoken about subversiveness in general terms or honed in on one expression at a time. This study aims to address this gap by exploring a set of prominent subversive keywords.

The first part of the article surveys two bodies of literature concerning expressions of political resistance in China in the predigital and digital ages. I then outline the sampling process whereby nine expressions were chosen for analysis based on their popularity on Weibo.com. A grounded analysis of 30 Weibo posts containing each of these keywords (n=270) is then presented across two major axes: power/self-identification and values/ideologies. While the first axis draws a clear image of Chinese society and the hierarchy between the different social groups as viewed through netizens’ eyes, the second reveals a more complex picture of the contradictions and paradoxes in the latter’s values and ideologies. Finally, I assess the implications of these findings for understanding the role of subversive keywords in possible processes of social and political change in China.

The Tradition of Subversive Expression in China
Censorship has a long history in China, and so does the search for ways to bypass it. As early as in Sima Qian’s Records of the Grand Historian (史记, about 85 BC), Chinese people have expressed subversive thoughts through metaphor, analogy, wordplay, and humor. Such expressions are ambiguous enough to evade the eyes of censors, yet sufficiently clear to gain mass popularity. Subversive uses of language are closely connected with the traditional Chinese style of implicit communication known as Hanxu (含蓄 hánxù). This reserved, indirect communicative style enables the speaker to convey a message without threatening relationships or group harmony (Gao, 1998).
Such indirect styles to communicate subversive messages were used by Chinese authors and poets throughout history. A prominent example is the poet Su Shi (苏轼, 1037-1101), an important figure from the Song dynasty (960-1279), who was arrested for poems that allegedly criticized the court and denounced the emperor. A more recent example is a play written by Wu Han (吴晗, 1909-1969) about the dismissal of Ming dynasty official Hai Rui (海瑞罢官Hài Rúi Bāguān). At the time, the play was interpreted as criticism of the Communist Party and is believed to be one of the factors that ignited the Cultural Revolution. In both examples, the authors used implicit language to convey their messages: while Su Shi described details of people’s daily lives to hint at criticism of the reforms, Wu Han used an example from Chinese history that his readers understood as a reference to current events (Fisher, 1982).

China’s literati are not the only ones using language play. As early as the Tang (618-907) and Song dynasties, there are records of enigmatic folk similes (歇后语) that are still used today. These similes are constructed in two parts: the first is a metaphorical image, while the second is an explanatory resolution of the metaphor, often a punning homonym, where the true meaning is embedded and often left unsaid. These codes have been part of the oral repertoire of common people in China for centuries (Rohsenow, 1991).

Subversive expressions are often associated with humorous communicative stances. In tracing humor across different genres of published works in early 21st-century Chinese comedy, Christopher Rea (2015) noted that writers and artists used different forms of humor as a response to political unrest, and it was joking, play, mockery, and farce that “helped to shape the tone, the grammar, and the vocabulary of modern China” (p. x). In the digital era, this history of humorous and creative rebellion continues on new paths.

Political Resistance and Subversive Expressions in the Chinese Digital Sphere

China officially came online in 1993. Since then, digital media technologies have become popularized, rendering information more accessible and expanding opportunities for self-expression (Esarey & Xiao, 2011; Xiong, 2012). Alongside these developments, the regime made constant efforts to control content disseminated through digital media. While the government is the official authority on state laws regarding Internet censorship, in practice it forces foreign and domestic businesses to participate in enforcing these laws. As of 2002, all content hosting companies are expected to sign the “optional” Public Pledge on Self-Discipline for the China Internet Industry. At first, participants on blogging and messaging websites were exempt from registering with their real identities, since the companies were the ones held responsible if sensitive content went uncensored (MacKinnon, 2008). However, since March 2012, following the principle of “front stage voluntary, backstage real name,” participants have been required to register using real identities (Jiang, 2016).

Even before a blog post is published online, sensitive keywords are caught automatically by government-mandated software filters. However, if users avoid such words, they can write posts that, even if sensitive in content, might be online for hours or even days before being removed. The Chinese government often ignores posts that are critical of the government but systematically blocks those that encourage collective action (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013).

Despite this control, individuals find complex and creative ways to express a variety of opinions. In fact, according to Guobin Yang and Min Jiang (2015), the multilayered nature of the Chinese censorship system may actually limit the coherence of censorship strategies and create opportunities for creative and networked transgression. Recent studies show that political criticism is common in Chinese digital spheres (MacKinnon, 2008; Rauchfleisch & Schäfer, 2015; Yang, 2013). Since bloggers do not depend on microblogging as a source of income, they are more willing to risk their posts being removed and thus can act as watchdogs more than journalists (Esarey & Xiao, 2011).

Because of their need to negotiate between what they want to express and what they are allowed to (Esarey & Xiao, 2008), Internet users adapt to the restrictions on the Internet by using coded language that includes metaphors, homophones of sensitive phrases, and other expressions of parody and sarcasm. These expressions are often used to bypass censorship while reflecting participants’ attitudes toward the lack of freedom of information and speech (Esarey & Xiao, 2008, 2011; Rea, 2013; Wang, 2012; Yuan, 2013). Such wordplay is also employed by minorities in China, such as Uyghur speakers (Clothey, Koku, Erkin, & Emat, 2016).

In their typology of online satire in the Chinese blogosphere, Yang and Jiang (2015) reconceptualize online political satire as a networked practice. They see online satire as networked in its production, circulation, and meaning. Understanding online satire as a networked practice emphasizes the social function it fulfills, which, although not political in itself, can be appropriated for political purposes. The social function has this political potential especially since the proliferation of such creative satire results from the complex interlocked conditions of politics, technology, history, and culture in China (Yang & Jiang, 2015).

In a study on the types of wordplay and creative scriptural practices employed to express criticism online, Yuan (2013) identified nine types of new words—or neologisms—used in Chinese Internet language: (1) characters or numbers used as emoticons, (2) acronyms or inverse acronyms, (3) homophones with characters or numbers, (4) composed words, (5) decomposition and recomposition of characters and their meaning, (6) semantic extension, (7) elision, (8) diverted use of Chéngyu, and (9) loans from Chinese dialects or other languages. Neologisms are now
extensively replicated and imitated in digital communication (Wang, 2012; Yuan, 2013; Zhang & Jiang, 2011). They are considered a by-product of the acceleration of communication in the digital age, in addition to other changes—linguistic, technological, and psychosocial—that are taking place in China (Li, 2012; Yuan, 2013). They can also be seen as a form of “counter-power” associated with “the capacity by social actors to challenge and eventually change the power relations institutionalized in society” (Castells, 2007, p. 248). Rongbin Han (2013) proposes to call the use of such expressions “pop activism,” a practice combining playfulness and politics in a way that allows Internet users to protest authoritarian rule while also turning political topics into popular entertainment. As such, creative expressions not only challenge the party state but also become a way to defy established values and norms.

Some of these subversive expressions have spread into popular culture as well. Shaojung Sharon Wang (2012) analyzed how the term “Grass-Mud Horse” has spawned mass production of cultural artifacts created and spread online and offline. Grass-Mud Horse is a homophone for an obscene curse word in Mandarin. Its use has evolved so that this horse—or, more correctly, alpaca—represents a counterpower to online restrictions.

“Diaosi” (屌丝), loser, is another term popularized by netizens. Since 2012, Chinese youths have been using the term cynically to refer to themselves as a protest of unfair social standards for success or limited socioeconomic mobility, calling attention to the number of young people whose lifestyles are characterized by mediocre incomes, lack of marital opportunities, and digital leisure culture (Szablewicz, 2014). According to Szablewicz, this expression helps Internet users articulate their desired lifestyles and the extent to which they are (un)achievable to them in the face of economic uncertainty.

While there has been some work on related fields such as humor (Rea, 2013; Shifman, Levy, & Thelwall, 2014; Yang & Jiang, 2015) and motivations for digital political participation in China (Chan, Wu, Hao, Xi, & Jin, 2012), subversive expressions specifically as a corpus have received little attention. Some scholars devoted research to a single expression, shedding light on a specific arena rather than examining the wider phenomenon. As pointed out by Yang (2014), although research regarding the Internet in China is thriving, the work does not tend to focus on meaning but rather analyzes the issues concerning the Internet in China in dichotomous categories, like state-netizens or authoritarianism-democracy.

The present study aims to address these gaps by investigating an array of prominent new subversive political expressions. It explores the attitudes and values of Chinese Internet users toward themselves and their surroundings, in addition to their worldview as reflected through the consistent usage of these subversive expressions.

The study builds on the idea that the creation and dissemination of new symbols constitute a form of creative civic engagement, or what Henry Jenkins (2016) referred to as a “playful style of activism.” This type of activism emerges from participatory politics—from the point where political change is promoted through creative cultural mechanisms rather than established institutions (Jenkins, 2016). Participants in Chinese social media who use subversive expressions choose those specific characters intentionally as a tactic in response to the political environment, to avoid censorship regulations, and out of the desire to be part of the community that uses this system of symbols.

These expressions are used in consistent and routinized ways that they form a system: an infrastructure that facilitates a speech community (Gumperz, 2009) of people who may then envision themselves as part of an anti-regime “imagined community” (Anderson, 2006). More specifically, this subversive speech community can be conceptualized as an “anti-society” (Halliday, 1976)—a group within society which is a conscious alternative to it. Anti-societies strategically employ “anti-language,” a dialect used both as means for enhancing inter-group cohesion and as resistance to external pressure. Montgomery (2013) argues that the over-relexicalization which is at work in creating anti-language enhances the possibility for verbal play, which renders the anti-language impenetrable by outsiders, and strengthens the sense of solidarity among community members. Lefkowitz and Hedgecock (2017) echo this claim, saying that “electing an oppositional code can cultivate solidarity and affirm separateness from the dominant speech community in terms of language, neighborhood, ethnicity, culture, age, social class, occupation, and sexual orientation” (p. 350). A good example of anti-language in the digital era is the persistent use of the term “file sharing” rather than “piracy” to refer to the digital reproduction of copyrighted material (John, 2014). Although not labeled as anti-language by John, using the term file-sharing fits the “anti-language” frame because of the bottom-up nature of its emergence and the continual use of it despite the push of the “war on piracy” by the state and entertainment industry. Building on this body of works, I explore whether Chinese digital subversive expressions may indeed be an anti-language practice used by a newly emerging speech community of Chinese Internet users.

Finally, this article raises the question as to whether this speech community serves as an organizing agent calling individuals to action to generate political change. It is important to remember that in the Chinese context, calls for political action face unique challenges, and those are further explored below.

I address the following series of questions: (1) Which meanings and worldviews are associated with the most prominent subversive keywords used on the popular Chinese microblogging site Weibo? (2) How do the expressions relate to each other in forming subversive, anti-governmental,
Analysis

The study analyzed the top 30 posts for each of the nine expressions (n=270) following the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), whereby criteria and analytical categories are developed inductively. I aimed to formulate a sample that is both systematic and small enough to conduct a close qualitative analysis of each post. I used the grounded theory approach since it is appropriate for detecting the richness of meanings embedded in this new, underexplored content type. However, based on later developments in this approach (see Kelle, 2007), I also took into account existing theoretical frameworks and past research in the field. An evaluation of 30 posts per expression enabled us to assess the extent to which these expressions are used in a consistent manner, namely, signify the same primary meanings across posts. As detailed below, this analytical process led to the identification of two primary axes as pivotal in the construction of subversive expressions’ meanings: the present power structures as perceived by netizens, and their desired values as expressed in relation to future Chinese society.

Between Naked Officials and Galloping Alpacas: A Conceptual Map

The majority of expressions analyzed below are, in fact, labels for social groups. This was an unexpected outcome: the sampling process was designed to identify the most commonly used expressions, and these turned out to be tags for social groups. The results show a consistency in the use of the expressions across the corpus: there was little variability in the meanings ascribed to these words by different participants. The order of the expressions below was set according to the findings of the grounded analysis, starting from the group most connected to the government and continuing through to the one most remote from it. Each phrase will be described before presenting their integrated analysis.

裸官 (luō guān) Naked Officials

This expression does not actually refer to officials who are naked, but to government officials who send their families to live abroad and regularly transfer money to them (often illegally). They are referred to as naked because they appear to be without any assets. In the blog posts, Naked Officials are widely associated with lies, corruption, fraud, and the abuse of power. Discussants view them as heedless, carefree traitors who endanger their home country (e.g., “Naked Officials: A ticking time bomb threatening the Chinese regime”).

官二代 (guān èr dài) Second Generation Officials

Second Generation Officials are the children of officials who benefit from their parents’ power and wealth. They are closely connected to the government, and thought of as spoiled, rich young people who exploit their inherited status and power. Participants see Second Generation Officials as people who can do anything they want and get away with it (“...I’m not Second Generation Official or Second Generation Wealthy, I have to confront all of life’s burdens”).

富二代 (fù èr dài) Second Generation Wealthy

The children of China’s nouveau riche population, like Second Generation Officials, are associated with being spoiled and solving their problems with their parents’ money and connections. They are seen as a powerful force in society: though not directly connected to the government, they can still influence it. Like Second Generation Officials, Second Generation Wealthy are regarded as forming a closed group that cannot be easily infiltrated, and are thus distant from the regular citizens (e.g., “I am not a tall-rich-hot guy, and I’m not a Second Generation Wealthy, but my life still counts for something”).

method

Sampling

The Grass-Mud Horse Lexicon (n.d.), a project in which expressions employed by Chinese Internet users are collected and translated, served as the starting point for selecting keywords for analysis. The lexicon is part of the bilingual news website China Digital Times, founded by Xiao Qiang and run by the Berkeley Counter-Power Lab. The project aims to map the dynamics of “censorship, domination, and resistance” in online networks to prove the existence of an alternative political discourse, often referred to as “resistance discourse.” The corpus for this study was chosen after a systematic evaluation of the 320 expressions in the Grass-Mud Horse Lexicon. For each of these expressions, a search was conducted on the microblogging website Weibo.com. The results ranged from less than a hundred to millions. While the previous sections discussed blogging in broad terms, bloggers in this study refers to microbloggers, specifically those who post on Weibo.com.

As this study aimed to focus on the most used expressions, only terms that yielded more than 1 million results were selected for further analysis. In the next stage, I screened these highly popular expressions: for each, the 30 most recently written posts on Weibo were examined. Expressions that were used in a literal sense rather than as a political pun were removed from the sample. This multistage elimination process yielded nine expressions, which are explained in the next section.
Originally referred to Internet users believed to have received 50 cents for each favorable comment they posted about the government. In the corpus, the term refers to a person who is blindly patriotic and willfully unaware. Fifty Centers are seen as liars, who spread false rumors, and brainwashed blind government supporters, who in one of the post were even referred to as “institutional prostitutes.”

Patriotraitor

This expression is a play on the words patriotism (爱国 àiguó) and traitor (卖国贼 màiguó zéi). One blogger defines a patriotraitor as someone who “commits treason under pretense of patriotism.” Participants use the expression to refer either to (1) an ignorant person who speaks nonsense, (2) a hypocrite or deceiver who uses nationalistic ideas for financial gains, or (3) someone whose patriotic extremism is harmful to the country and its people.

Mortgage Slaves

Mortgage Slaves refers to people whose income is channeled mostly toward repaying a mortgage (e.g., “In 2014 I set foot on the road of no return to being a Mortgage Slave”). The expression is constructed from two characters: 房奴, meaning house/building, and 奴奴, meaning slave. There are other similar combinations like Card Slave (卡奴 kǎnú, in reference to credit cards), Car Slave (车奴 chēnú), Money Slave (钱奴 qiánnú), and so on. Mortgage Slaves are viewed as helpless people stuck in a frustrating situation.

Fart People

The term “Fart People” is used sarcastically by participants to refer to themselves, “everyone,” or “common people.” Although they are many, they are seen as powerless and non-influential (e.g., “I didn’t think anyone would be reading a blog of a Fart Person like me”).

Grass-Mud Horse

Literally meaning alpaca, it is a homophone of a curse word in Mandarin meaning “fuck your mother” and is most commonly used like the word “fuck” in English. Sometimes it is used in reference to an alpaca, either literally (like someone sharing seeing an alpaca at the zoo) or metaphorically (e.g., “I felt as though ten million alpacas were galloping by”). Either way, this animal is not chosen randomly; it is a symbol of netizens’ resistance to Internet censorship and even to authority in general (Wang, 2012). In this corpus, Grass-Mud Horse was most commonly used as a swear word, for example, “It’s a waste of water! F**k you” (in reference to the ice-bucket challenge to raise awareness about amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or ALS) or “What about f**king justice?” (critical of blaming the victim in a fraud case).

The only verb in this sample is used sarcastically, signifying “to be (forcibly) represented” or “to be decided for” or “to be spoken on behalf of” or “to be misrepresented.” The source of the expression can be traced back to the theory of the “Three Represents” put forward by former Premier Jiang Zemin on an inspection tour in Guangdong Province in 2000, when he said:

As detailed below, this expression is particularly revealing in the context of digital protests, which reclaim representation “from below.”

An overall analysis of all posts revealed that the nine expressions were used in various thematic contexts, particularly work, money, corruption, and social inequality. Interestingly, these topics of criticism do not differ significantly from those invoked throughout China’s history (Ropp, 1981). Yet the grounded analysis revealed that the constant use of keywords created a complex symbolic map that does not only express specific opinions but also reflects directly on participants’ identities and general worldviews. In this respect, the two main axes detected relate to perceived power and to the values endorsed by participants. While the first axis draws a clear map of the perceived hierarchy in present Chinese society (showing a negative association between participants’ identification and perceived power), the second reveals a more complex image with regard to China’s future. It refers to the set of values and ideologies exposed through the posts, many of which are contradictory and thus reveal the paradox of “the Chinese Dream.”

The analysis revealed a strong negative link between two dimensions: perceived power and in-group identification. Perceived power is related, in this context, to political efficacy—feeling competent and believing that one’s actions may yield political consequences (Kenski & Stroud, 2006). A powerful entity can make decisions for itself or others, as opposed to those that do not have the option of changing their situation. By “in-group identification,” I refer to the
entities Weibo participants associate themselves with (through linguistic and content-related mechanisms), as opposed to those they view as “others” (e.g., “They, Naked Officials . . .” in contrast to “We, Fart People . . .”). In the map of Chinese society as imagined by participants, proximity to government is key to both dimensions.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the posts portrayed a hierarchy in terms of political power, with the government at the top enjoying the most power and control. Political power in this hierarchy goes along with closeness to the government. Immediately below the government are Naked Officials, Second Generation Officials, and Second Generation Wealthy—groups that are in some way involved with and able to influence the government. Lower down are Fifty Centers and Patriotraitors, who attempt to use current politics for their own benefit. Although they are not always directly connected to the government, they are still seen as relatively powerful. Next in the hierarchy are Mortgage Slaves and Fart People, seen as victims of manipulations of others. Interestingly, despite their economic status, Mortgage Slaves are still seen as victims. These two groups are viewed as the least powerful, unable to influence anyone or change their situation. Their lack of political efficacy is evident in expressions such as to be represented. The Grass-Mud Horse is somewhat defiant to this hierarchy—although the analysis indicated that the phrase no longer refers directly to freedom fighters and is used as a general curse word, it is still invoked as a symbol of resistance to existing power structures.

The hierarchy described above is linked to a clear division between in- and out-groups. Bloggers viewed Fart People and Mortgage Slaves, who are also depicted as in-groups, positively or sympathetically (often starting posts with “We, Fart People, . . .”). In contrast, Fifty Centers, Second Generation Officials, Second Generation Wealthy, Naked Officials, and Patriotraitors were framed as “them” and viewed negatively (e.g., “Being poor is no big deal, but being so ‘poor of values’ like you [Second Generation Wealthy] is really uncommon!”13). While “we” are the poor, oppressed, lower class citizens, victims of government policies, and “the system,” “they” are rich, spoiled, corrupt, lying hypocrites, and deceivers seen as disloyal, blind followers of material comfort and/or the government. In other words, participants identified with the entities who are least governmental or least connected to “the system,” and clearly dissociated themselves from those who are connected to the regime. This emphasis on the division between what is governmental versus what is civil shows how these expressions together form a symbolic map of creative civic engagement that uses digital platforms for civil disobedience.

The set of opinions regarding power and power dynamics is epitomized by the expression “to be represented.” As mentioned above, the source of the expression can be traced back to the theory of the Three Represents put forward by former Premier Jiang Zemin. The subversiveness embedded in this expression thus has two dimensions: first, it is a direct, mocking, reference to a famous expression of the party leader, and second, it is written in passive form, which, in Mandarin Chinese, often carries a negative connotation because it implies adversity or misfortune (Chao, 1968; Ross & Ma, 2006; Sun, 2006). Using the passive construction (with the passive marker 被 bèi) is highly subversive, as it appears alongside verbs that are not usually used in such a manner, for instance, “to be suicided” or “to be drunk tea” (被自杀 bèi zìshā, 被喝茶 bèi hē chá). By turning an active verb into a passive one, participants imply that this verb is forced upon them, emphasizing their lack of choice and efficacy: “Democracy is being undermined, public opinion is disregarded, and elections are ‘being represented’”14 or “Damn it! I am ‘being represented’ again. If the people have not chosen the government then please do not use the government as a representation of the people.”15

At a broader level, netizens refer to the current era as the “Passive Era” (被时代 bèi shídài).16 This expression signifies more than a protest against lack of freedom; it embodies objection to a certain group’s use—or rather, abuse—of power to violate or oppress another group. Ironically, though, by invoking the term “to be represented,” the people using it express their own oppositional voice, which, indeed, represents them.

The general picture exposed by the posts is thus grim: Weibo participants see the world as one in which the government and those connected to it constantly benefit from their power, while other groups are oppressed and powerless. Furthermore, the powerful groups are viewed as a closed clique, or caste, that commoners cannot access to or join freely. This is particularly evident in the cases of Second Generation Officials and Second Generation Wealthy, which can only be joined through birth. However, as elaborated in the next section, this clear (counter)hierarchical ladder is accompanied by a multifaceted, sometimes conflicting, account of the core values motivating participants.

**Figure 1.** The “counter-hierarchical” Chinese social ladder.
Values and Ideologies: The Paradox of the Chinese Dream

Fart People’s dreams are officials’ nightmares. That’s why there is no [such thing as a] Chinese dream.17

Values are defined as core enduring beliefs that guide people’s perceptions, actions, and evaluations of people and situations (Schwartz, 1992). While values were brought up overtly in some of the analyzed posts, in others they were not mentioned directly but could be inferred from the text, particularly from the analysis of criticism. An integrative analysis revealed that the map of values shared by participants is complex. On one hand, some values, such as honesty, modesty, respect, and justice, appear to be indisputable. On the other hand, there are also apparent contradictions, or internal tensions, in the ways certain values are framed. As detailed below, such tensions relate mainly to the concepts of socialism and patriotism.

Whereas many posts reflected left-wing socialist values (in particular equality), they often also expressed capitalist-oriented cravings. Thus, participants frequently condemned an affluent people while voicing a desire to be like them (e.g., “Naked Officials are the luckiest of officials”).18 On one hand, wealthy people such as Naked Officials, Second Generation Officials, and Second Generation Wealthy were clearly criticized; they were often referred to as hypocrites or traitors who abuse their power. For example, “Being poor is no big deal, but being so ‘poor of values’ like you [Second Generation Wealthy] is really uncommon!” (see Note 13). On the other hand, as exemplified by the previous quote, these blog posts also voiced jealousy or regret—a desire to have the money or lifestyle that wealthy and powerful people have, or to work hard to become one of those people.

This finding adds a layer of complexity to Szablewicz’s arguments surrounding the diaosi meme. According to Szablewicz (2014), this meme is used by Chinese youth whereby they embrace their “loser” status as a protest against the unattainable standards of success that are based on money as a source for power and attractiveness. What the findings of this study show, however, is that Chinese youth are still negotiating whether or not they even desire to be part of that wealthy group of people because of the values that are associated with them. The use of subversive expressions thus reveals deep criticism, not just of the unattainability of social mobility but of what being in higher social status entails.

Complex, often contradictory, opinions were also invoked around the concept of patriotism. Patriotism was often depicted in a negative light, such as in posts that talked about people who “sell patriotism” only for personal benefit (爱国生意). One participant pointed out that “Patriottraitors are scarier than traitors, [just as] people who pretend to be good are scarier than people who are actually bad.”19 In another post, Naked Officials were referred to as “Perverted Patriots” (变态爱国者).20 The negative framing in these posts related not to someone’s love for their country but to the exploitation of that love for economic or political purposes. For instance, one netizen declared, “I am not a Fifty Center, but I believe in my country,”21 emphasizing that love for the country is within the acceptable boundaries, while Fifty Centers are not.

It appears, then, that participants were constantly negotiating the boundaries and meaning of patriotism. In this context, it is important to note that due to the tight control practiced by the Chinese government, being pro-government may mean agreeing to give up certain freedoms. As this goes against the grain of the arguments of many netizens, a new formulation emerged in which, as the above example illustrates, a line was drawn between being for the government and being for the country. Thus, although participants may have criticized some policies and government actions, they did not express opinions against China as a country. There is, of course, a possibility that any posts criticizing China as a country have been removed. But, from the posts studied here, it appears that while blind patriotism or “selling patriotism” was criticized, the basic concept of patriotism (as caring for one’s country) was actually valorized: discussants’ criticisms are clearly born out of a desire to improve their country. A love for the party or government (“false” patriotism) was differentiated from a love for China (“true” patriotism).

In sum, if the discussion on power and self-identification reflected the world as participants see it, the depiction of values focused on the world as participants wish it could be. They aspire for a society in which people are honest and fight for justice, everyone is treated equally and fairly, and people put principles ahead of money. In this world, there would be no liars, no hypocrites, no oppression, and no corruption. Governments would be loyal to all of their citizens and vice versa, and the conflict between materialism and spiritual contentment would finally be settled as everyone would be rich.

All this echoes Xi Jinping’s slogan—“The Chinese Dream”—which he chose as the party-state slogan in late 2012. This expression is used in speeches and propaganda to construct a collective dream for China to be an influential capitalist authoritarian state (Callahan, 2014). Xi’s Chinese Dream is neither entirely liberal-capitalist nor entirely socialist. This analysis of the discourse on Weibo reveals that while the slogan “Chinese Dream” appears to focus on the Chinese people, it does not include Chinese individuals, since it aims to strengthen the state. This—as the opening quote of this section states—leaves little room for private dreams or freedoms. Authorities emphasize this by cautioning citizens not to let their individual dreams interfere with the collective dream of China (Barmé, 2013). The Chinese Dream is thus subversively depicted on Weibo as a means of driving the Chinese people toward one dream, which is actually that of the Chinese elite and not the dream of the citizens inhabiting it. At the same time, as highlighted in the concluding section,
the internal contradictions and inconsonance of the imagined alternative dream brought forth by bloggers complicate the prospect of change.

Conclusion

The analysis of prominent subversive expressions yielded insight into Weibo discussants’ views of their political habitat, shedding light on how Chinese social stratification and power divisions are experienced in daily lives. I have shown that the use of subversive words has gone beyond the stage of sporadic expressions of dissatisfaction; the expressions in this corpus relate to each other, constructing a clear system of hierarchies and identification. They are used systematically and consistently by participants who wish to distance themselves from their government, creating an alternative vocabulary in which those in power in “real life” are scorned and criticized. Yet, while participants make clear statements about present power structures, declarations about their desires for the future are more complex. Discussants appear to be of two minds, calling for justice and social equality on one hand while showing high individualistic and materialistic aspirations on the other. The popular expressions examined in this article sustain a longtime tradition of subversive forms of expression in China; yet, as outlined below, they also mark a shift in the uses and possible implications of subversive language.

I argue that contemporary subversive keywords constitute new and powerful formulations of collective expression. While in the past such expressions were used sporadically, this analysis corroborates the premise that expressions of creative civic engagement have now evolved into shared symbolic infrastructures. The lexicon of subversive expressions is endless and continually changing, with new expressions created regularly as reactions to different political events such as new policies and regulations. The expressions examined in this study were shown to be consistent in their modes of use and were diffused at a large scale, by millions. Thus, these expressions go beyond momentary individual creative outbreaks, which can facilitate communal routes for voicing objections to the regime.

The constant, extensive invoking of this lexicon both reflects and constitutes a new “speech community” (as per Gumperz, 2009) with shared oppositional values. In a regime marked by tight control of media, this creation of an alternative symbolic system, in which people gradually become aware of the discontent of others and shape a shared set of words to express it, may have significant implications. This analysis thus corroborates the initial conceptualization of creative civic engagement through subversive language and its formation as a shared “anti-language” community. This raises a new set of questions: can this emergent community further formulate an infrastructure for a “connective action” (as per Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) for social and political change, and can such a connective action that is built on unorganized (although consistent) invoking of creative anti-language translate into an overarching political shift? According to Jenkins (2017), “These new digital media platforms and practices potentially enable forms of collective action that are difficult to launch and sustain under a broadcast model, yet these platforms and practices do not guarantee any particular outcome” (p. 140). The questions of implications, of translation from the symbolic and cultural to political change, are complex questions which merit further research.

If we think of language as a basis for the formulation of collective mind-sets, the systemization of subversive expressions already marks change. Yet, there are three important caveats. First, control over what is published still lies in the hands of the government. Although criticism is expressed, it is not voiced freely but rather communicated through indirect expressions that fall within the range of what is deemed permissible by the government. Second—and related to the first point—none of the 270 posts analyzed call for direct action against the government (in line with King et al.’s, 2013, findings). Finally, the contrasting discourses about the ideal future China cannot easily be translated to a single plan: it seems that Chinese netizens can formulate quite easily their criticism of the present but do not have a shared vision of the future. The present study, then, would fall between an optimistic approach that forecasts a vast and rapid change following the new uses of social media and a skeptical one that does not believe a significant transformation will take place. To borrow the metaphors invoked by Jonathan Hassid (2012), I see the use of subversive keywords as falling somewhere between a pressure cooker and a safety valve. The lack of calls to action may be due to these direct calls being censored by the government, or it may be self-censorship, especially taking into consideration the repercussions for such action (e.g., the crackdown on big Vs [verified online social media profile with a big number of followers] in 2013).

While this study contributes to our understanding of the under-researched phenomenon of subversive political expressions in Chinese social media, it has several limitations that will hopefully be addressed in future research. This project was restricted to a small set of extremely popular expressions; follow-up studies could expand the sample to include political expressions excluded from the corpus of this research. These studies may also relate to other popular media phenomena, such as visual jokes and Internet memes (Gong & Xin, 2010; Rea, 2013; Shifman, 2013, 2014), which are used increasingly across China and the world. Whereas this study focused solely on microblogging content, we need to also investigate users’ views. Interviews with bloggers who use such expressions could analyze material beyond what is manifest in the blogs, revealing the motivations and values the participants negotiate. Finally, further research could go beyond the scope of the Chinese web to comparatively evaluate the various forms and uses of subversive wordplay in divergent geopolitical spheres.
these limitations, I believe that this first systematic analysis of subversive keywords offers both valuable observations into contemporary Chinese mind-sets and a new understanding of these expressions as shared infrastructures of anti-regime symbols. These new subversive expressions are different from the historical formulations of subversion in China. They can be seen as an alternative system, a “shadow” symbolic map on which those who are powerful in “the real world” are disparaged.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Funding**
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Notes**
1. See http://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/Grass-Mud_Horse_Lexicon
2. In some cases, no results were shown, and instead the following message appeared: “According to regulations and policies, search results cannot be displayed.” Although researching these would be of great significance, it would require a methodology beyond the scope of the current study.
3. See http://weibo.com/1646933975/Bkj1yOi7pE (accessed 17 September 2017).
4. See http://weibo.com/2648220855/Blf6r2krYi (accessed 17 September 2017).
5. See http://weibo.com/1861862012/Bmo75bl35 (accessed 15 February 2017).
6. See http://weibo.com/18161862012/Bmo75bl35 (accessed 15 February 2017).
7. See http://weibo.com/3939426052/BgezmsEVM (accessed 15 February 2017).
8. See http://weibo.com/511747838/BiGg2bKxE (accessed 15 February 2017).
9. See http://weibo.com/1029232101/Bk3RSaFuK (accessed 17 September 2017).
10. See http://weibo.com/2175091975/BjKjlapbD (accessed 15 February 2017).
11. See http://weibo.com/1937606134/BgKX4y2q2 (accessed 17 September 2017).
12. See http://weibo.com/2200567122/Blhinr3z5 (accessed 17 September 2017).
13. See http://weibo.com/1653076903/BjKnS9mvj (accessed 17 September 2017).
14. See http://weibo.com/1772784092/BmoNyvsC (accessed 17 September 2017).
15. See http://weibo.com/5194161161/Bmefszahp (accessed 15 February 2017).
16. Passive Era. *China Digital Times*. Available at: http://china digitaltimes.net/space/Passive_era (accessed 17 September 2017).
17. See http://weibo.com/2200567122/Blhinr3z5 (accessed 17 September 2017).
18. See http://weibo.com/1029232101/Bk3RSaFuK (accessed 17 September 2017).
19. See http://weibo.com/3427479354/BiKfzetV2 (accessed 17 September 2017).
20. See http://weibo.com/2175091975/BjKjlapbD (accessed 15 February 2017).
21. See http://weibo.com/1937606134/BgKX4y2q2 (accessed 17 September 2017).

**References**
Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London, England: Verso Books.
Barmè, G. R. (2013). *Chinese Dream (Zhongguo Meng)*. In *China Story Yearbook* (pp. 4-13). Retrieved from https://www.thechinastory.org/yearbooks/yearbook-2013/
Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2012). The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics. *Information, Communication & Society, 15*, 739–768.
Callahan, W. A. (2014). China Dream—I. *The Asan Forum, Asian Academy*. Retrieved from http://www.theasanforum.org/what-can-the-china-dream-do-in-the-prec/
Castells, M. (2007). Communication, power and counter-power in the network society. *International Journal of Communication, 1*(1), 238–266.
Chan, M., Wu, X., Hao, Y., Xi, R., & Jin, T. (2012). Microblogging, online expression, and political efficacy among young Chinese citizens: The moderating role of information and entertainment needs in the use of Weibo. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 15*, 345–349.
Chao, Y. (1968). *A grammar of spoken Chinese*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Clothey, R. A., Koku, E. F., Erkin, E., & Emat, H. (2016). A voice for the voiceless: Online social activism in Uyghur language blogs and state control of the Internet in China. *Information, Communication & Society, 19*, 858–874.
Esarey, A., & Xiao, Q. (2008). Political expression in the Chinese blogosphere: Below the radar. *Asian Survey, 48*, 752–772.
Esarey, A., & Xiao, Q. (2011). Digital communication and political change in China. *International Journal of Communication, 5*, 298–319.
Fisher, T. (1982). “The Play’s the Thing”: Wu Han and Hai Rui Revisited. *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs, 7*, 1–35.
Gao, G. (1998). “Don’t take my word for it”—Understanding egao in contemporary China. *China Digital Times*, 1(1), 238–266.
Gong, H. M., & Xin, Y. (2010). Digitized parody: The politics of egao in contemporary China. *China Information*, 24(1), 3–26. The Grass-Mud Horse Lexicon. (n.d.). *China Digital Times*. Retrieved from http://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/Main_Page
Gumperz, J. J. (2009). *The speech community*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing.
Hannan, M. H., & Xin, Y. (2010). Digitized parody: The politics of egao in contemporary China. *China Information*, 24(1), 3–26.
Hannan, M. H., & Xin, Y. (2010). Digitized parody: The politics of egao in contemporary China. *China Information, 24*(1), 3–26.
Han, R. (2013). *Challenging the regime, defending the regime: Contesting cyberspace in China*. (Doctoral dissertation).
University of California, Berkeley. Retrieved from https://cloudfront.escholarship.org/dist/prd/content/qt4gm7f4v0/qt4gm7f4v0.pdf

Hassid, J. (2012). Safety valve or pressure cooker? Blogs in Chinese political life. *Journal of Communication, 62*, 212–230.

Jenkins, H. (2016). Youth voice, media, and political engagement: Introducing the core concepts. In H. Jenkins, S. Shresthova, L. Gamber-Thompson, A. Zimmerman, & N. Kliger-Vilenchik (Eds.), *By any media necessary: The new youth activism* (pp. 1-60). New York: New York University Press.

Jenkins, H. (2017). From culture jamming to cultural acupuncture. In M. DeLaure & M. Fink (Eds.), *Culture jamming: Activism and the art of cultural resistance* (pp. 133–160). New York: New York University Press.

Jiang, M. (2016). Managing the micro-self: The governmentality of real name registration policy in Chinese microblogosphere. *Information, Communication & Society, 19*, 203–220.

John, N. A. (2014). File sharing and the history of computing: Or, why file sharing is called “file sharing.” *Critical Studies in Media Communication, 31*, 198–211.

Kelle, U. (2007). “Emergence” vs. “Forcing” of Empirical Data? A crucial problem of “Grounded Theory” reconsidered. *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung, 6* (Suppl.), 133–156.

Kenski, K., & Stroud, N. J. (2006). Connections between Internet use and political efficacy, knowledge, and participation. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 50*, 173–192.

King, G., Pan, J., & Roberts, M. E. (2013). How censorship in China allows government criticism but silences collective expression. *American Political Science Review, 107*, 326–343.

Lefkowitz, N., & Hedgcock, J. S. (2017). 13 Anti-language: Linguistic innovation, identity construction, and group affiliation among emerging speech communities. *Multiple Perspectives on Language Play, 1*, 347–376.

Li, C. W. (2012). Xin meiti liuxing ciyu jiexi [An Analysis of New Media Buzzwords]. *Shandong Shehui Kexue*, 2–017.

Mackinnon, R. (2008). Flatter world and thicker walls? Blogs, censorship and civic discourse in China. *Public Choice, 134*(1-2), 31–46.

Montgomery, M. (2013). Language and subculture: Anti-language. In *An introduction to language and society* (pp. 113-123). Routledge.

News of the Communist Party of China. (2006). *Three representatives*. Retrieved from http://english.cpc.people.com.cn/66739/4521344.html

Rauchfleisch, A., & Schäfer, M. S. (2015). Multiple public spheres of Weibo: A typology of forms and potentials of online public spheres in China. *Information, Communication & Society, 18*, 139–155.

Rea, C. (2013). Spoofing (‘e’gao) culture on the Chinese internet. In J. M. Davis & J. Chey (Eds.), *Humor in Chinese life and culture* (pp. 149-172). Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Rea, C. (2015). *The age of irreverence: A new history of laughter in China*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Rohsenow, J. S. (1991). *A Chinese-English dictionary of enigmatic folk similes (xiéhòuyǔ)*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

Rupp, P. S. (1981). *Dissent in early modern China: Ju-lin wai-shih and Ching Social Criticism*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Ross, C., & Ma, J. H. S. (2006). *Modern Mandarin Chinese grammar: A practical guide*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

Schwartz, S. H. (1992). Universals in the content and structure of values: Theoretical advances and empirical tests in 20 countries. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, 25*, 1–65.

Shifman, L. (2013). Memes in a digital world: Reconciling with a conceptual troublemaker. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 18*, 362–377.

Shifman, L. (2014). *Memes in digital culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Shifman, L., Levy, H., & Thelwall, M. (2014). Internet jokes: The secret agents of globalization? *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 19*, 727–743.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Sun, C. F. (2006). *Chinese: A linguistic introduction*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Szablewicz, M. (2014). The “losers” of China’s Internet: Memes as “structures of feeling” for disillusioned young netizens. *China Information, 28*, 259–275.

Wang, S. S. (2012). China’s Internet lexicon: Symbolic meaning and commoditization of Grass Mud Horse in the harmonious society. *First Monday, 17*(1). Retrieved from http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3758

Xiong, G. Q. (2012). Zhongguo wangluo zhengzhi de xingqi yu zhengzhi wenhua de bianqian [The Rise of Internet Politics and Changes in Political Culture in China]. *Shehui Kexue*, 1, 23–31.

Yang, G. (2013). *The power of the Internet in China: Citizen activism online*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Yang, G. (2014). Political contestation in Chinese digital spaces: Deepening the critical inquiry. *China Information, 28*, 135–144.

Yang, G., & Jiang, M. (2015). The networked practice of online political satire in China: Between ritual and resistance. *International Communication Gazette, 77*, 215–231.

Yuan, Z. J. (2013). Je suis crabé! Néologie et pratiques scripturales dans le langage de l’internet chinois [I’ve Been Crabbed! Neologism and Scriptural Practices in the Chinese Internet Language] (Master’s thesis). Université Grenoble Alpes. Retrieved from http://dumas.ccsd.cnrs.fr/dumas-00864025

**Author Biography**

**Sulafa Zidani** (MA, Hebrew University of Jerusalem) is a doctoral student of communication at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. Her research interests include creative political expression, transnational culture, and power dynamics.