

*Internet Banter: Construction of Resistance and Deconstruction of Meaning*

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**Abstract**

A large corpus of banter and jokes has become widespread on the Internet in contemporary China. This kind of “humor” is important to those who have been ridiculing social reality and very often the political system. It can be constructed as a form of resistance, through quiet, nonviolent means, and act as a stabilizing safety valve without doing any harm to their creators. In the meantime, however, such internet banter probably have no effect in undermining the unsatisfactory aspects of society or in inducing any institutional changes. Instead, when “amusing ourselves to death” becomes the tendency of our mainstream culture, making internet banter embeds a danger of keeping deep thoughts from flowing into the public discourse, and thereby deconstructs the seriousness of meaning-making process of what is happening to us as individuals and to this world as a whole.

Keywords: internet banter; construction; resistance; deconstruction; meaning

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## Introduction

In China, there is widespread saying on internet going like this: “in Chinese history, Tang and Song Dynasty have made great achievement in poetry, as songs to Yuan Dynasty, and novels to Ming and Qing Dynasty. But what do we have today? *Duan Zi*(段子)!” *Duan Zi*, in Chinese originally refers to a conversational term for the popular Chinese art- crosstalk (*Xiangsheng*). It has taken on its current meaning as online banters since the first day the Internet appeared in China. It is short and easy to spread, with the features of humor and lightness (Voci, 2010). As the Chinese government pushes forward internet censorship to a very high level, internet banters has now become one of the most popular cultural genres in China.

Current research on humor-in the broad sense of online banters, jokes or satires- tends to focus on their meanings and significance as forms of political resistance (Esarey and Xiao, 2008; Li, 2011; Tang and Bhattacharya, 2011; Tang, 2013), or alternatively, conceptualizing online political satire not in terms of its contents but as networked social practices (Yang and Jiang, 2015). They attempt to explain this unique Chinese internet culture from different perspectives, and especially emphasize these internet practices’ potential in constructing resistance against power.

This article will also inform and highlight the continuing theme of previous studies, i. e. the employment of humor as resistance mechanisms in social relationships and societies of all kinds, but furthermore discuss the potential danger of upholding or encouraging such discursive practices in China’s context. It argues that given China’s political system and its ubiquitous censorship, internet banters, despite of its revolutionary implication as non-violent resistance against power, probably cannot do anything about the unsatisfactory reality of the Chinese society, let alone inducing any institutional changes. While constructing a resistance culture through deconstruction of the traditional meaning-making process, internet banters desolve the seriousness of public discussion around serious social issues, keep deep thoughts from flowing into the public discourse, and thereby make the entertainization/ tabloidization of social agendas the guiding ideology of the society which is obviously disastrous to the construction of a rational public sphere in China.

## Definition and categorization

In this article, the term “internet banter” is used as the equivalent of the Chinese word “Duanzi” based on the closeness in their meanings. According to Merriam Webster Dictionary, banter refers to a form of jesting or to the act of exchanging joking repartee; and in modern use it usually refers to a light-hearted form of wit. This definition describes both the discursive practice and the communicative psyche in the process, which makes it fit well into the context and typology of our topic on *Duanzi*, and even applicable to analyze similar discursive practices in other social contexts.

The definition does not limit the term into any particular format of act, so it is reasonable to infer that banter can be in any format as long as it delivers its purpose of humor. But in this article, we mainly focus on the discursive practices recorded as textual narratives online. Therefore, we give “internet banter” a narrower sense but a

broader definition, that is a short, textual discourse form created by netizens who utilize tactics of humor such as, irony, satire, parody, etc. to make comments on issues of their concern.

Different scholars use different standards to categorize internet banter. A popular categorization is based on the content of a banter and uses color to mark the sentiment/value it carries (Yang and Jiang, 2015; Zhang, 2012). This article adopts Zhang's (2012) categorization and the categories are listed as below with illustrative examples respectively:

### **1. Red banter**

Red banter conveys positive messages aligned with mainstream ideology and moralities. Chinese netizens usually dub this kind of narrative as "positive energy" or "chicken soup".

Examples:

*"Change the environment or change yourself. Change yourself rather than change the environment. Yourself is the root of all problems, which will totally be solved if you change yourself."*

*"There is no fast lane to success. There is no express way to happiness. All the successes lie in restless efforts and race. All the happiness lies in mundane struggle and insistence."*

### **2. Gray banter**

Gray banter focuses on the dark side of the society and humanity, and conveys critical views about politics and society. Chinese netizens usually dub this kind of narrative as "negative energy" or "poisonous chicken soup". The most studied topic-political satires- usually fall into this category.

Examples:

*"Don't try to lose weight. You are ugly not only because of the fat."*

*"The price of everything has gone up except our salary. But we have to live on sturdily, because the price of burial plot has also risen..."*

*"A reporter interviewed an old man: Guangzhou spent 0.6 billion yuan building a cemetery but only to inter government officials. What's your opinion on this? The old man asked back: to bury them alive?"*

### **3. Yellow banter**

Yellow banter is vulgar messages that have sexual implications.

Examples:

*"Note: keep your mobile phone with you during afternoon nap. A colleague went out without bringing his phone. His wife's continual calls woke up a lady, who outrageously picked up the call and yelled: we are sleeping, how annoying you are!"*

*“Last night, my wife woke up and asked me in Mandarin where the bathroom was. But we never spoke to each other in Mandarin. And we were at our own home. So what does this imply?”*

#### **4. Colorless banter**

Colorless banter, or neutral banter are jokes that netizens make just for humorous or self-mockery purpose.

Examples:

*“I am dead already. Burn joss paper if you need me. For small businesses please call my soul back. For big ones please dig me out of the grave.”*

*“An atheist friend brought a Bible and said to me: ‘if you can name one fact about it and then prove it, I will buy you drinks for one month.’ I took the book and scanned it through. ‘I win,’ I said, ‘it has 1143 pages.’ ”*

#### **Internet banter as a practice of resistance**

From the above categories, we can see that internet banter are not always about political resistance and opposition. The most relevant category that is associated with political resistance is the grey banter, while other categories more or less serve social functions. Even for the practice of grey banter, some scholars (Test, 1986; Yang and Jiang, 2015) use the concept of “ritual satire” to distinguish between the practices noted for their social functions and the more politically oriented practices of online satire.

These differentiations probably come down to the different understanding of “resistance”. Resistance is certainly not just about politics. According to the Oxford Dictionary, resistance means “the refusal to accept or comply with something”. And this “something” literally can be anything. In this sense, the act of making internet banter per se is somewhat resistance to the conventional meaning-making. That is to say, internet banter attempt to deconstruct the existing explanatory system of perceiving what is happening to the world around us, and thereby construct a collective online community featured by counterculture and resistance. In certain respects, then, we can argue that all humor has a political dimension to it.

First, from the perspective of the relationship between text and meaning, Jacques Derrida in *Of Grammatology* (1967) and his later work *Letter to a Japanese Friend* (1983) developed the outlook of deconstruction which consisted of conducting readings of texts with an ear to what runs counter to the intended meaning or structural unity of a particular text. The purpose of deconstruction is to show that the usage of language in a given text, and language as a whole, are irreducibly complex, unstable, or impossible. As a method of critical analysis of philosophical and literary language, deconstruction emphasizes the internal workings of language and conceptual systems, the relational quality of meaning, and the assumptions implicit in forms of expression.

That is to say, a given text may have different or even opposite meanings from its designated meaning. And the approach of deconstruction provides the possibility for

people to question the accepted basis of meaning and make alternative explanations from a same text. In this sense, the discursive practice of internet banter can be viewed as destructive efforts made by netizens to challenge the traditional meaning-making process. Reflected in public discussion, deconstruction makes the social issues themselves become less important. Instead, it highlights people's interpretation (usually in a deconstructive sense) of them and the social psyche caused by doing so. "It's not the jokes. It's what lies behind' em. It's the attitude." (Griffiths, 1976: 20) Shared attitudes and the expression of shared sentiments and beliefs of resistance to or social control over social situations and relationship through humor are the essence of the sociology of humour (Powell and Paton, 1988). In this sense, deconstruction (of meaning) is construction (of resistance culture).

Second, Dundes and Hauschild (1988) examine the kind of self-deprecatory humor developed by Jews in resistance to the threats of radical prejudice of host nations and persistent anti-semitism, and show that the social resistance functions of humor deployment emphasize the social distancing of members of one group vis-à-vis another social group. In dictatorships or authoritarianisms, the distanced party usually is the ruling class or elites. Through the study of Soviet jokes, Benton (1988) shows that political jokes have become bywords for the citizens' resistance to the over-bureaucratized and over-standardised views officially encouraged by the regimes. As core elements in the contemporary popular culture of such societies they sustain resistance, if not dissidence, to such inhuman constraints. Political jokes become, as Benton argues, 'a powerful transmitter of the popular mood in societies where this mood can find no officially sanctioned outlet'.

It also holds true in China's case. The popular discursive practice of internet banter is fundamentally a social movement of anti-authority and anti-elitism, as well as a reclaim of identity that diverges itself from the one shaped by dominated ideology and mainstream culture. China is now facing varied, wide-ranging social issues as a combined result of the economic reforms launched in 1978, China's political and cultural history and an immense population. And the Chinese government has encountered considerable challenges in trying to remedy the issues. While some of these issues can be exposed by media, a large proportion of subjects that contains politically sensitive issues may be censored. Citizens that "speak ill of government policies" even face severe consequences if caught by the ubiquitous internet police.

Given the pressure and oppression people have suffered yet had no way to vent, a "grass-mud-horse" (草泥马, homophone for "fuck your mother") v.s "river crab" (河蟹, homophone for "harmony" which is upheld as the Chinese government's ideology) lexicon has been invented to circumvent the sensitive word blocking mechanisms (also see Zhang, 2013). If we view this lexicon as a politically oriented resistance to the censors, then internet banter, as the chief form of orally or textually-transmitted folk wisdom today are more like folklore which is passed on primarily by word of mouth, from person to person, offering little opportunity for official censorship to be exercised, and makes itself more or less unimpeachable (Dundes, 1987).

Last but not least, whether intended or unintended, internet banter on Chinese internet are a response to the tensions of living in an unfree society where the ruling class seeks to control every aspect of life. In some optimists' view, this discursive practice is a subversive force of considerable significance. At personal level, Brigham (2005)

suggests that through absurdity, we can gain new insights that we cannot reach, or at least are more difficult to reach, with reason and logic. He writes mainly about personal transformation even social change through psychotherapy. At societal level, humor is used as a means of resistance by those living under authoritarian regimes and, at the same time, unites people against the governing power structure and gives them a common sense of identity. It also destroys their sense of obligation to the regime that is controlling them, so that when an opportunity comes to overthrow the regime, there will be a common desire to do so (Sorensen, 2008). As Bakhtin (1981) argues in *The Dialogic Imagination*:

It is precisely laughter that destroys the epic, and in general destroys any hierarchical (distancing and valorized) distance. As a distanced image a subject cannot be comical; to be made comical, it must be brought close. Everything that makes us laugh is close at hand, all comical creativity works in a zone of maximal proximity. (p.23)

Moreover, the use of humour to reinforce the social control of deviance from shared ideologies and mainstream culture between the “subaltern” group and the elitist authority further suggests its deployment as a form of what Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948), in the context of mass media, long ago referred to as 'norm enforcement'. And humor as expression of sub-cultural norms reinforces social controls within the group and expresses its members' collective resistance to the social pressure and tensions created by the formal organization of the wider environment with which the group interacts (Powell and Paton, 1988). In doing this an online community has been formed and a new identity has been reclaimed by its members.

### **A fearful future for China's public sphere**

However, not everybody is hailing this popular culture. Being an essential part of the fabric of social life, humor and discursive practices derived from it are just as often playfully “useless” and “meaningless”. More often than not, it is the “nonsense” that invariably evokes humorous expression and establishes jokelore. So apart from those with clear intention or appeals, a multitude of internet banter are made out of nonsense, and aim not to produce any meaningfulness, which is rather a behaviour of ‘ritual’ network practice, as discussed previously, serving social functions, than substantially directing to any political or social purposes.

In terms of political impact, internet banter do play a role in mobilizing public sentiment, and by diminishing those in power and making them subject of laughter, facilitate resistance and even political revolution. However, Benton (1988) eloquently denounces the over-estimated value of humor and the optimists' wishful idealism:

But the political joke will change nothing. It is the relentless enemy of greed, injustice, cruelty and oppression—but it could never do without them. It is not a form of active resistance. It reflects no political programme. It will mobilise no one. Like the Jewish joke in its time, it is important for keeping society sane and stable. It cushions the blows of cruel governments and creates sweet illusions of revenge. It has the virtue of momentarily freeing

the lives of millions from the tensions and frustrations to which even the best organised political opposition can promise only long-term solutions, but its impact is as fleeting as the laughter it produces. (p. 54)

This is especially the case for China. While Chinese people celebrate the freedom that social media has brought to their public lives, they are facing a deteriorating media environment where this freedom becomes more and more inaccessible due to the increasingly stringent censorship exercised by the Chinese government who promised otherwise as President Xi came into power in 2013. That year is like a watershed that witnessed the golden age of China's internet had passed. I carried out several years ago a couple of case studies which had showed strategies such as the aforementioned grass-mud-horse v.s river crab lexicon, and humorous internet banter could facilitate resistance and even induce institutional changes. But now I dare not claim so. These strategies just are not that effective now because the seamless scrutiny would leave little space for any provoking behaviours to poke at the power.

In my view, there are two prerequisites to make resistance a real resistance. First, there is a healthy public discussion set in place around a certain topic. Second, there already exists an act of revolt against a certain form of power, including dominant culture, and official discourse, etc. It is the two prerequisites that prevent the public sphere from being filled solely with cacophony or carnivalesque word-play. If, however, the first response is to entertainize them when people try to cope with serious social problems, instead of proceeding into reasoned thinking or deeper thought, then the public sphere would very likely fall into the trap of cynicism and nihilism, which render it unable to produce constructive discourses any longer. In the meantime, a brand new horrible subaltern ideology has been established in the undersurface, which helps us deconstruct pressure and oppression, and continue to live with the ruling ideology on the surface. But eventually no problem would be solved.

## **Conclusion**

This article attempts to discuss a series of issues around a popular discursive practice on China's internet- internet banter, including its definition, typology, and revisit to previous studies about employment of humor as resistance and social control. But in contrast with my optimism several years ago, now I share Benton's pessimism about such discursive practices' impact on politics and society, not only because the media environment in China is increasingly deteriorating, but because there is a trend of entertainization or tabloidization of social problems in public sphere. On one hand, given China's political system and the ubiquitous censorship, internet banter probably cannot do anything about the unsatisfactory reality of the Chinese society, let alone inducing any political changes. On the other hand, through deconstruction of the traditional meaning process, internet banter desolve the seriousness of public discussion around social issues, and pose a danger of making entertainization and tabloidization the guiding ideology of the society, which undoubtedly does harm to the construction of a rational public sphere in China.

This study also opens up several new directions for subsequent research. New internet banter are emerging all the time with the appearance of new social issues. More examples and cases of internet banter over a long period of time need to be collected and analyzed to create a more refined typology. More discursive analyses need to be

done to examine the specific content of internet banter to gain a better understanding of the dynamics of a particular social issue at micro level. Besides, comparative studies of online political banter both across national boundaries and in relation to other online discursive practices will further expand Yang and Jiang's (2015) study on online political satire as a networked social practice. Just as they conclude, only by situating such online discursive practices "in a particular historical moment with its concomitant cultural, political, and technological opportunities and constraints can we better grasp the production, circulation, and consumption of users' everyday creativity and the alternative universe of meaning they create" (p. 229).



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