



## Internet-Memes in Chinese Mediasphere as a Reflection of Modern Reality

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**ABSTRACT** This study deals with the penetration of the Internet in all spheres of life, including its increasing influence on the political views of people. Internet memes are becoming a specific reflection of modern reality and a new kind of socio-political discourse. Therefore, the study aimed to study and analyze the most popular Internet memes in the Chinese media space, compare the main trends in modern Chinese, and determine their connection with key events within China and abroad. The main result of the study was the identification of new linguistic and cultural characteristics in the compilation of the Internet meme. Moreover, during the study, it was proved that most of the Internet memes are socially or politically colored, some of them penetrate from unofficial Internet space to a higher language level and are included in the generally accepted active language reserve.

### INTRODUCTION

The Internet has rapidly entered the everyday life of everyone, and now it is no longer just a virtual platform for communicating and receiving new information (Glushkova and Voronina 2018).

The Internet is considered as a special informational, social, psychological, and linguistic space. It has its characteristic features that include virtuality, interactivity, hypertextuality, globality, creativity, anonymity, and patchiness, which together provide a unique opportunity for the emergence, existence, and development of new linguistic and communicative forms in the Internet context. Therefore, an Internet meme is one of the specific types of Internet discourse (Crystal 2001; Dancygier and Vandelanotte 2017).

The English word “meme” refers to an idea, image, and object of intangible culture, spontaneously replicated by the Internet community. However, the meme is currently considered a mechanism for transmitting and storing cultural information. Thus, it is an important source of reflection of modern reality as one of the ways of expressing thoughts and feelings about what is happening in the world (Yang 2017; Zhu 2019).

A meme is an idea, behavior, or style that spreads from person to person within a culture, often with the aim of conveying a particular phenomenon, theme, or meaning represented by the meme. A meme acts as a unit for carrying

cultural ideas, symbols, or practices that can be transmitted from one mind to another through writing, speech, gestures, rituals, or other imitable phenomena with a mimicked theme. Supporters of the concept regard memes as cultural analogues to genes in that they self-replicate, mutate, and respond to selective pressures (Leiser 2019).

Proponents theorize that memes are a viral phenomenon that may evolve by natural selection in a manner analogous to that of biological evolution. Memes do this through the processes of variation, mutation, competition, and inheritance, each of which influences a meme's reproductive success. Memes spread through the behavior that they generate in their hosts. Memes that propagate less prolifically may become extinct, while others may survive, spread, and (for better or for worse) mutate. Memes that replicate most effectively enjoy more success, and some may replicate effectively even when they prove to be detrimental to the welfare of their hosts (Jing 2015; Denisova 2016).

China's Internet is full of catchphrases, in-jokes and other memes. While many are just for fun, others have a deeper meaning to them. China's online memes can sometimes be a powerful tool to say what cannot be said.

### Objectives

This paper aimed to study and analyze the most popular Internet memes in the Chinese media space, compare the main trends in modern

Chinese, and determine their connection with key events within China and abroad.

### METHODOLOGY

Scholarship demonstrates that internet memes – digital-media based, intertextual, participatory creations – are polyvocal, political discourse and grassroots action and advocacy. In democratic and nondemocratic societies, citizens use memes to react, critique, protest, and speak truth to power. Political memes are used to critique and comment on social and political issues, from elections, to food stamps, police violence and issues of equality.

When nearly anyone can write a blog post or share a meme, it becomes necessary to understand how user-generated media influences politics. While this work has begun with studies of relationships between social media use and information-seeking or traditional political participation, there is more work yet to be done to understand how user-generated content, like internet memes, influence those who view them as media. By exploring this question of meme effects, this paper seeks to establish what constitutes an effect of memes and how such effects might be measured.

This study used general humanitarian methods such as comparative method, generalization, analysis, and deduction. Initially, the most popular Internet memes in 2017 and 2018 in the Chinese Internet space were identified. Data were obtained based on surveys and self-monitoring of the chats, blogs, and forums (Denisova 2016; Bull 2017).

Moreover, the received information was analyzed and systematized, and then the characteristics of each meme, translation, and an example of its use were given (Jing 2015; Zeng 2016).

Also, the authors conducted further research regarding its linguistic and cultural characteristics. Finally, based on the obtained results, the authors could compare the main trends in modern Chinese and determine their connection with key events within China and abroad (Davis 2001; Kuhn 2014).

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Notably, the most popular 15 images and expressions were identified during the study of

the Internet memes in the Chinese media space for the years 2017-2018.

1. 确认过眼神 | *quèrènguòyǎnshén*. “确认过眼神，我遇上对的人” (I can see by my eyes that I met the right person); this is a line from the song that was first played in the album of the Singaporean pop singer Lin Junjie (林俊杰) back in 2008. On the eve of the new year 2018, a user of Weibo (a Chinese microblogging service, a popular platform in China) under the name 玩网小学生 published a post called “确认过眼神，你是广东人” (I can see from your eyes that you are a Guangdong) ridiculed the habit of Guangdong to give red envelopes with obscenely small amounts on New Year. A typical feature of the inhabitants of the southern province caused a heated discussion on the network and gave a second life to the musical composition with these words. In the second part of the phrase, you can use any other description of the interlocutor. Accordingly, it should be recalled that even a phrase cut off in the middle of the text modestly emphasizes the ability to see the reality behind the tinsel and guess the true state of affairs (Meikle 2018; Leiser 2019).
2. 隐形贫困人口 | *yǐnxíngpínkùnrénkǒu*. The phrase “invisible poor people” (隐形贫困人口) became popular at the beginning of 2018. In a mild form, it refers to people who have food and shelter at first glance, while they are actually in poverty. The presence of such a social group is especially acute after November 11 (bachelor’s day, world shopping day) when people spend their last money on fashionable devices and clothes during the time of discounts, and then they count pennies. Regarding these people, the Internet users say “你这么会花钱，一定很穷吧” (you are so skillfully spending money, surely you are the poor man). In general, you can compare this meme with jokes about using the iPhone in public and eating Doshirak at home (Meikle 2016).
3. 小猪佩奇 | *XiǎozhūPèiqí*. Peppa Pig (小猪佩奇) has also become a meme star. Users went crazy, wondering where to buy souvenirs with the symbols of this

cartoon, celebrities pasted themselves with decals. They wore children's watches and other funny little things with the image of pigs. Even someone did a haircut with the silhouette of Peppa Pig or tried to get a real tattoo. According to the Chinese video hosting, the animated series with Peppa scored hundreds of billions of views. Thus, Peppa Pig has become an unspoken sign that a particular person is following trends. An inappropriate agiotage led to blocking the tag associated with Peppa-mania and the viral spread of images of cartoon characters by popular personalities on DouYin's Chinese video service. However, cartoons with Peppa could still be seen by everyone, and souvenirs with the symbols of the animated series could be freely sold in stores.

4. 你个杠精儿! | nǐgègàngjīngr. There are often debaters in the comments to points or papers in WeChat? in discussions in Weibo and forums. You can also call them troublemakers or those who like to spar for no reason. 杠精 comes from dialect 抬杠 - swear over trifles. A lot of Chinese Internet words come from dialects. However, this meme is not a direct equivalent to our "sofa troops," which often claim expert opinions. Here, using the senseless and merciless disputes, the Chinese users are trying to disperse the melancholy and 你个杠精儿 is used rather for those who have nothing to do.
5. 太skr了 | tàiskr le. The letter combination came from English slang, which means something unintelligible, unexpected, and even insane. For example, the local meme provider, a popular actor and performer Chris Wu (吴亦) used this word in his press conference at the start of the 2<sup>nd</sup> season of the TV show Rap in China (中国有嘻哈). He described that the word "skr" refers to the contestants' performances. Put differently; it could be used in conjunction with another popular meme: "确认过眼神, 是会说skr的人."
6. 大猪蹄子 | dàzhūtízi. Meme came from the series "The History of Yanxi Palace" (延禧攻略), which has been translated

as "big pig hooves." The fact is that "the main male role" - 男主角 nánzhǔjiǎo - in Chinese is consonant with 男 nánzhūjiǎo that is translated as "male hooves of hogs." Therefore, 大猪蹄子 has a similar meaning, but slightly exaggerated, to emphasize hatred and express displeasure with the inconstancy of the male character. For the first time, "male pork hooves" or "all-male pork hooves" appeared in floating comments that users could send during streaming on platforms. Later, the phrase was used on other platforms in the Chinese network, where women criticize the patriarchal system or are unhappy with men's behavior in general.

7. pick 一下 | pick yīxià. The last year's "打 call" (in 2017, the "Beat the Drum" meme | 打 call | dǎ call, which expresses support and agreement with someone's position) was replaced by a fresh "pick 一下." They began to use this meme on the Korean reality show called "Produce 101," which is especially popular in China. Behind the meme, there are no any special stories or puns; therefore, its meaning is easy to understand; that is, "choose me" or simply "choose." In fact, it is used in Chinese sentences instead of the verb "choose" (挑选, 选择).
8. C 位出道 | C wèichū dào. The word 出道 is translated as "start a career, go out, and debut." In turn, C 位 is an abbreviation for different versions of the English words "center" or "carry" and means "honorary place of an influential person in show business" (大咖位). Thus, you can translate it as "the center begins" or "the star makes its debut." However, it is often used in the sense of "well, let's go" or "give way for beginners" in memes. According to one version, the above phrase came from gamers who gather at the base (in the "center") before starting the task. Moreover, it is used as a signal to start the action. According to another version, the meme appeared at the rehearsal of a pop group performance when the director commanded before the start - "well, center, start." An example of the use of the phrase in the sentence is: "让嘉宾占

- C 位” - let the honored guests stand in the center (Wang and Zhang 2016).
9. 转发锦鲤 | zhuǎnfājǐnlǐ. Meme – send a carp. Karp koi (锦鲤) is traditionally considered a symbol of good luck; however, this year, it flooded the social network. On the Internet, it is used for memes, stickers, and greeting cards. Massive sending to each other images of carps formed a meme - 转发锦鲤. These long-lived ornamental fish are popular throughout the world, but they are credited with special properties to bring good luck and long life in China. To be in the trend, you need to send your friends the image of a fish, and it is better to combine it with a photo of a famous and successful person.
  10. 限制了我的想象力 | Pínqióngxìànzhìlèwǒ de xiǎngxiànglì. Translation: Poverty has limited my imagination. This phrase has long appeared in the Chinese vocabulary, but it was used everywhere in the second half of 2017. In fact, the phrase in a joking way beats up the fact that it is often difficult for ordinary people to imagine how the rich life and what their interests and entertainment are.
  11. 你有 freestyle 吗? | Nǐyǒu freestyle ma? Translation: Do you have a freestyle? The meme became popular overnight, namely, when a member of the jury Wu Yifan (吴亦凡) asked the same question to one of the participants on the Hip-Hop in China TV program (中国有嘻哈). In practice, it is used to emphasize the need to have flexibility, quirkiness, creativity in a dialogue, to have inspiration as well as to be on an emotional lift.
  12. Diss. The meme has also come to the Chinese Internet slang from hip-hop culture. “Diss” derives from the abbreviation of two English words called disrespect (disparate) and disparage (humiliate). Its essence is reduced to the expression of disrespect in a rude form to a rapper or breaker. However, in the Chinese Internet slang, “diss” means to express the maximum degree of contempt. For instance, the common expression is 全世界diss你又如何 (What can you do if the whole world despises you).
  13. 求锤得锤 | Qiúchuídéchuí. Literally, this meme is translated as “If you want a hammer, you get a hammer.” It was spread after a scandal involving the Chinese pop artist Joker Xue and his mistress, the famous model Li Yutun. In August 2017, she wrote a post in her micro-blog Weibo where she said that Joker (married at the time) forced her to have an abortion at a later date, which led to long-term depression. At first, the singer fans did not believe in such an unattractive behavior of their idol and began to demand evidence, but in the end, they received as many as two “hammers,” proving both adultery and forced an abortion.
  14. 比心 | Bǐxīn. Crossed index and big fingers in China and South Korea mean “heart” and are used to express the sincerest feelings. This gesture came to China from Korea, where it was first actively used by pop singers. In fact, when one hand is occupied with a microphone during a performance, and you are expressing your love for the fans, then you can make such a heart with your free hand.
  15. Eat chicken | 吃鸡 | Chījī. The full expression sounds like “大吉大利，晚上吃鸡。” This phrase traces back a paper from English - “Winner, winner, chicken dinner!” (This is a win, I can eat!). At first, the phrase became popular thanks to the American drama about card games “Twenty-one,” and then the online game PlayerUnknown’s Battlegrounds. Then, it was used to advertise casinos in Las Vegas in the 1970s: the minimum win was guaranteed by a standard dinner — three pieces of chicken and a serving of vegetables. However, in the Internet slang, the above statement means “take first place” and “win.”

Studying the Internet memes would provide an insight into the Chinese language picture of the world. Actually, a completely new source of the birth of neologisms is forming that include different Internet communities (social networks, forums, blogs, and chat rooms). Of course, for a majority of the native Chinese speakers, Internet memes may be unintelligible when they first met.



Thus, they need further explanation. Therefore, it is the above fact that makes them look like the traditional phraseological turns of Chengyu, such as the similarity of the grammatical structure formation. Actually, primary sources of memes inception are hot news in the media (皮皮虾, 我们走!), a film or a series (惊不惊喜? 意不意外?), a television show (C位出道), a music product (确认过眼神, 我遇上对的人), computer or video games (还有这种操作?). As a type of case law, Internet memes keep information about that text, information resource, cultural phenomenon, or historical event that are used as the source of the meme. Accordingly, the Internet meme has a cultural connotation, which gives the addressee the possibility of identifying a case law. Notably, part of the popular memes is included in the active language reserve so that they would lose novelty and become common expressions. Thus, another unique phenomenon would be observed when a phrase or expression from the Internet space moves to another language level, including official business. For example, following the current trends in 2017, the official newspaper of the Communist Party of China "Renmin Ribao" (人民日报) made its own rating of the Internet memes (Ungere and Schmidt 2008).

### CONCLUSION

Studying the Internet memes would provide an insight into the Chinese language picture of the world. Of course, for a majority of the native Chinese speakers, Internet memes may be unintelligible when they first met. Thus, they need further explanation. Therefore, it is the above fact that makes them look like the traditional phraseological turns of Chengyu, such as the similarity of the grammatical structure formation. Thus, when we speak about the phenomenon of the Chinese Internet meme, it is safe to say that most of them are politically or socially colored. In fact, the memes are significantly different in terms of demand and sustainability. Moreover, there is a relationship between the stability of the meme and its potential for generating new language structures. Finally, with the great popularity, the possible creation of the new text formations on its basis, reproduction on different Internet sites allows the Internet memo to be preserved and

introduced into the active stock of the Chinese vocabulary.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

This study aimed to study and analyze the most popular Internet memes in the Chinese media space. Future studies can investigate similar methods of increasing influence on the political views of people. Also identification of new linguistic and cultural characteristics in the compilation of the Internet meme can be more comprehensively studied.

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