

**Internet Memes and Cyber Nationalism in China: A Social  
Semiotic Analysis of the Diba Expedition**

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## ABSTRACT

Before 2016, Diba was known for its memetic discourse 屌丝 (*diaosi*). Diba members of this period were regarded as a representative of China's post-80s generation who struggled for their social identity offline and constructed a group identity online. After 2016, Diba was known for its nationalist expeditions to Facebook. Diba participants of this period were officially praised as a patriotic group and represented China's post-90s generation who united in response to certain political events.

This research investigates Diba's self-generated internet memes and their role of articulating pro-government opinions in online expeditions across four years. These collective expeditions respectively involved Taiwan in 2016, Sweden in 2018 as well as Hong Kong in 2017 and 2019.

After classifying 11,386 memes collected during a non-participant observation, 980 representative data were selected to create a multimodal corpus. Synthesising concepts from meme studies and multimodal research, the corpus was annotated in terms of representational meanings and formal properties. From a social semiotic perspective, the annotated corpus was used to assist the exploration of how Diba participants' pro-government stance is multimodally represented in the situational contexts of four different expeditions.

Based on an in-depth qualitative analysis, I argue that Diba's memes rely on the multimodal components' formal features to generate desired visual impressions and communicate with potential audiences of different socio-cultural backgrounds. Moreover, Diba's memes are innovative in recontextualising and appropriating elements from popular cultures, regional conventions, historical events, and official discourses. The appropriation enables Diba participants to express or justify their political opinions in a creative and sometimes playful manner. The recontextualisation further helps Diba participants intertextually depict the expeditions as sacred and patriotic self-defence. However, I also argue that Diba's memes are aggressive in deploying the confrontational rhetoric to threaten, harass, provoke, and intimidate the named targets. This type of rhetoric demonstrates Diba participants' intentional persuasion from a position of power.

Overall, I argue for the integration of innovation, aggressiveness, patriotism, and nationalism in Diba's online expeditions and user-generated memes. This feature not only results from the young participants' absorption of the "China rising" narrative since the early 1990s but also stems from the surge of nationalist sentiments within the Chinese context in recent years.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

When I started my PhD studies, I once compared it to a JRPG involving learning skills, levelling up, meeting new friends, confronting challenges, and reaching the predefined destination. I then found out that it is also a tough and lonely journey filled with isolation, uncertainty, struggle, loss, regret, misunderstanding, fear, failures, exhaustion, tears, and sleepless nights.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

- ACG  
Anime, comics, and video games, 111
- ALS  
Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, 14
- Anti-ELAB  
Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill, 42
- BBS  
Bulletin board system, 27
- BRI  
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- MIC  
Made in China, 173
- MIP  
Most Important Problem, 69
- NATO  
North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, 26
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Extensible Markup Language, 82

## Chapter 1 Motivation and introduction

This chapter provides a brief introduction to the thesis. Section 1.1 clarifies the motivation for examining the Diba Expedition, an online political activity collectively conducted by a group of Chinese young people. Section 1.2 explains reasons for focusing on multimodal internet memes generated and circulated during the Diba Expedition. Section 1.3 lists the primary aim and research questions that this thesis intends to achieve and answer. The final section 1.4 outlines the thesis structure and summarises the main content of each chapter.

### 1.1 Why the Diba Expedition

On 20 January 2016, a group of Chinese young people flooded the Facebook pages of Taiwan's newly elected president, Tsai Ing-wen, and two news agencies, Sanlih E-News Channel (SETN) and *Apple Daily* (Taiwan). During this process, participants collectively referred to themselves as 帝吧 (*diba*) and their actions as 出征 (*chuzheng*, expedition). They filled the comment areas with pro-government written texts and self-generated memes within a short time frame, claiming that their fundamental purpose was to demonstrate opposition to Taiwan independence.

Due to its large scale of participation and timing, occurring right after the Taiwanese presidential election on 16 January 2016, this expedition attracted broad attention from the public, official media, government institutions, and academia. Specifically, Chinese internet users circulated articles (EPnVd, 2016; He, 2016; PingWest, 2016) introducing Diba and illustrating the expedition process through screenshots. Without commenting on the behaviour of violating technical regulations, official media and government institutions commended Diba participants for their innovative memes and pro-government stance, including *People's Daily* (2016), *Global Times* (2016b, 2016c), the Communist Youth League (CYL) (2016), and Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council (2016). Through in-depth research on the organisation and mobilisation of the expedition, Liu and his colleagues (2019a) highlighted the implication of considering the expedition as a representative case showing how China's post-90s generation actively integrated fandom tactics with nationalist activities (see section 2.3.2 for a review of relevant studies).

Following the first expedition on 20 January 2016, a series of similar online activities were conducted over the next three years to express pro-government opinions on several political

issues (see section 4.1 for details). For instance, collective actions were taken in 2017, 2018, and 2019 to support the central government in matters such as Hong Kong independence, Sino-Swedish conflicts, disputes of Uyghur human rights, and the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement. During these subsequent expeditions, Diba participants adopted identical tactics as they did in their first expedition. Their actions once again aroused public discussions (Sou hu, 2017a, 2017b; Hao, 2018; Yang *et al.*, 2018; Lianhe Zaobao, 2019; Liberty Times, 2019) on China's cyber nationalism and young people's engagement with political issues. Nevertheless, reactions from official media, government institutions, and academia focused more on the 2019 expedition that criticised Hong Kong's Anti-Extradition Bill Movement. Apart from *People's Daily* (2019a, 2019c) and the CYL (2019a, 2019b), *新闻联播* (*xinwen lianbo*) (2019b; 2019a), China's state broadcaster, praised Diba participants for the first time for their pro-government stance. Several researchers (Du, 2021; Liao, Koo and Rojas, 2022; Chen, 2023; Zhuang, Huang and Chen, 2023) explored how expeditions were mobilised and organised in 2019 (see section 2.3.2 for a review of relevant studies). However, their studies primarily revealed relationships between the expeditions and China's fandom culture, as most of them were based on the concept of fandom nationalism that Liu and his colleagues (2019a) advocated when exploring the first expedition in 2016.

Considering Chinese society's reaction and relevant academic studies, my motivation for examining the Diba Expedition can be specified in the following two aspects.

Firstly, a general investigation of Diba's continuous expeditions has not yet been conducted. By categorising the first expedition in 2016 as a representative case of fandom nationalism, Liu and his colleagues (2019a) effectively aroused further discussions on the latest development of cyber nationalism in China's socio-cultural context. Subsequent explorations (Liao, Koo and Rojas, 2022; Chen, 2023; Lams and Zhou, 2023; Zhuang, Huang and Chen, 2023) on the 2019 expedition to Hong Kong refined this categorisation with more detailed comparison between the expedition and China's fandom activities. However, these studies often concentrated on a single expedition, seldom exploring (1) what pro-government opinions were specifically articulated in different expeditions and (2) whether Diba participants adopted certain strategies when supporting the central government or protecting the nation-state regarding distinct political issues and communicative situations.

Secondly, the official's acknowledgement of the Diba Expedition contrasted notably with its attitude towards what Diba was known for before the online expeditions to Facebook. Before the first expedition in 2016, Diba was closely linked to *屌丝* (*diaosi*), a viral expression of self-

mockery, and the life experience of China's post-80s generation (see section 2.3.1 for a review of relevant studies). For the public, Diba's *diaosi*-centred discourse was popularised to articulate collective frustration about China's dominant ideology of masculinity, elite culture, social stratification, and certain official policies (Best, 2014; Szablewicz, 2014). Nevertheless, *diaosi*'s symbolic meaning of loser was criticised by officials for disseminating negative emotions and challenging mainstream values (Yan, 2014). Given the shift in official attitudes towards Diba, it is worth to contemplating which parts of the Diba Expedition were specifically acknowledged by the official. As introduced earlier in this section, when official media and government institutions mentioned the expeditions in 2016 and 2019, they seldom explicitly commented on the fact that bypassing government's technical restrictions was a prerequisite for conducting expeditions on Facebook. What was often commended was the pro-government stance that Diba participants collectively demonstrated in relevant political issues. Thus, in addition to examining the mobilisation and organisation of the Diba Expedition, it is important to ask (1) how Diba participants expressed pro-government opinions and (2) what are the relationships between these expressions and Chinese society, where nationalist sentiments are rising and 正能量 (*zhengnengliang*, positive energy) is officially promoted as a political slogan (Yang and Tang, 2018; Chen and Wang, 2019).

In short, my intention of examining the Diba Expedition was triggered by the young participants' active engagement in China-related political disputes and diverse reactions that their collective actions aroused. Like previous studies, this thesis sees the Diba Expedition as a typical case representing how cyber nationalism is developing in China's current socio-cultural context. However, it seeks to present the Diba Expedition as a phenomenon comprised of continuous activities, in which participants dealt with different communicative situations and supported the central government in distinct political conflicts. This motivation is closely related to my next decision of focusing on the multimodal internet memes generated and transmitted in different rounds of expedition.

## 1.2 Why multimodal internet memes

In China's public discussions, news reports, and academic studies, the Diba Expedition was often referred to as 表情包大战 (*biaoqingbao dazhan*, *biaoqingbao* war) (P. Gong, 2016; PingWest, 2016). Moreover, screenshots of diverse *biaoqingbao*, a type of expressive digital images, were frequently presented when people commented on the Diba Expedition. Figure 1.1

shows a few *biaoqingbao* that *People's Daily* (2016) and the CYL (2019a) illustrated in their commentary articles regarding Diba's first expedition in 2016 and another one in 2019. These articles not only commended the innovation of using *biaoqingbao* as a tool in political communication, but they also praised the pro-government ideas that Diba participants expressed through these *biaoqingbao*.



(translation)

1. If you pay me in US dollars, I am willing to eat shit
2. Special seal of the Diba Expedition and against Taiwan independence  
Diba's subdivision of bomb attack
3. Support the Hong Kong police
4. I love China, I love Hong Kong  
Support the Hong Kong police, support justice
5. Defenseless  
This is what you call as "defenseless"

Figure 1.1 *Biaoqingbao* or memes retrieved from commentary articles of *People's Daily* and the CYL

*Biaoqingbao* is often known as sticker packs or emoji packs that are used by Chinese internet users in online communication. In the Chinese context, it primarily works to add "a visual and emotive layer to text-dominant online conversations" (Xu, 2016), and it shares certain similarities with internet memes spreading in the English context. In terms of production and transmission, *biaoqingbao* also relies on creative remix and viral imitation within online environments (Seta, 2016). However, given the differences between Chinese and English online environments, elements included in Chinese *biaoqingbao* and English internet memes inevitably differ in terms of their connotations, formal features, compositions, and cultural implications (see section 2.1.3 for a review of relevant studies).



Despite these differences, this thesis considers *biaoqingbao* as a representation of Chinese internet memes. By addressing examples in Figure 1.1 as internet memes, I intend to expand their roles from presenting emotive information in online conversations to disseminating ideas through collective imitation and circulation. Against the background of the Diba Expedition, this intention can be further elaborated in the following two aspects.

Firstly, examining Diba's multimodal internet memes can provide insights into the production and transmission of political memes in the Chinese context. It is not rare to see internet users across the world utilise memes to participate in political discussions (Milner, 2013; Ross and Rivers, 2017b), construct political narratives (Breuer and Johnston, 2019; Laurent, Glăveanu and Literat, 2021), and facilitate political campaigns (Ross and Rivers, 2017a; McLoughlin and Southern, 2021). Nevertheless, focusing on Diba's memes enables more specific and contextualized inquiries, such as when Chinese young people employ multimodal memes in online political communication, (1) what elements are commonly involved in these artefacts, (2) what characteristics can be generally found, and (3) can they reflect Chinese youths' interpretations of relevant political issues, life experiences, or other aspects of China's socio-cultural context. These inquiries not only diversify academic studies on internet memes' political influence (see section 2.1.2 for a review of relevant studies) but also help move the concept of internet memes beyond Anglophone contexts.

Secondly, the Chinese public's description of Diba's expeditions as "war" implies the weaponisation of Diba's multimodal internet memes. This implication highlights that the phenomenon of the Diba Expedition can be a useful case exemplifying memetic warfare efforts (Giesea, 2015; Bogerts and Fielitz, 2019; Donovan, Dreyfuss and Friedberg, 2022) in the Chinese context (see section 2.1.2 for a review of relevant studies). Moreover, analysing Diba's memes can enable exploration of (1) how participants positioned themselves when flooding the targeted Facebook pages with self-generated memes, (2) how political ideologies were transmitted through the propagation of memes, and (3) what effects were generated.

In summary, my decision to focus on multimodal internet memes circulated during the Diba Expedition was motivated by the Chinese public's interpretation of Diba's memes as military weapons, as well as the comparability between Chinese and English internet memes. The primary intention behind this decision is to contemplate the concept of internet memes in the Chinese context and explore Chinese internet memes' role in collectively disseminating pro-government ideas.

### **1.3 Aim and research questions**

Using the Diba Expedition as a representative case, the overarching aim of this thesis is to examine how Chinese young people use multimodal internet memes to participate in political communication and represent a pro-government stance.

To reach this research aim, three principal questions need to be answered in my exploration of the multimodal internet memes that Diba participants generated and circulated in expeditions ranging from 2016 to 2019:

#### **Q1: What notable characteristics can be found in Diba's memes?**

- a. What formal properties and content elements are commonly involved?
- b. What meanings are primarily expressed?
- c. What are their explicit and implied addressees?
- d. What effects are generated among diverse audience?

#### **Q2: How do Diba's memes indicate Diba participants' political positions? Which means asking, how do Diba's memes represent Diba participants' relations**

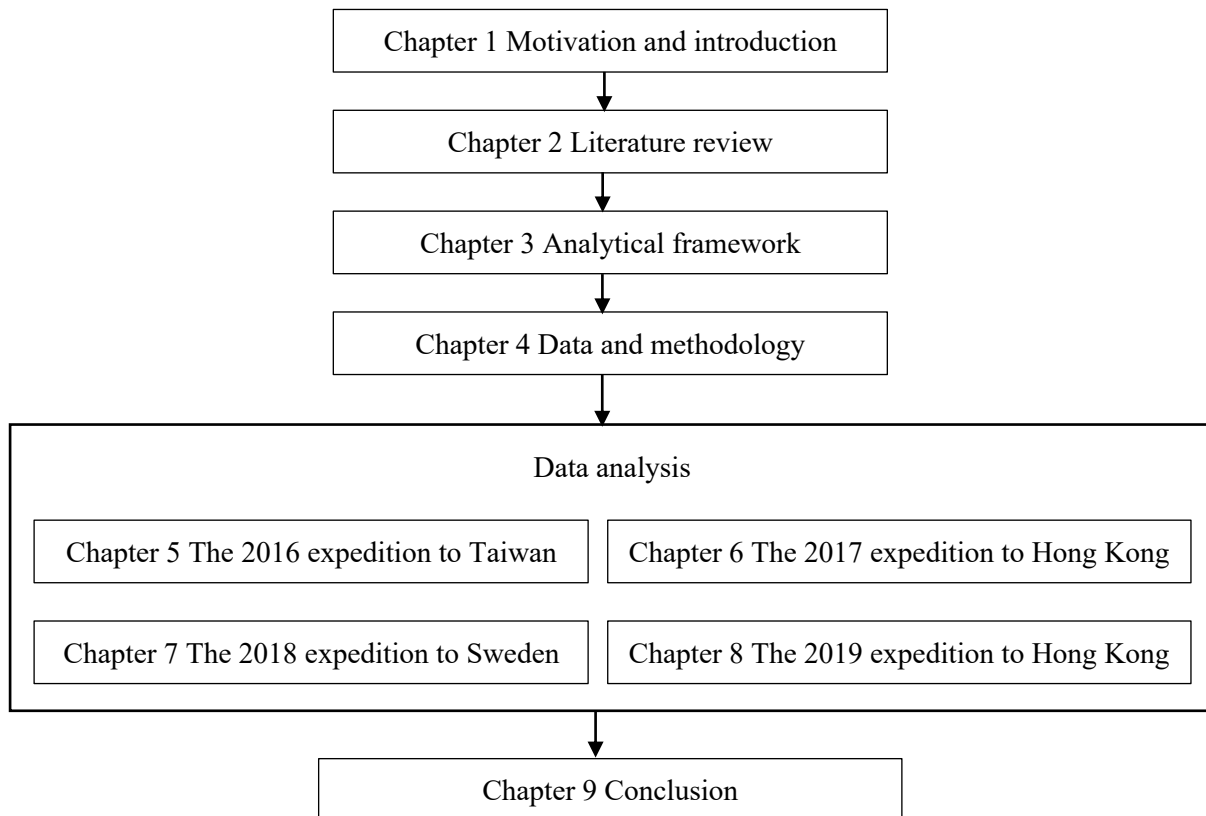
- a. with the targeted individuals and institutions?
- b. with China's central government?
- c. within the international situation of each expedition?

#### **Q3: What relations can be found between Diba's memes and China's socio-cultural context?**

The three principal research questions are interconnected in their exploration of Diba's memes. Each is built on the previous one to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. The first research question sets the foundation by identifying what makes Diba's memes unique within their specific contexts. Identifying these representative characteristics is crucial for exploring how the memes function as communicative tools. The second question builds on the first one by analysing how the identified characteristics reflect the political positions of Diba participants. It links the meme content and formal properties to the political stance and affiliations of their creators. The third question broadens the analysis by connecting Diba's memes to China's socio-cultural context. It synthesises insights from the previous two questions, illustrating how Diba's memes operate within and contribute to the larger socio-cultural context.

## 1.4 Thesis structure

Figure 1.2 illustrates the thesis structure. Following an overview of the thesis in Chapter 1 and a review of relevant studies in Chapter 2, Chapter 3 elaborates the analytical framework that serves as a theoretical underpinning for certain decisions concerning methodology and the other four analysis chapters. Chapter 4 details data-related methods and ethical concerns. To highlight the continuity of expeditions ranging from 2016 to 2019, Chapter 5, Chapter 6, Chapter 7, and Chapter 8 are organised according to the year of each expedition. Each chapter presents quantitative findings obtained from the annotated meme data and a qualitative analysis of notable characteristics and meaning-making practices. Chapter 9 brings the whole study into a conclusion.



*Figure 1.2 Thesis structure*

Chapter 1 provides an overview, including the research background, motivations, objective, and structure of this study. After introducing the research topic and presenting data examples, research motivations are explained by clarifying background information of the examined phenomenon and positioning this study within relevant research domains. The primary research

objective is outlined in relation to three main research questions, which are divided into seven sub-questions.

Chapter 2 offers a review of relevant literature and indicates research gaps that this study aims to fill. The review begins with previous studies concerning the definition of memes, the production and transmission of internet memes for various purposes, and the use of internet memes in the Chinese context. Subsequently, existing research on Chinese nationalism is reviewed, focusing on the conceptualisation and different forms of Chinese nationalism. In the final part, former analysis of Diba's activities in China's domestic internet spheres and its expeditions to Facebooks are reviewed to further clarify this study's position within relevant research domains.

Chapter 3 presents the analytical framework of this study and introduces core concepts. This chapter begins by detailing the three analytical dimensions used to unpack internet memes in terms of content, form, and stance. The following parts of this chapter further enhance these dimensions in accordance with the research questions. Notions from multimodal research specify the primary analytical aspects of these dimensions. Ideas from social semiotics reinforce these dimensions by emphasising the social context in which internet memes are produced. Moreover, concepts related to recontextualisation extend the analytical scope to the interrelations generated during the memetic production and transmission.

Chapter 4 focuses on the methodology of this study, including information about the data, the corpus, preliminary findings obtained during data collection process, and ethical concerns. The data was automatically collected from selected sources of Facebook posts involved in four representative expeditions. The first part of this chapter explains the data collection process, which was facilitated by a non-participant observation of Diba's expeditions. It also presents the preliminary findings discovered during this process. The second part offers details on data selection, the constructed corpus, and data annotation. The third part introduces focus and tools of corpus investigation. The last part addresses ethical concerns involved in conducting the non-participant observation and preserving data that were made inaccessible during political turmoil.

Chapter 5 analyses memes that Diba participants used during the 2016 expedition. By embedding the examined memes in the broader context of cross-strait conflicts, this chapter primarily contemplates how Diba's mems work to justify China's territorial claims over Taiwan, express pro-government sentiments, and address the unstable cross-strait relationships.

Chapter 6 investigates how Diba participants deployed multimodal memes to promote a pro-government stance during the 2017 expedition. This chapter uncovers contextualised meme

production process, in which diverse semiotic resources serve to address British colonial impacts on Hong Kong, condemn independence supporters, defend national identity, and demonstrate confidence in China's development and military.

Chapter 7 explores memes which were transmitted during the 2018 expedition to address external pressures from Sweden. Focusing on Diba participants' strategic use of templated integration and recontextualised elements, this chapter aims to uncover how Diba 's memes express collective nationalist sentiments and reflect Diba participants' interpretation of Sino-Swedish conflicts.

Chapter 8 explores memes circulated during the 2019 expedition to Hong Kong, with focuses on their innovative roles in highlighting China's governance over Hong Kong, expressing support for the Hong Kong police, criticising protesters, and delegitimising the pro-democracy political orientation.

Chapter 9 concludes the main findings and implications of this thesis. Moreover, this chapter reflects on the original contributions of the researching work, aswell as underscores its position in broader contexts of multimodal research, meme studies, and academic examination of Chinese nationalism. The final part of this chapter discusses limitations and suggests areas for future research.

## **Chapter 2 Literature review**

This chapter consists of three sections. It aims to provide a thorough review of previous studies, identify research gaps, and clarify this study's position within the existing research domains. Section 2.1 reviews former studies exploring memes and internet memes in both Anglophone and Chinese contexts. This section specifically presents previous discussions on the definitions of memes and internet memes, their influences on contemporary society, differences between Chinese and English internet memes, and the common characteristics of Chinese internet memes. Section 2.2 focuses on past research conceptualising nationalism in China's socio-political context and examining the development of Chinese nationalism across different historical stages. Finally, section 2.3 elaborates on the historical evolution of Diba by reviewing relevant studies. These studies either analysed Chinese viral expressions and subculture that emerged from Diba's online activities in domestic spheres before 2016 or the tactics used for mobilising and organising the Diba Expedition to Facebook after 2016.

### **2.1 Studies on memes and internet memes**

This section is divided into three subordinate parts. Section 2.1.1 introduces the concept of meme and former debates on its definition. Section 2.1.2 concentrates on the emergence and popularisation of internet memes in contemporary society. It also gives an overview of previous studies specifically investigating internet memes' economic, social, cultural, and political influences. Section 2.1.3 moves to studies focusing on Chinese internet memes. At the end of this section, research gaps will be stated for showing how this study can contribute to the existing literature.

#### **2.1.1 Memes**

When coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (1976), a meme is originally considered as an analogue to a gene and plays a crucial role in cultural transmission. In genetic evolution, genes function as replicating entities to pass on biological traits from one body to another via sperm and eggs. Similarly, memes propagate cultural information from brain to brain through the process of imitation or copying. Examples of memes include tunes, slogans, catchphrases, jokes, fashions, and sports.

In applying the concept of natural selection to memes, Dawkins (1976) identified three general qualities: longevity, fecundity, and copy-fidelity. Longevity refers to a meme's ability to survive over an extended period. Fecundity, however, holds greater importance as it

determines the rate of replication within the meme pool, which serves as a repository of all memes present in a given population. Copy-fidelity is closely related to the faithful maintenance of the initial patterns through successive round of copying. Moreover, he also advocated for the concept of competition and linked it with the three properties of memes. He related this concept to the core of Darwinian theory, suggesting that memes compete for survival in human brains and other mediums, such as radio and television time, billboard space, and library shelf-space.

However, researchers (Blackmore, 1999; Sperber, 2000) from other fields criticised Dawkins's original definition of memes as being vague. They sought to theorise this term and attempted to conceptualise memes for formal research. One of such attempts was made by cognitive scientist Sperber (1996), who proposed a naturalistic approach to understand culture under the name of the epidemiology of representation. He examined the selection, media, transmission and copying of representations in the same manner to Dawkins's exploration of memes. According to Sperber (1996), there are two major types of representation: mental and public. Mental representations refer to beliefs, intentions, and preferences, which constitute components of an individual's knowledge. This kind of representation are usually transmitted as mental versions to other minds through communication and distribution. Public representations consist of more tangible forms, such as speech, writing, gestures, and pictures. Derived from a set of mental and public representations within a specific social group, cultural representations are transmitted like endemics over generations or spread like epidemics throughout a population.

Psychologists and computer scientists tend to broaden the concept of memes. Unlike Dawkins, who initially interpreted memes as units of transmission, researchers (Plotkin, 1993; Brodie, 1996) in these two fields saw memes as information units that are replicated in other minds. Among relevant studies, Blackmore (1999) used Dawkins's (1976) and Dennett's (1995) discussions of memes as the basis to highlight the power of imitation in a broad sense. From her point of view, anything copied from one mind to another can be classified as an autonomous meme. Each meme utilises human behaviours to spread itself indiscriminately, without considering whether it is useful or harmful to its physical hosts. For instance, although songs like *Happy Birthday to You* are not indispensable in human society, they are transmitted around the world and over generations. Additionally, from the perspective of social learning, Blackmore (1999) highlighted that only humans can complete extensive memetic transmission, since true imitation requires deciding what to imitate, transforming one viewpoint to another, and then producing consistent actions. Within the process of imitation, memes necessarily

exhibit three features: heredity (copying the form and details of a specific behaviour), variation (errors, modifications, or variations in the copying process), and selection (only parts of behaviours are successfully copied and transmitted).

In addition to mapping attempts at defining memes according to research areas, debates can also be separated into two principal advocacies driven by mentalism and behaviourism. Both are based on the theory of memetics and see a meme as a unit of culture. However, they explore how memes transmit cultures from distinct perspectives. Scholars (Dawkins, 1976; Dennett, 1990, 1995; Lynch, 1996, 1998) who advocated mentalist-driven memetics tended to see gene-like memes as idea complexes or pieces of abstract information. To reach a larger group of receivers, meme producers need to select suitable vehicles to convey these infectious ideas and information. The selected meme vehicles act as units to preserve and propagate the replicated content. However, the transmitted memes of abstract beliefs or thoughts are always separable from the tangible expressions functioning as meme vehicles. In contrast, behaviour-driven memetics asserts that viewing memes as abstract information makes it difficult to identify and empirically observe how memes evolve and diffuse (Gatherer, 1998). In other words, the meme and carrier-of-meme relationship in the thought contagion model shifts attention to the mental units of information residing in a brain. These “memory abstractions” (Lynch, 1998, p. Section 4) are not measurable and quantifiable for investigating the meme frequency and cultural evolution.

To solve this problem, Gatherer (1998) suggested considering memes as cultural events, behaviours or artefacts that can be replicated or spread. From the behaviourist perspective, memes never exist if they are not manifested through concrete units. For instance, religious beliefs are spread by priests performing a standard series of activities. Without these ritual behaviours, it is difficult for the conceptual beliefs to find channels to reach a larger population. Therefore, instead of concentrating on the abstract information residing in individual brains, studies of memetic transmission should focus on the imitable and observable behaviours as memes. Moreover, questioning Dawkins’s (1976) virus-and-host metaphor effectively shifts attention to the process of cultural evolution that is realised through changes in individuals’ memetic behaviours, and all these changes happen outside the individuals. This concern of behaviour-driven memetics shares certain similarities with diffusion research (Rogers and Shoemaker, 1971), as both examine the phenomenon of transmission through empirically quantifiable changes in behaviours. Along with the debates between mentalist and behaviourist (also known as internalist and externalist) perspectives, Blackmore (1999) proposed including any type of replicable and imitable information as memes, no matter they are conceptual ideas



or concrete behaviours. This proposal was named by Shifman (2014, p. 39) as the “inclusive memetic approach”, and it is criticised for overgeneralisation and weakness in supporting the analysis of diverse memes.

### **2.1.2 Internet memes**

When the debate on the concept of memes ignited in academia, a new term emerged in vernacular discourses: internet memes (also known as online memes). For internet users, memes refer to ideas or information rapidly disseminated through the internet. They are often presented in various forms, such as writing, image, and video (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007). Milner (2013, p. 2357) specifically categorised internet memes as “multimodal artefacts remixed by countless participants, employing popular culture for public commentary”. User-driven imitation, copying, and remixing during the process of meme transmission constitute integral parts of the participatory culture in the twenty-first century (Shifman, 2014). Facilitated by online connectivity and the popularity of graphic editing software, most internet memes are visual artefacts, including still images, images with inserted written phrases, animated images, or videos. The widespread use of internet memes has led to the emergence of several meme-centred aggregators (such as 9GAG and 4Chan), providing a novel avenue for online communications (Börzsei, 2013). Additionally, the frequent appearance of internet memes on blogs, microblogs, forums, and other digital platforms has gradually elevated the term to a crucial representation of web narratives (Burgess, 2008).

To further clarify the definition of internet memes, media and sociology scholars (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007; Shifman, 2011, 2014) emphasised the difference between virals and memes. Shifman (2011) noted that viral content typically spreads rapidly without significant changes, akin to an epidemic. In contrast, memetic content involves creative engagement or derivative practices. Virals often prioritise reaching a large audience and may overlook human agency and socio-cultural contexts. Memes, however, rely on extensive and dynamic interactions within specific environments (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007; Burgess, 2008; Shifman, 2011; Olga Goriunova, 2014). Shifman (2011) further elucidated the difference and relationship between virals and internet memes through the example of Chris Crocker’s *Leave Britney Alone* video. Initially, as a viral video, it was viewed and spread widely. As it gained popularity, different people modified or altered the original video into derivatives. These derivatives collectively formed a repository of memetic content. In this case, Chris Crocker’s viral video should be viewed as a manifestation of the *Leave Britney Alone* meme.

Despite acknowledging Shifman's (2011) comparison between viral and memetic content, Varis and Blommaert (2015), from the perspective of social semiotics, argued that this comparison is relatively superficial. They contended that memes possess high level of semiotic productivity, and they are often related to the process of recontextualisation (Bernstein, 1996; Fairclough, 2000; Wodak, 2014) or resemiotisation (Scollon and Scollon, 2004) . In this process, semiotic objects are taken from their original context to a different one, involving a new set of contextualisation conditions and producing different communicative effects. Taking the online reaction to a message as an example, Varis and Blommaert (2015) viewed liking and sharing others' posts as two different genres: phatic communion and phatic communication. Although the formal properties of these genres are not changed significantly, they involve different agencies, addressees, and pragmatic features. In this sense, memes are not necessarily created to be denotationally and informationally meaningful (Varis and Blommaert, 2015).

As a component of online subculture, internet memes have gained attention for their economic, social, and political influences. In terms of economic influence, internet memes are closely linked to the attention economy (Beck and Davenport, 2001; Marwick, 2015). Human agency, as emphasised by Shifman (2011) and Blackmore (1999), plays a crucial role in making memes dynamic entities. Human attention thus becomes a precious resource for meme transmission. With the attention of different agents, producing and propagating internet memes significantly contribute to "agenda-setting, transforming random issues" (Shifman, 2019, p. 47). For instance, consider *The Ice Bucket Challenge*, where individuals dumped a bucket of ice water over their heads to promote awareness of Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) and encourage donations to relevant research. A viral video of this activity spurred imitations by participants worldwide. Consequently, the formation and emulation of *The Ice Bucket Challenge* meme not only draw attention to the actions being imitated but also to the original video's intention: raising awareness of the ALS and fundraising efforts.

In terms of social influence, internet memes are often associated with the concept of networked individualism (Castells, 2001; Wellman, 2001; Wellman *et al.*, 2003). Through vernacular creativity in meme production and transmission, individuals articulate or construct their uniqueness. On the one hand, rules or formulas of meme production can act as a bridge, linking meme producers and users to the larger community (Shifman, 2014; Gerbaudo, 2015; Varis and Blommaert, 2015; Gal, Shifman and Kampf, 2016; Yus, 2018). For example, *diaosi*, an internet slang coined by Diba before 2016, is frequently used on Chinese social media to refer someone as a loser. Initially serving as a label of digital creativity, it eventually developed into a meme, deployed by Chinese youth to express resentment towards China's class

polarisation (Szablewicz, 2014). A review of relevant studies on *diaosi* and its relationship with Diba is provided in section 2.3.1. On the other hand, internet memes' social influence can also lead to division (Yus, 2018; Shifman, 2019). According to Knobel and Lankshear (2007), internet memes can be interpreted as new forms of literacy practices, as meme production and transmission involve more than modifying and disseminating written or visual texts. Instead, they are closely linked to “ways of interacting with others, to meaning making, and to ways of being, knowing, learning and doing” (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007, p. 221). Therefore, successful construction and consumption of an internet meme require adherence to generic conventions, marking in-group solidarity between meme users while excluding outsiders (Yus, 2018; Shifman, 2019). A typical examination of this division is Miltner's (2014) research focusing on the meme genre of LOLcats, where she identified three different groups of LOLcat fans and observed social boundaries between them.

In terms of political influence, internet memes leverage their economic and social powers to play pivotal roles in different political campaigns (Shifman, 2019). Emerging as personalised expression of hopes, thoughts, lifestyles, or grievances, internet memes gain traction across diverse population. Due to the ease of imitation, adaptation, and sharing, internet memes circulate widely on digital platforms such as blogs, forums, Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, and Instagram (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). Consequently, what starts as a personal action can evolve into collective actions among individuals with common identifications or political claims (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Shifman, 2019).

This transformative power of internet memes signifies a novel form of grassroots activism and political participation. Several cases exemplify the intersection of internet memes' political influence and grassroots activism, including the 2008 *Put People First* campaign (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012), the 2011 Arab Spring (Harlow, 2013), the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement (Milner, 2013; Huntington, 2016), the 2014 American India activism (Lenhardt, 2016), and the 2016 United States (US) presidential elections (Ross and Rivers, 2017a; Moody-Ramirez and Church, 2019). In these activities and movements, internet memes served as vehicles for political expression and discussion (Shifman, 2014, 2019; Kulkarni, 2017). The vernacular creativity involved in meme production offers valuable spaces for negotiating diverse opinions and identities (Milner, 2013; Rea, 2013; Shifman, 2014; Fang, 2020). In addition to their significant roles in grassroots activism, internet memes have also been weaponised in alt-right movements or groupings to attack ideological opponents, polarise online interactions, and disseminate distorted narratives (Bogerts and Fielitz, 2019; Dafaure, 2020; Donovan, Dreyfuss and Friedberg, 2022). Researchers generally refer to this

phenomenon as memetic warfare (Hancock, 2010; Giese, 2015), where social media are considered as battlefields and internet memes help construct visual and rhetorical provocations (Heikkilä, 2017; Gearhart *et al.*, 2020). Online cultural creativity and memetic transmission have become gateways to mobilise potential supporters and spread different ideologies in the Trump presidency (Merrin, 2019; Al-Rawi, 2021), the counter-spectacle against the Islamic State (Johansson, 2018; Downing, 2021; McCrow-Young and Mortensen, 2021), Germany's far-right movements (Bogerts and Fielitz, 2019), and Ukraine's online resistance against Russian propaganda (Horbyk and Orlova, 2023; Mejova *et al.*, 2024; Munk, 2024).

### 2.1.3 Chinese internet memes

Although explorations of memetic transmission and cultures were initiated in Anglophone contexts, increasing efforts have been made to localise the concept of meme and examine meme cultures in the Chinese context. Through detailed case studies, researchers (Seta, 2016; Jiang and Vásquez, 2019; Ying and Blommaert, 2020) pointed out the comparability between English internet memes and 表情包 (*biaoqingbao*) as Chinese internet memes. Like image macro, one of the most common forms of English internet memes, *biaoqingbao* often comprises written texts and static images or GIFs. Producing and transmitting a *biaoqingbao* similarly involve imitable behaviours of appropriating, modifying, remixing, and disseminating elements from different media repertoires.

In their cross-linguistic study on memes circulated in various countries, Nissenbaum and Shifman (2018) noted that Chinese memes feature the basic format of placing changing written text over a fixed image. Nevertheless, they differ from popular memes in other countries in terms of style. Instead of relying on photographic images or drawings, Chinese memes commonly integrate cartoon characters with photographic facial expressions of celebrities well-known in East Asian cultures. Drawing on a large corpus comprised of *biaoqingbao*-related posts, threads, chatting records, blogs and web articles, Ying and Blommaert (2020) discovered that the facial expressions popularised in Chinese memes form a relatively limited list. They are mostly captured from specific movie or television actors, famous athletes, and influential political figures. Although these faces are highly expressive within the original contexts, they can be used to generate distinctive emotions when superimposed with different written texts. Focusing on Chinese memes that appropriate the smiling face of D'Angelo Dinero, an America professional wrestler, Jiang and Vásquez (2019) explored how the captured expression is recontextualised and localised after being integrated with elements from China's

digital cultures, popular cultures, social lives, and political events. Moreover, Fang (2020) found that diverse facial expressions of Jiang Zemin, who served as the third paramount leader of China from 1989 to 2002, were featured in 膜蛤 (*moha*, toad worship) memes to create humour, voice political criticism, and generate a collective identity.

In addition to cartoon characters, celebrities and politicians, animals can also be widely seen in Chinese internet memes (Ying and Blommaert, 2020). A typical example catching academic attention is the doge meme, which contains a (modified) photograph of a *shiba inu* dog and sometimes a superimposed written text. Previous research (S. Yang, 2017; Zhang and Kang, 2022; Cui, 2023) found that a series of doge memes were deployed by Chinese internet users in various communicative situations and for different purposes. For instance, the ludic facial expression of Kaboshi, one of the *shiba inu* dogs featured in doge memes, is ubiquitously circulated to smooth online conversations or serves as a default emoticon on Sina Weibo (S. Yang, 2017). The humble facial expression and posture of Suki, another *shiba inu* dog featured in doge memes, was resemiotised by a few Chinese university students to ease the tension between their dual identities of serving as CYL cadres in political propaganda campaigns while acting as ordinary students among peer groups (Cui, 2023). Furthermore, when exploring China's socialist memes and interviewing relevant meme users, Zhang and Kang (2022) noticed that doge memes were integrated with popular catchphrases of political slogans. According to the interviewed meme users, the included political discourses are usually perceived as vague and general, as the juxtaposition of playful doge memes and serious propaganda slogans results in a prominent incongruity. This inconsistency helps depoliticise the catchphrases of socialism and contributes more to generating humorous effects during young people's online conversations (Zhang, 2023).

Similarly, doge memes are virally disseminated in Anglophone contexts (Esteves and Meikle, 2015; Applegate and Cohen, 2017; Nani, 2022). However, Yang (2017) stressed that their popularity in the Chinese context is not necessarily a result of Chinese internet users' resonance with meme cultures developed outside China. This feature can also be exemplified by Pepe the Frog, an anthropomorphic character originating from an American indie comic series. Initially, Pepe's stylised expression and iconic line "feels good man" are widely appropriated by internet users to generate a sense of humour or playfulness (Glitsos and Hall, 2019; Pelletier-Gagnon and Diniz, 2021). In Anglophone contexts, it is now more well-known for being used in far-right activities to propagate white supremacist ideologies (Miller-Idriss, 2019; Lee, 2020; Lobinger *et al.*, 2020). However, in the Chinese context, Pepe is commonly

referred to as 伤心蛙 (*shangxinwa*, sad frog). Instead of drawing on its roles in American comics and political campaigns, mainland internet users actively modify Pepe's expression of sadness to project their own spiritual status and augment this negative emotion with written texts (Seta, 2019). Additionally, Hong Kongers recontextualised Pepe's expressions into the 2019 Anti-Extradition Bill Movement to present more complex feelings (Chan, 2021; Jacobs *et al.*, 2023). On the one hand, Pepe's sad face implied a collective frustration towards the local and central governments. On the other hand, Pepe wearing a yellow hat helped embody Hong Kong protesters and produce a sense of solidarity.

Furthermore, several researchers (Chen, 2014; Mina, 2014; Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2018) pointed out that the localisation of globally popular memes within the Chinese context is connected not only to Chinese meme users' vernacular creativity but also to the regime's censorship of internet content. For example, rage comics was initially popularised in 4chan, an English-language imageboard website. It was later developed into a meme format edited and circulated by internet users to narrate life experiences and vent various emotions humorously (Know Your Meme, 2011). In the Chinese context, rage comics are known as 暴走漫画 (*baozou manhua*). Although the basic memetic format remains, Chen (2014) and Ma (2016) highlighted that Chinese internet users tend to connect *baozou manhua* more closely with domestic and Japanese subcultures. In *baozou manhua*, elements of Japanese 暴走族 (*bosozoku*) motorcycle subculture (Sato, 1982; Kersten, 1993) and ツッコミ (*tsukkomimi*) tactics (Tsumumi, 2000; Tosa and Nakatsu, 2002) are adopted to emphasise the extreme emotional state of going crazy and present the meme as a witty mockery. Additionally, China's *diaozi* and 恶搞 (*e'gao*) discourses (Meng, 2009; Best, 2014; Szablewicz, 2014; Yu and Xu, 2016) underpin *baozou manhua*, establishing an aesthetics of self-deprecation and constructing parodies of official discourse in a less offensive manner. Like rage comics in the English context, *baozou manhua* also provides a medium for ranting about life issues and seeking solace. However, as Chen (2014) uncovered, it notably features efforts of voicing frustration toward Chinese society while avoiding to challenge China's face culture (Hu, 1944).

Considering the intertwining of Chinese internet memes with China's social-cultural contexts and subcultures from surrounding Asian countries, Ying and Blommaert (2020) summarised the five most commonly seen characteristics of Chinese internet memes: (1) importing the 萌え (*moe*) concept from Japanese anime, manga and game cultures to generate

a sense of cuteness, (2) absorbing the style of 贱 (*jian*) from a series of Hong Kong movies to construct mischievous ironies or self-mockeries, (3) appropriating a decadent attitude of a Chinese television character to express 丧 (*sang*), a collective feeling of exhaustion, frustration, and anxiety, (4) sometimes deploying blatant or subtle sexual allusions in a playful manner, and (5) including violent or rude content to augment users' intention of insulting others.

#### **2.1.4 Research gaps**

Despite extensive research exploring memetic production and transmission in Anglophone contexts, there remains a noticeable gap in understanding how these processes work in China's socio-cultural context and during collective political activities. While studies have indicated similarities between English internet memes and Chinese *biaoqingbao*, they concentrated on examples that play a subordinate role in text-dominant online conversations or express emotive meanings. Limited efforts have been made to examine how Chinese internet memes function as independent artefacts mimetically circulated across platforms to articulate subjective ideas and attack dissidents. Furthermore, existing research often stresses that Chinese internet memes commonly feature recontextualised elements, but it seldom investigates whether the selection of these elements is related to specific representational requirements, personal preferences, or general tendencies popularised in China's socio-cultural context. This lack of specificity limits our understanding of meme producers' or users' purposeful selections, which may differ in distinct communicative situations or be influenced by other factors, such as life experiences and cultural backgrounds. Addressing this gap is crucial as it provides a Chinese perspective on interpreting internet memes' role in online communication and their impacts. This study aims to fill this gap by examining internet memes that were purposefully produced and transmitted by a group of Chinese young people to express pro-government opinions.

#### **2.2 Studies on Chinese nationalism**

Along with struggles between the governance of traditional empire and the construction of modern nation-state system, nationalism originated in Europe in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Kohn, 1944; Gellner, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1990). This concept subsequently spread to non-European countries through anti-colonial movements in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Kedourie, 1970; Cairns and Richards, 1988; Sharkey, 2003). It is acknowledged that nationalism fosters identification with a collective national identity. This collective identity

generates a sense of community (Anderson, 1983), rooted in long-standing cultural and historical ties, such as shared ancestry, languages, symbols, myths, values, and memories (Fishman, 1971; Smith, 1988; A. D. Smith, 1996; Abizadeh, 2004; Joseph, 2004; Lim, 2010; Elgenius, 2011).

As Levison (1967) stressed, nationalism did not exist in ancient China. Instead, China's self-image at that time was fundamentally based on the collective identification with cultural heritages. Zhao (2000) also argued that exploring the modern concept of nationalism in China's socio-political context should always consider the internal and external situations of different time periods. Therefore, this section organises previous studies into five parts, according to the historical periods in which specific forms of Chinese nationalism prevailed.

Section 2.2.1 reviews research discussing the earliest conceptualisation of Chinese nationalism in the aftermath of the Opium Wars. Section 2.2.2 presents past explorations of socialist-oriented state nationalism which was advocated in the Mao-era. Section 2.2.3 concentrates on liberal nationalism that flourished alongside China's economic reforms. Section 2.2.4 revolves around investigations into patriotic nationalism, which was mobilised after the Tiananmen Square incident. The last section 2.2.5 focuses on studies examining the development of nationalism after the widespread use of the internet in China. This organisation does not imply that each historical stage features only one form of nationalism. Instead, the chronological order is used to highlight that Chinese nationalism is multifaceted and reactive to different situations.

### **2.2.1 The earliest conceptualisations of Chinese nationalism**

In China, the concept of nationalism emerged after the Qing Empire's military confrontations with Japan and certain Western countries (Zhao, 2000; Karl, 2002; Modongal, 2016; Zheng, 2019). Several scholars (Levenson, 1967; Harrison, 1969; Townsend, 1992) agreed that before the foreign invasions in the 1800s, Chinese people's loyalty to the ruling dynasty and their collective identity should be examined from the perspective of culturalism. Based on common historical and cultural heritages, ancient China developed as a culturally-defined community rather than a politically-defined nation-state. Harrison (1969) noted that this cultural community was rooted in the shared idea of valuing Chinese culture as a superior civilization and the consistent adherence to Confucian norms. Since legitimate rule rested on the maintenance of cultural superiority and traditional principles, the foreign imperialist invasion in the 1800s challenged both the Qing Empire and Chinese people's worldview. This



crisis drove Chinese elites and intellectuals to reject culturalism and import the European concept of nationalism for defence and regeneration (Townsend, 1992). Whitney (1970) regarded this attempt as a crucial force shifting China from a cultural entity to a political entity.

During the series of foreign invasions, the Qing dynasty's defeat by the British navy in the 1839-1842 Opium War was considered by the Chinese people as a national humiliation (Zhao, 2000; Cohen, 2002; Callahan, 2004a; Scott, 2008; Kaufman, 2010). This bitter experience aroused collective sentiments of insecurity and anxiety (Cohen, 2002; Kaufman, 2010; Y. Wang, 2020), which further developed into anger and rebellion as more territories were ceded to foreign powers through wars and unequal treaties (Luo, 1993; Zhao, 2000; Scott, 2008; Kaufman, 2010; Yang and Lim, 2010; Modongal, 2016). According to Zhao (2000), the responses of Chinese elites and intellectuals to this chaotic situation were generally featured by a strong tendency of anti-traditionalism and national-interest driven pragmatics. Domestic feudalism and foreign imperialism were seen as collective enemies. In addition to the hostility towards foreign invaders, multiple studies (Wang, 1961; Lin, 1979; Teng and Fairbank, 1979; Pusey, 1983; Meissner, 2006) have uncovered how foreign texts, theories, and experiences were adapted to address China's internal condition and determine its position in the international system.

Among these efforts, Zheng (2012) highlighted Liang Qichao and Sun Yat-sen as two representative figures who attempted to conceptualise Chinese nationalism and search for a suitable basis of nation-building. Representing the constitutionalists, Liang Qichao specifically drew on social Darwinism and advocated the idea of great nationalism to encompass all Chinese ethnicities in pursuing national unity, awakening, reform, and survival (Tang, 1996; Suresh, 2002). Representing the revolutionaries, Sun Yat-sen learned from Italian cultural nationalism and put forward 三民主义 (*sanmin zhuyi*, Three Principles of the People), which incorporated 民族 (*minzu*, nationalism), 民主 (*minzhu*, democracy), and 民生 (*minsheng*, livelihood) (Gregor and Chang, 1979). Previous studies (Linebarger, 1937; Leibold, 2004; Son, 2020) pointed out that Sun Yat-sen's conception of Chinese nationalism underscored the importance of consanguineous race and cultural revival. It specifically aimed at constructing national identity and uniting the Chinese people to oppose foreign imperialism and the Manchu-led Qing dynasty.

### **2.2.2 Socialist-oriented state nationalism**

As Fitzgerald (1995) noted, in addition to attempts made by constitutionalists and revolutionaries, China's Marxist-Leninists introduced the concept of class to nationalist discourse as an alternative. During the second Sino-Japanese War and the Chinese Civil War, the Chinese communists identified foreign imperialism, bureaucratic capitalism and domestic feudalism as the primary enemies. This constructed nationalist ideology was deployed in mass mobilisation not only to achieve national liberation but also to promote the project of building a socialist China (Johnson, 1962; Zhang, 2014). After the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, this ideology was further developed during the Mao era to address the challenging internal and external conditions. Scholars (Townsend, 1992; Suresh, 2002; He, 2003; Zhao, 2004; Modongal, 2016) referred to Chinese nationalism at this historical stage as socialist-oriented state nationalism. To foster a sense of nationhood internally, state nationalism stressed the unity of diverse ethnic groups. Externally, it asserted the indivisibility and inviolability of territorial integrity. Focusing on several international conflicts during the Mao-era, Chen (1994, 2001) revealed that propaganda campaigns incited revolutionary nationalism among the Chinese people to support China's confrontational stance towards the West and its regional neighbours, such as the Soviet Union and Vietnam.

Moreover, Zhao (2000) argued that Chinese nationalism in the Mao-era was characterised by nativism and anti-traditionalism. On the one hand, nativism drew on the collective experience of a century of national humiliation to identify imperialism as the enemy. Its strong tendency toward anti-Western xenophobia and emphasis on national independence underpinned the policy of "self-reliance". Both Whiting (1985) and Yahuda (1997) indicated that Mao's nativist isolation not only reflected Chinese nationalists' interpretation of an independent nation-state. It also presented their assertive response to the historic dilemma between internal autocratic development and external dependency. On the other hand, anti-traditionalism viewed traditional cultures as China's weakness. By instilling a strong sense of revolutionary duty among the Chinese people, this ideology provided a basis for the proletarian Cultural Revolution to attack certain Chinese traditions and Confucianism as feudal legacies (Zhao, 2000). According to MacFarquhar and Schoenhals (2006), slogans, party media, music, movies, and textbooks played crucial roles in promoting revolutionary myths and mobilising the mass population. Through detailed discourse analysis, Liu (2010) found that personalisation, magnification, and moralisation were the major techniques involved in the production of revolutionary emotion.

### 2.2.3 Liberal nationalism

For the development of Chinese nationalism in the post-Mao era, some studies (Goldman and MacFarquhar, 1999b; Xu, 2001; Li, 2010; Yang and Lim, 2010; Modongal, 2016) have concentrated on its liberal aspect. Considering China's move to a market economy and its reform policies in the late 1970s and early 1980s, scholars (Xu, 2001; Zhao, 2004; Yang and Lim, 2010; Modongal, 2016) used the term "liberal nationalism" to highlight China's domestic sentiments of pro-West openness. This wave of nationalism was characterised by redefining China's historical project as modernisation (Suresh, 2002) and seeking "China's rise through learning from the West" (Yang and Lim, 2010, p. 462). Reformist leadership ceased to advocate Maoist ideas of class struggle and the Stalinist model, which stresses state control, rapid industrialisation, and forced collectivization (Suresh, 2002; Fairbank and Goldman, 2006; Yang and Lim, 2010). According to Yang and Lim (2010), Chinese liberal intellectuals in this historical period were fascinated with Western ideas and eager to promote democratisation. From Zhao's (2000) point of view, liberal intellectuals' attitude can also be labelled as anti-traditionalism, as they blamed traditional cultures and Chinese national character for the country's economic backwardness, absolutism, narrow-mindedness, and love of orthodoxy. Despite different research perspectives, it has been agreed that both the pro-Western and anti-traditional views were based on resentment against the communist political system (Zhao, 2000; Fairbank and Goldman, 2006; Yang and Lim, 2010).

Although Oksenberg (1986) categorised China's reform-minded leaders in the mid-1980s as confident nationalists, he further stated that the 1986 campaign against bourgeois liberalism and complete Westernisation demonstrated increasing challenges and doubts from their internal opponents, assertive nationalists. In addition to appealing for political liberation through forums in universities (Yang and Lim, 2010) and democracy walls on the streets (Paltemaa, 2007; Benton, 2010), a different kind of national imagination was put forward by the Chinese 新左派 (*xinzuopai*, New Left) who held a more moderate and conservative view of reform (Zheng, 1993; Goldman and MacFarquhar, 1999b; Goldman, 2009; Li, 2010). As Li (2010) defined, New Leftists range from social democrats to nationalists and Maoists. Against the context of economic reform and market liberation, they adopted perspectives of radicalism and held a strongly nationalist stance when criticising global capitalism and social polarisation intensified during China's modernisation process. In a book co-edited by Goldman and MacFarquhar (1999b), researchers offered detailed examinations of the paradoxical situation in which New Leftists clashed with liberals over proposing different goals and priorities for

nation-building. Among these examinations, Goldman and MacFarquhar (1999a) pointed out that nationalism was increasingly stressed after Western ideas, values, and cultural products became popular in China. Political leadership labelled this popularisation as spiritual pollution and launched a campaign to construct national ideologies.

Furthermore, Zhao (2000) addressed the pragmatic aspect of China's liberal nationalism. From his point of view, modernisation served more as a strategy to pursue the pragmatic goal of ensuring economic growth and building 中国特色社会主义 (*zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi*, socialism with Chinese characteristics). Comparing the liberal reform with China's Self-strengthening Movement of 1861-1895, Zhao (2000) argued that modern practices of learning from the West were intrinsically restricted by the prerequisites of fitting with Chinese characteristics and guaranteeing the party-state's regime legitimacy. Zheng (2004) also indicated that unlike previous historical stages, China's nationalist sentiments in the post-Mao era were primarily sourced from internal issues rather than external threats. Additionally, Chen (2005) echoed Zhao's (2000) idea of pragmatic nationalism when analysing China's foreign policy during the period of economic reform. He proposed the term "positive nationalism", describing it as a top-down form of nationalism that was monopolised by China's ruling elite, placed economic development as its central task, agreed to participate in the system of international interdependence, and favoured a peaceful developing environment.

#### **2.2.4 Patriotic nationalism**

After the crackdown of the student-led Tiananmen Square protest in 1989, defensive nationalism prevailed in China as a response to sanctions imposed by Western countries and the less favourable international environment (Zhao, 2000; Yang and Lim, 2010). Several scholars (Zheng, 1993; Goldman and MacFarquhar, 1999b; Suresh, 2002; Cabestan, 2005; Yang and Lim, 2010) discussed that after the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Chinese ruling elites and official media strategically deployed the Peaceful Evolution theory to present Western criticism as attempts to subvert China's socialist system, fuel anti-West sentiments, and call for national solidarity. Among these discussions, Cabestan (2005) indicated the similarity between populist nationalists' anti-Western attitudes and the Chinese people's xenophobia at the end of the nineteenth century. Zhao (2000) highlighted the surge of nativism among Chinese elites, as they turned to traditional Chinese culture for alternative ideological doctrines and redefining the concept of Chineseness. Moreover, Fairbank and Goldman (2006, p. 443) mentioned that 毛热 (*maore*,

Mao fever) revived in several major cities to revitalise “Mao worship, foment class struggle, and re-indoctrinate the population in Marxism-Leninism”.

In addition to addressing external pressures through defensive nationalism, the patriotic education campaign was initiated in 1991 to instil a sense of national pride and enhance national cohesion for building socialism with Chinese characteristics (Zhao, 1998; Wang, 2008). According to Zhao (1998), while China’s conservatives suggested to prioritising assaults on the capitalist West as the campaign’s primary agenda, reform-minded leaders limited the campaign to educating the younger generation and Chinese intellectuals in terms of patriotic indoctrination, traditional culture, and national conditions. To incorporate patriotic education into teaching content from kindergarten to university, the curriculum was designed to highlight “China’s 国情 (*guoqin*, national conditions) in the historical, economic, political, military, diplomatic, social, and cultural fields and in areas of population and resources” (Zhao, 1998, p. 293). Marxist Theory, and Ideology and Politics were added to curricula as two major courses for political education.

Previous studies (Wang, 2008; Law and Ho, 2011; Sneider, 2013; Qian, Xu and Chen, 2017; Ho, 2021; Lee and Wang, 2023) have discussed the relationship between the patriotic education campaign and Chinese nationalism based on extensive explorations of in-class textbooks. Comparing how wartime memory is presented in Chinese and Japanese high school history textbooks, Sneider (2013) found that China’s patriotic version of history textbooks emphasizes the brutality of Japanese invaders through graphic accounts and explicitly promotes a nationalist framework in which China is depicted as a victim of humiliation. Wang (2008) also stated that the patriotic history education facilitates the institutionalisation of China’s century of humiliation as a historical discourse, reinforcing the construction of national identity and influencing the young generation’s attitude towards the external world. Nevertheless, Qian and his colleagues (2017) challenged Wang’s (2008) opinion with results from qualitative interviews. They stressed students’ role of critical consumers and contended that patriotic history education and textbooks produced limited effects on developing nationalism among Chinese high school students. Furthermore, it was uncovered that the humiliation discourse and historical memory of national struggles are also stressed in Chinese language textbooks (Lee and Wang, 2023) and music education (Law and Ho, 2011; Ho, 2021). These educational materials not only advocate social harmony and reiterate national myths (Law and Ho, 2011), but they also promote heroism, patriotic sacrifice, vigilance against external threats, territorial

sovereignty, affirmation of historical leaderships, and a Han-centric national identity (Lee and Wang, 2023).

Zhao (1998) noted that the patriotic education campaign has been extended to the Chinese population far beyond young students. Besides books, media articles, films, TV programmes, and popular music (Wang, 2012; Z. Gao, 2015; Teo, 2019), tourist spots such as cultural relics, historical sites, and museums are used to renew the public's collective memory of historical humiliation, commercialise state-centred patriotism, and sustain communist identity (Vickers, 2007; Wang, 2008; Li, Hu and Zhang, 2010; Denton, 2013; Liu and Ma, 2018). Zhao (1998), Callahan (2006), and Wang (2008) also indicated festivals' vital role in facilitating the government to consume nationalism, conduct consistent patriotic education across the country, and consolidate collective identification with national identity. Considering the pragmatic, systematic, and sophisticated tactics of the patriotic education campaign, Zhao (1998) referred to Chinese patriotism as state-led nationalism. In his opinion, the campaign effectively blurred the boundaries between patriotism, nationalism, socialism, and communism. As official propaganda always links patriotic love and support for China to the state and ruling party, Zhao (1998) further argued that patriotic nationalism serves to sustain the legitimacy of the Communist Party's leadership and mobilise confrontational sentiments against foreign forces. The influence of this mobilisation was presented in previous studies focusing on China's anti-American and anti-Western nationalist passions in matters such as the 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis (Zhao, 1999; Scobell, 2000), the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade (Gries, 2001; Zhao, 2002; Shen, 2004), the Tibet uprising of 2008 (Smith, 2010; Xu, 2012), and the 2008 Olympic torch relay (Nyíri, Zhang and Varrall, 2010; Xu, 2012).

### **2.2.5 Cyber nationalism**

Unlike Zhao (1998) and Chen (2005), who categorised Chinese nationalism as a state-led or top-down form of nationalism, some scholars (Gries, 2004; Deans, 2005; Liu, 2006; Beukel, 2011; Kang, 2013; Gries, Steiger and Wang, 2015; Chen, Su and Chen, 2019) used the term "popular nationalism" to underscore that China's nationalist sentiments are driven from the bottom top. This form of nationalism reflects ordinary people's concerns about national development and sometimes contends with government decisions on matters such as the Diaoyu Islands disputes, the "China Can Say No" sensation, and the Belgrade bombing protests. Among these scholars, Liu (2006) specifically pointed out that the cyber environment and

digital technologies empower Chinese internet users to challenge the state's monopoly through nationalist discursive production.

With the widespread use of internet, increasing efforts have been made to examine China's cyber or digital nationalism (Wu, 2007; Jiang, 2012; Schneider, 2018a; H. Liu, 2019a). From Wu (2007)'s opinion, internet plays a vital medium facilitating Chinese nationalists in creating and disseminating messages. He noted that China's cyber nationalism is largely event-driven, and it should be considered as a grassroots movement involving scattered participants, volatile objectives, and decentralised operation. Moreover, Schneider (2018a, 2022) suggested viewing the construction of China's cyber-nationalist sentiments as a creative interplay between multiple stakeholders, including Chinese authorities, commercial enterprises, and private internet users.

By reviewing the historical evolution of China's internet landscape in the 1990s and 2000s, Wu (2007) provided a thorough investigation of China's cyber nationalism, highlighting its shift from elite circles to the grassroot public. Through detailed studies of several cases, he demonstrated that (1) Chinese nationalists deployed web-based services, such as campus bulletin board systems (BBSs), chatrooms, commentary sections of online portals, online petitions, hyperlinks, to communicate, promote, organise, and execute nationalist causes, and (2) trash emails and hacking techniques were used in cyber-attacks and wars against the US, Indonesia, and Japan. This bottom-up perspective was similarly adopted by Webber and Yip (2018) in their analysis of China's nationalist hacktivism, which emerged alongside the transition from liberal nationalism to patriotic nationalism in the 1990s. Through an investigation of China's famous hacktivist groups and forums, they revealed that nationalist hacktivism catered participants' urge for political expression when offline protests were restricted to demonstrate their self-perception as defenders protecting the nation-state from threats and humiliations. As Gorman (2017) found, the state-nationalist argument of defending national solidarity underpinned several cyber-attacks where Chinese nationalists used techniques such as flesh search to expose the private information of individuals deemed traitorous, anti-China or anti-government.

In addition to the voluntary cyber-attacks, Schneider (2022) advocated for considering technological affordance and complexity when examining China's cyber nationalism. Focusing on three cases involving government and nongovernmental organisation websites, commercial networks, and social media platforms, he pointed out that aggressive sentiments and nationalist discourses in China's internet spheres resulted from guidance of design choices and algorithmic rationales, reproduction of symbolic resources provided by official communication channels,

and amplification of diverse commentaries. Although Schneider (2022) acknowledged social media platforms' potential to create nationalist resonances, he echoed other researchers' (Feng and Yuan, 2014; Zhang, Liu and Wen, 2018) opinions and argued that the decentralised nature of these platforms allows non-state actors to strategically steer collective sentiments and subtly repurpose nationalist discourses to challenge Chinese authorities. Furthermore, it was uncovered that web-based services, such as search engines and online encyclopaedias, played a noticeable role in reproducing the logic of imagined communities (Anderson, 1983) and stimulating nationalist sentiments regarding historical and contemporary incidents (Schneider, 2018b; Zhang, 2020). This was specifically achieved through biased search algorithms, filtered content, regulated hyperlink networks, definitive narratives, and limited user interaction.

As Zhao (2000) and Wu (2007) stated, Chinese nationalism is typically event-driven and reactive to perceived foreign pressures or hostility. This feature has been continuously demonstrated in previous studies examining China's cyber-nationalist sentiments and collective activities in event such as the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis (Wu, 2007), 1996 Atlanta Olympics (Wu, 2007), 1998 Indonesia riots (Hughes, 2000; Ong, 2003), NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in 1999 (Qiu, 2006; Wu, 2007), 2008 Beijing Olympics (Li, 2009; Nyíri, Zhang and Varrall, 2010), Diaoyu Islands incidents (Gries, Steiger and Wang, 2015; Cairns and Carlson, 2016), the 2016 Taiwan presidency election (see section 2.3.2 for a review of relevant studies), the Sino-US trade war (Huang and Wang, 2021; Bouvier, Geng and Zhao, 2024), 2019 Hong Kong protests (Lams and Zhou, 2023; Zhuang, Huang and Chen, 2023), the Covid-19 pandemic (Schneider, 2021; Zhang, 2022), and Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in 2022 (Zha and Jin, 2023).

While China's cyber nationalism evolved within the unique internet ecosystem, distinctive terms were coined to label nationalist youths of different generations who vented dissatisfaction through online commentaries or collective activities. Yang and her colleagues (2010; 2014) presented a detailed categorisation of 愤青 (*fenqin*, angry youth) born after 1980. These young people witnessed the critical stage of China's economic growth and globalisation. However, the anti-China tendency in the international community and increasing inequality in domestic society drove them to articulate nationalist ideas through internet services, such as blogs (Jiang, 2012).

Shifting attention to Chinese youths born after 1990, multiple studies (Fang and Repnikova, 2017; H. Liu, 2019b; Shan and Chen, 2021; Liao, Koo and Rojas, 2022; Chen, 2023; Zhuang, Huang and Chen, 2023) examined another two terms 小粉红 (*xiaofenhong*, little pink) and 饭



圈女孩 (*fanquan nvhai*, fangirl) in the context of two online expeditions (see section 2.3.2 for a review of relevant studies). Attracted by the 2016 Diba Expedition, Fang and Repnikova (2017) elaborated on how little pink evolved from a nickname shared by users of a Chinese online literature website to a label identifying irrational nationalist youths. They pointed out that the ideological connotation of this term mainly stemmed from China's liberal intellectuals who disdain nationalism, consider nationalist youths as agents of the party, and criticise the party-state's patriotic education. However, Shan and Chen (2021) saw little pink as self-mobilised allies of the state. They argued that little pink represents a new form of bottom-up and popular nationalism, whereby commercial and fandom culture provides resources and experiences for constructing group identity and organising online nationalist activities. Focusing on the 2019 Diba Expedition, several scholars (Liao, Koo and Rojas, 2022; Chen, 2023; Zhuang, Huang and Chen, 2023) explored the emergence of fangirls. Their explorations further demonstrated that China's nationalist youths intentionally personated the nation-state as a male idol, utilised fandom tactics to protect it amid political conflicts, and justified nationalist online activities as expressions of patriotic love.

Among examinations of Chinese youths' involvement in cyber nationalism, it was revealed that China's CYL plays a noticeable role in strategically mobilising nationalist sentiments on social media platforms and innovatively transmitting propaganda information by absorbing Asian subcultures (Pan, 2018; Shan and Chen, 2021). Shan and Chen (2021) discovered that the CYL deployed pop idols and patriotic music to call for support from young little pink after the South China Sea arbitration. Nevertheless, Pan (2018) classified Chinese youths who actively engage with the CYL's online propaganda as 自干五 (*ziganwu*, voluntary fifty-cent), as they commonly defend the authoritarian regime and voluntarily confront dissidents via online commentaries (Han, 2015b, 2015a). In addition to the CYL's focus on Chinese youths, movie franchises also contributed to manufacturing national identity and popularising 战狼 (*zhanlang*, wolf warrior), a term that evolved from a movie title to a label employed by Chinese internet users to describe aggressive nationalists and by the international society to categorise China's combative style of diplomacy under the Xi administration (Shi and Liu, 2019; Martin, 2021; Sullivan and Wang, 2023).

### 2.2.6 Research gaps

As indicated at the beginning of this section, Chinese nationalism is a multifaceted and situational matter. The reviewed studies demonstrate that nationalist sentiments and activities in each period are reactive to China's domestic conditions and its relations with foreign countries. Whether adopting a top-down or bottom-up approach, former research has shown that forms of nationalism emerging in China's national development are commonly intertwined with historical memories, ideologies promoted by past leadership, official propaganda, Chinese people's interpretation of China's foreign relations, and their inward-directed expectations. This study aims to contribute to the existing research on Chinese nationalism by exploring nationalist online expeditions conducted over four years by Chinese youths born after 1990. Moreover, this study intends to explore the expressed political opinions in light of China's recent national conditions and based on previous research concerning different forms of Chinese nationalism. In section 1.1, it was introduced that this study is partially motivated by the official's positive attitudes and comments on Chinese youths' online expeditions. In addition to mentioning fangirls who idolise the nation-state, China's state broadcaster explicitly commended the expedition participants by referring to them as *帝吧网友* (*diba wangyou*, Diba members) (2019b; 2019a). While studies have discussed fangirls' role in China's fandom nationalism, this study aims to highlight Diba's implications, reflecting the long-term development of China's cyber nationalism where fandom tactics and culture only play a small part.

### 2.3 Studies on Diba and the Diba Expedition

In China's socio-cultural context, *帝吧* (*diba*), formerly known as *李毅吧* (*liyi ba*, Li Yi Bar), originated as one of the discussion boards on the Chinese online forum, *百度贴吧* (*baidu tieba*). While initially established as an online fan club for Li Yi, a Chinese football player, Li Yi Bar also served as a platform for members to exchange opinions on public issues and personal life in creative ways. Prior to 2016, Chinese internet users were attracted by the innovative expressions that Diba members used in their online interactions. The viral transmission of these expressions led researchers (Szablewicz, 2014; S Yang *et al.*, 2017) to consider Diba as a cornerstone of China's internet subcultures. However, with the commencement of the first Diba Expedition in 2016, Diba gained recognition for its pro-

government stance and its pivotal role in coordinating online collective activities across diverse digital platforms (H. Liu, 2019a).

Based on the digital platforms involved, the scope of activities, and the topics of interest, this section classifies previous studies on Diba into two groups: one group in section 2.3.1 explored the linguistic and social dynamics of Diba members' online interactions within Li Yi Bar before 2016, while the other in section 2.3.2 concentrated on Diba participants' collective actions during the Diba Expedition to Facebook after 2016.

### 2.3.1 Diba before 2016

Research conducted before 2016 primarily examined the language usages of Diba members inside Li Yi Bar. They also revealed Diba's significant impacts on China's internet subcultures (Hao and Lu, 2013; Li, 2013; Lin, 2013; Szablewicz, 2014; Cao, 2017) and Chinese people's daily communication (Yang, Tang and Wang, 2015; Y. Gong, 2016; Sum, 2017). Among the linguistic expressions originating from Li Yi Bar, the coined word 屌丝 (*diaosi*) received extensive attention both inside and outside academia. According to several researchers (Lin, 2013; Szablewicz, 2014; Cao, 2017), this word emerged from online conflicts between Diba member and members from 雷霆三巨头 (*leiting sanjutou*), another discussion board on *tieba*. As a blended word, its first part, 屌 (*diao*), literally refers to male genitalia or is conventionalised as an offensive term in Chinese trash talks (Yang and Liu, 2013; Han, 2014). The second part, 丝 (*si*), originating from 粉丝 (*fensi*), which is widely used in China's popular culture as a transliteration of the English word "fans" (Zhu, 2013). During the online conflicts, the word *diaosi* was coined to depreciate Diba members who named their discussion board after Li Yi's nickname 大帝 (*dadi*, the Great Emperor) and referred to themselves as 毅丝 (*yisi*, fans of Li Yi) (Szablewicz, 2014).

Nevertheless, Diba members appropriated the negative connotation of *diaosi* to mock themselves as 穷矮挫 (*qiongaicuo*, poor, short, and ugly males) and losers according to China's mainstream values. Additional phrases were also coined to form a *diaosi*-centred discourse, such as 白富美 (*baifumei*, white, rich, and beautiful females) and 高富帅 (*gaofushuai*, tall, rich, and handsome males) (Yang, Tang and Wang, 2015; Y. Gong, 2016). After these phrases spread virally in online interactions (Y. Gong, 2016), entertainment

products (Cao, 2017), commercial campaigns (Szablewicz, 2014; Yang, Tang and Wang, 2015; Sum, 2017), and official discourses (Yang, Tang and Wang, 2015), *diaosi* became a generalised expression of self-mockery, regardless of the user's age, gender, or social status (Szablewicz, 2014; Sum, 2017). Relating the popularity of *diaosi* to China's socio-cultural context, multiple studies (Cheng and Xie, 2013; Kan, 2013; Li and Tang, 2013; Best, 2014; Hou, 2014; Szablewicz, 2014; Sum, 2017) highlighted that this word functioned as more than an innovative expression of self-mockery. Instead, it reflected a collective frustration towards China's unbalanced social stratification, elite culture and mainstream ideology of masculinity.

On the one hand, the connotation of *diaosi* is linked to the life experiences of China's post-80s generation and the historical background of economic reforms in the late 1990s (Best, 2014). The market-oriented reforms activated Chinese society in several aspects, such as expanding business collaborations, importing foreign resources, loosening the household registration system, encouraging rural-to-urban migration, and popularising cosmopolitan consumer cultures. However, it was found that the gap between idealistic expectations and reality not only stimulated angry youths' nationalist sentiments against the international community (Yang and Lim, 2010; Yang and Zheng, 2014). It also led to feelings of relative deprivation and disillusion among frustrated youths who struggled with unequal social classification (Kan, 2013; Best, 2014; Szablewicz, 2014; Sum, 2017). Considering the social context in which the *diaosi*-centred discourse was formulated, previous studies (Li, 2013; Lin, 2013; Huang, 2016) argued that *diaosi* should be seen as a symbolic expression. It helped Chinese youths born after 1980 build a virtual subcultural community, construct group identity, and relieve their self-anxiety in the consumer society (Li, 2013, 2016; Best, 2014; Yang, Tang and Wang, 2015).

On the other hand, the *diaosi*-centred discourse is closely related to the Chinese government's one-child policy, which resulted in high family expectation for individual success and a skewed gender ratio (Best, 2014). As several researchers (Yang, Tang and Wang, 2015; Huang, 2016; Cao, 2017) noted, the widespread use of *diaosi* enabled young people to challenge the hegemonic standard of being tall, rich, and handsome, which is commonly used in Chinese society to measure masculinity. It also allowed them to create a sense of intimacy and collectivity. Nevertheless, in Gong's (2016) critical discourse analysis of *diaosi*-related expressions in 50 online discussions and Cao's (2017) research on two popular *diaosi*-themed web-series, it was found that while the *diaosi*-centred discourse represents political contestations against social stratification and China's ideology of masculinity, it simultaneously reinforces relevant social values and sexist ideas.

In addition to examinations of *diaosi*, a small number of Chinese articles (Luo and Zhao, 2012; Ning, 2014; Zhou and Zhou, 2016; Hu, Zhang and Shen, 2017) discussed the online phenomenon of 爆吧 (*baoba*, bar bursting), in which Diba members played an active role. According to Luo and Zhao (2012), bar bursting refers to collectively and systematically attacking other Chinese internet users or communities by posting repetitive messages. This tactic is sometimes accompanied by flesh search technologies to expose the private information of the targets and cause mental harms. In Yang and her colleague's (2010; 2014) analysis of China's angry youths, they listed the 69 Holy War, an activity of bar bursting, as a typical example of how China's post-80s generation engaged in cyber nationalism. However, all the Chinese articles concerning bar bursting explored relevant cases from the perspectives of gender issues and increasing disdains against Korean idol culture. When analysing the 2016 Diba Expedition, several studies (S Yang *et al.*, 2017; G. Liu, 2019; Guo and Yang, 2019; Wu and Fitzgerald, 2023) briefly mentioned that bar bursting's hierarchical structure of organisation, strategies of mobilisation, and styles of online attack were appropriated in performing Diba's nationalist expeditions to Facebook.

### **2.3.2 The Diba Expedition after 2016**

As a turning point, the year 2016 marked Diba's first pro-government expedition to Facebook. Simultaneously, academic studies on Diba shifted from the *diaosi* discourses to the emergence of China's fandom nationalism (H. Liu, 2019b). This shift distinguished the Diba members of Li Yi Bar from the Diba participants of expeditions on Facebook. Fundamentally, these two versions of Diba are characterised by intergenerational differences in media context and socio-political environment (H. Liu, 2019b; Wu, Li and Wang, 2019). Due to its political impact in virtual environment, the Diba Expedition was considered as a new form of cyber nationalism (H. Liu, 2019a). As emphasised by Yang (2019) and Wang (2019), the discursive formation of nationalism and the massive mobilisation provided Diba participants with a heroic collective experience.

Diba's first expedition in 2016 was not confined to domestic digital platforms. The success of bypassing government regulations and the collective activities on Facebook drew researchers' (Shengnan Yang *et al.*, 2017; Sun, 2020) attention to the technical aspects of the Diba Expedition in 2016. Specifically, their primary focus was on investigating how digital technologies facilitated the expedition's massive mobilisation and effective organisation across various digital platforms (Shengnan Yang *et al.*, 2017; Guo and Yang, 2019; Wu, Li and Wang,

2019; Yang and Chen, 2019). Among these studies, Sun (2020) suggested regarding the Diba Expedition as a representative instance of China's techno-nationalism.

China's Great Firewall functions as a virtual border, symbolising a sovereign control in cyberspace (H. Liu, 2019b). This border helped researchers (Shengnan Yang *et al.*, 2017; Guo and Yang, 2019; Zhuang, Huang and Chen, 2023) distinguish between the Diba Expedition conducted on Facebook and mobilisation efforts on China's domestic digital platforms. Through in-depth interviews with several Diba participants, Guo and Yang (2019) revealed that the first expedition in 2016 heavily relied on a hierarchical network. Human resources were recruited from certain Chinese social media platforms. For instance, Sina Weibo and Douban. These resources were then divided into different QQ groups based on specific assignments. Photoshop was used to create memes from selected images and multilingual texts. Additionally, Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), Facebook accounts, and technical guidance were shared to overcome technological barriers. While the expedition took place on Facebook, video livestream platforms were deployed to broadcast the latest developments and enable remote participation (Shengnan Yang *et al.*, 2017). A similar organisational network was formed during an expedition in 2019 to allocate human and technical resources (Zhuang, Huang and Chen, 2023).

According to previous investigations (Shengnan Yang *et al.*, 2017; Guo and Yang, 2019; Wu, Li and Wang, 2019; Chen, 2023; Zhuang, Huang and Chen, 2023), the hierarchical network of mobilisation and organisation explicitly reflects Diba's profound relations with China's internet subcultures.

On the one hand, Diba's prior experience with bar bursting had already familiarised organisers with the required tactics. Through the conventionalised strategy of instantly flooding specific Facebook posts with self-generated content, Diba participants obtained an opportunity to express collective emotions (Yan, 2017; Gu, 2018; Guo and Yang, 2019; Z. Wang, 2019). This collective action turned the Diba Expedition into a carnival-like ceremony, fostering a strong sense of belongingness. Drawing on Collins's (2004, 2014) model of interaction ritual theory, Liu (2019) pointed out that Diba's group aggregation and its intergroup boundaries aroused participants' identity consciousness. Therefore, the sense of belongingness stemmed from participants' self-categorisation, contributing to the formation of Diba as an online group identity and mainland compatriots as a national identity (Bi and Yang, 2016; Tang, 2016; Wu, Li and Wang, 2019; Yang and Chen, 2019). Additionally, it reinforced the participants' self-perception of the post-90s generation as an age identity and the patriotic youths as an ideological social identity (Mao and Cai, 2017; H. Liu, 2019b; H. Li, 2019; Wu, 2019).

Considering the expedition's collective actions and identity politics, some researchers (Bu and Gao, 2018; Ding and Zheng, 2018; Huang and Dong, 2018; R. Li, 2019) have called for more regulations on China's network public sentiment and online youth civic participation.

On the other hand, it was acknowledged that the mechanism of mobilisation and content production during the Diba Expedition was influenced by China's fandom subculture (H. Liu, 2019b; Wu, Li and Wang, 2019; Liao, Koo and Rojas, 2022; Chen, 2023). As highlighted by Wu and her colleagues (2019), there were several similarities between how China's post-90s youths consume idol culture and participated in the first expedition. Drawing on previous transnational experiences of supporting idols in commercial competitions, fangirls acquired sophisticated media literacy in internet activism, along with extensive knowledge of "public relations, marketing, opinion manipulation, and even ways of spreading rumours" (Wu, Li and Wang, 2019, p. 43). These skills effectively enabled Diba participants to personify the nation-state as *阿中哥哥* (*azhong gege*, Brother Ah-zhong) during expeditions conducted in 2019. Lams and Zhou (2023) discovered that national personification could be unpacked into three layers, representing China as a charismatic male idol, a tolerant protector, and a victim of foreign forces. Moreover, Chen (2023) stated that this national personification was mainly realised through appropriating the concept of persona (Brasor and Tasubuku, 1997; Galbraith and Karlin, 2012) from Asia's pop idolatry. This appropriation helped female participants repurpose the affection of pop idols to express their political devotion. Consequently, the transformed fanship (Reysen and Branscombe, 2010) fuelled the Diba Expedition with more emotional investments (Liao, Koo and Rojas, 2022), creating a sense of intimacy that prompted participants to support and protect the idolised nation through specific fandom tactics (Zhuang, Huang and Chen, 2023). These tactics included maximising media exposure by consistently posting and reposting pro-government content, using homogenous content to manipulate visible information under relevant hashtags, and reporting anti-government posts.

In addition to examining the mechanisms of mobilisation and organisation, several studies have delved into Diba participants' pro-government and self-generated content. Most of these studies focused on either the memetic comments posted during the first expedition in 2016 (Guo and Yang, 2019; Z. Wang, 2019; Wu and Fitzgerald, 2023) or the attitudinal expressions involved in 2019 expeditions (Ng, 2021; Chen, 2023).

Liu (2019) and Gu (2018) emphasised the pivotal role of innovative memes in the first expedition, highlighting their ability to generate collective effervescence, construct representative symbols, and foster group solidarity. Through an examination of written

comments left on Tsai Ing-wen's Facebook page, Wang (2019) uncovered that Diba participants often repeated template comments to express individual and collective love for China as a motherland and for patriotic Taiwanese as compatriots. However, he also found that non-pattern comments tended to emphasise China's hegemony and superiority in politics, economy, and culture. Considering image comments alongside written ones, Guo and Yang (2019) observed that the first expedition in 2016 heavily relied on image macros for communication. Visual elements were used to ridicule, while textual elements contributed to constructing metaphors and justify pro-government opinions. They identified three primary purposes for these metaphors and justifications: "educate and admonish, satire and irony, attack and threaten" (Guo and Yang, 2019, p. 79). Similarly, Wu and Fitzgerald (2023) confirmed that Diba participants deployed text-only, image-only and captioned images to draw on political rhetoric and illustrate China's cultural heritages. Notably, they discovered that these formats were also appropriated by Taiwanese to articulate pro-Taiwan opinions and occasionally interact with the Diba participants. While Guo and Yang (2019) considered some of Diba's playful memes as communication-oriented, Wang (2019) argued that the pan-entertainment form of expression failed to foster genuine conversations.

Chen (2023) shed light on the explicit influence of fandom tactics during the 2019 expeditions, particularly focusing on how fangirls used fandom expressions and represented themselves. He observed that fangirls adapted to platform regulations and censorship by shortening certain political terms into phonetic pinyin abbreviations, such as replacing "政府 (*zhengfu*, government)" with "ZF (*Zheng Fu*)". Furthermore, he revealed a paradox wherein fangirls visually portrayed themselves as individuals protected by the nation-state and other male Diba participants. In contrast, Ng (2021) deployed a different approach, utilising a supervised classification model and sentiment analysis to examine all Facebook comments posted during a round of expedition in 2019. She found that Diba's repetitive comments were aimed at creating a positive image of the Hong Kong police through coordinated human action rather than bot-controlled campaign. Furthermore, Ng (2021) concluded that while Diba's China-related comments elicited mixed feelings from other Facebook users, their police-related comments fostered a positive attitude toward the Hong Kong police among like-minded users. Notably, this tendency occasionally appeared under pro-democracy posts.



### 2.3.3 Research gaps

As reviewed above, previous studies on the Diba Expedition concentrated on the 2016 and 2019 expeditions. While these studies have extensively discussed how these two activities were mobilised and organised to support the central government in Taiwan- and Hong Kong-related issues, limited efforts have been made to examine the specific political ideas which were articulated to demonstrate the pro-government stance and their communicative effects on other Facebook users who are not from Taiwan, Hong Kong or mainland China. Despite former explorations of the role played by Diba's self-generated internet memes, there are still underexplored aspects regarding the relationships between selected meme components and the socio-cultural contexts in which these selections were made. More importantly, existing research have revealed how the Diba Expedition were performed in response to the 2016 Taiwanese presidential election and Hong Kong's 2019 Anti-Extradition Bill Movement. However, few studies have investigated the Diba Expedition as a phenomenon that comprises continuous online activities lasting for years and involves numerous internet memes strategically produced according to different political conflicts. Addressing these research gaps is important for understanding how Diba participants deployed internet memes to voice political ideas in different communicative situations and how the conveyed meanings reflect young participants' interpretations of relevant political issues. This study aims to fill these gaps by examining internet memes produced and transmitted during four rounds of the Diba Expedition, which targeted individuals and institutions from Taiwan, Hong Kong and Sweden.

### 2.4 Summary

This chapter provided a review of previous studies related to memes, internet memes, Chinese nationalism, and the Diba Expedition. The thorough review not only helps to locate this research within the relevant fields but also identify research gaps that it intends to fill.

The literature on meme studies has focused predominantly on Anglophone contexts, leaving a gap in understanding meme communication within China's socio-cultural context, particularly in political activities. While some research has compared English internet memes with Chinese *biaoqingbao*, they often examined Chinese memes as supplementary or emotive elements in text-dominated conversations. Limited attention has been given to Chinese internet memes as independent artifacts that circulate to express subjective ideas or critique dissents. Additionally, motivations of including specific elements in Chinese memes - whether due to representational needs, personal preferences, or broader cultural trends - are relatively

underexplored. This research aims to address these gaps by exploring memes produced by Chinese youths who uphold a pro-government stance. By doing so, this research intends to provide insights into the role of internet memes in Chinese online political communication.

Chinese nationalism, as reviewed in this chapter, is multifaceted and reactive. Previous research linked Chinese nationalism to historical memories, ideological legacies, official propaganda, and public perceptions of China's global standing. This research builds on these findings and examines the nationalist Diba Expedition organised by Chinese youths born after 1990. While earlier studies centred on the 2016 and 2019 Diba expeditions, this research plans to explore a broader timeline, highlighting how nationalist sentiments have been expressed online over four years.

By investigating memes collected from four expeditions targeting Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Sweden, this research contributes to understanding how Chinese youths employ memes in political discourses. The next chapter will elaborate on the theoretical framework which guides certain methodological decisions and facilitates the qualitative analysis of Diba's memes.

## **Chapter 3 Analytical framework**

This chapter is divided into four sections, elaborating on the theoretical framework and introducing key concepts. Section 3.1 presents Shifman's (2014) three memetic dimensions as a foundational framework for unpacking Diba's memes and capturing interconnections between them. Supported by a polit analysis, this section also explains the need to enhance Shifman's framework by highlighting the multimodal, social, and contextual aspects of Diba's memes. Section 3.2 elicits core ideas from multimodal research to deal with Diba's memes as multimodal artefacts. Drawing on the approach of social semiotic multimodal analysis (Kress and Hodge, 1988; van Leeuwen, 2005; Kress, 2010), section 3.3 emphasises the social agency of Diba participants as sign makers and interprets their memes as motivated constructions. The final section 3.4 introduces the concept of recontextualisation, which facilitates the examination of cultural references embedded in Diba's memes and their roles in connecting these memes to the broader socio-cultural context.

### **3.1 Three analytical dimensions of internet memes**

Section 2.1.1 introduced and reviewed previous studies that debated how to define and examine memes from either a mentalist- or behaviour-driven perspective (Blackmore, 1999; Knobel and Lankshear, 2007; Milner, 2013; Shifman, 2014; Varis and Blommaert, 2015; Cannizzaro, 2016; Wiggins, 2019). Within this debate, Shifman (2014) suggested analysing memetic artefacts by examining dimensions of imitation. She applied this approach to internet memes, indicating that in the production and transmission of memes, people typically make decisions across three dimensions: content, form, and stance.

#### **3.1.1 Definitions of the three dimensions**

In the first dimension of content, producers primarily decide which ideas, themes, or underlying messages should be repeated and conveyed. The content can be a direct representation of cultural references, social commentaries, or other messages that meme producers intend to communicate. The second dimension, form, pertains to the physical incarnation of the conveyed content, which can be perceived through human senses. Features of this incarnation are determined not only by genre-specific formats but also by material attributes that can be edited or replicated. For instance, the conceptual idea of racism can be mimetically transmitted online through images or videos. Nevertheless, these two forms of expression involve different presentation templates, aesthetic elements, and layouts. The third

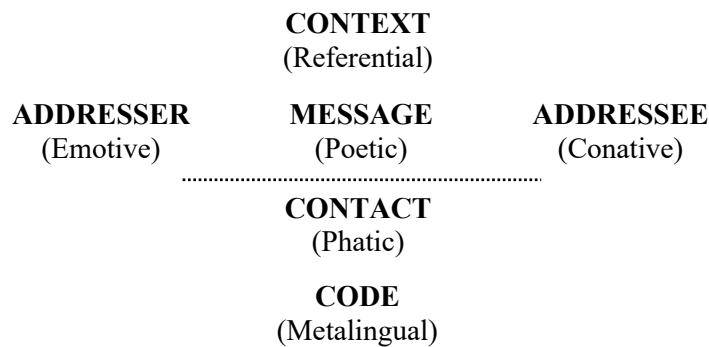
dimension, stance, is proposed as a broader category. It relates to “the information memes convey about their own communication” (Shifman, 2014, p. 40). This dimension focuses on how meme producers construct their relationship to the memes, the involved language or (linguistic) codes, and any potential receivers or (re)producers. To clarify how to apply the dimension of stance in analysis, Shifman (2014) further divided it into three subdimensions, as detailed below.

The first subdimension draws on Phillips’s (1972, 2009) concept of participation structure to examine who is entitled to participate and in what way meme producers expect them to engage. In sociolinguistics and interaction analysis, participant structure is primarily used to investigate the organisation of interaction in educational settings (Au, 1980; Herrenkohl and Guerra, 1998; Tabak and Baumgartner, 2004; Galguera, 2011). This term was initially put forward when Phillips (1972, 2009) explored differences in communicative performances between all-Indian student and non-Indian or white students in classroom. She defined that a participant structure is comprised of who is involved, how they interact, and the roles they play in communication events. In classroom activities, participant structures can assign roles such as active, passive, and peripheral participants to teachers and students. Assignments of these roles are inevitably influenced by the interactive and social settings. Therefore, to achieve optimal outcomes, it is necessary to adjust the participant structure based on participants’ inclinations or readiness.

The second subdimension of stance, based on Goffman’s (1986) concept of keying, explores the transformable tone and style of communication. Keying, as a central concept in frame analysis, refers to the process by which an activity is transformed or contextualised within different situational settings or frames. Each setting or frame is featured by a distinct set of rules and expectations, leading participants to adopt different roles, gestures, languages, and attitudes according to the situation. For example, a teaching activity can be keyed as a role-playing exercise, providing a new framework to define participatory roles, impose behaviour norms, and clarify the expected format of interaction. By highlighting the fluidity of social meanings and the vital role of context in interpreting actions, keying allows for examinations of how individuals redefine a similar activity in different situational contexts and adjust their behaviours accordingly.

To investigate the communicative functions that memes can perform, the third subdimension of stance is grounded in Jakobson’s (1960) discussion on the fundamental functions of human languages. As schematised in Figure 3.1, he proposed that a speech event

or act of communication generally involves six factors, each determining a distinct function of language.



*Figure 3.1 Constitutive factors in an act of communication and corresponding functions of language (Jakobson, 1960)*

The referential or denotative function is orientated towards the **CONTEXT** and focuses on describing objects, states, or situations. The emotive or expressive function relates to the **ADDRESSER**, indicating the speaker’s feelings, attitudes, and emotions. The conative function is linked to the **ADDRESSEE**, influencing or engaging the listener in receiving the conveyed messages. The phatic function helps establish, maintain, or discontinue conversations. It concentrates on the **CONTACT** embodied as physical channels and psychological connections between the **ADDRESSER** and the **ADDRESSEE**. The metalingual function centres on the **CODE** of language, involving the use of language to clarify linguistic terms and structures. Finally, the poetic function is directed towards the **MESSAGE**, emphasising the aesthetic aspects of language.

In addition to the three dimensions of imitation, it is emphasised that analysis on internet memes should align with a fundamental principle: memes should be viewed as groups of content items rather than as independent entities (Shifman, 2014). These groups are not static, as meme transmission involves meme users’ active interpretation, imitation, modification, and circulation. Elements iterated in the transmission process generate a sense of continuity and maintain a web of interconnected memes. Shared characteristics in terms of content, form, and stance not only highlight the collective identity of these interconnected memes but also make them easily recognisable across different contexts.

### **3.1.2 Pilot analysis**

To illustrate the applicability of the above three dimensions to Diba’s memes, this section presents a pilot analysis following Shifman’s (2014) processes of analysing two memes that

popularised in Anglophone contexts. The preliminary findings shown here will be used to support the following section 3.1.3, which points out the necessity of enhancing these analytical dimensions in order to address specific research questions.

The data samples for the pilot analysis were originally produced and transmitted during the Diba Expedition which opposed Hong Kong’s 2019 Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) Movement. As shown in Figure 3.2, each meme features the face of Joshua Wong, a pro-democracy activist and politician involved in the movement. While his face is repeatedly presented, creating a sense of connectivity among the four memes, it is placed in distinct settings.



(translation)

1. Harm Hong Kong and ignore law enforcement
2. Villain who harms Hong Kong
3. If you pay me in US dollars, I am willing to eat shit
4. If you follow me, you will only eat shit
5. Even in this situation, I am still willing to serve you

*Figure 3.2 Diba’s memes produced and transmitted in 2019*

In terms of content, specifically the expressed ideas and ideologies, these four memes condemn Joshua Wong and depict him as a villain who seeks personal gains from the US at the expense of Hong Kong. Overall, they convey a consistent message that Wong’s support for the Anti-ELAB Movement is driven by malicious and self-serving motives.

In terms of form, all four memes feature Wong’s face, which is cut out from other photos and collocated with elements of different shot distances. The meme in the top left presents Wong in a headshot, with his face juxtaposed against a bald creature that has a duckbill mouth. The top right meme represents Wong as a bald and bony man in a mid-shot. The two memes

in the bottom row show Wong in a full shot. The bottom left meme integrates Wong's face with the body of a dog, places it behind additional elements such as a signage and a plate of US dollars. The bottom right composites Wong's face with a cartoon character kneeling on the ground and licking the hip of another character, which features a smiling face of Donald Trump, the former US president.

In terms of stance, these four memes are primarily intended for viewers who can understand Chinese. By integrating Wong's face with various elements, meme producers transform him from a political activist into an obnoxious and comical creature. These memes also key the meaning expression as mocking or ironic. Therefore, in addition to performing the referential function by describing Wong and his political position, these four memes indicate the producers' negative attitudes and aim to influence viewers by depicting unpleasant elements.

### **3.1.3 Necessity of enhancing the three analytical dimensions**

The above polit analysis yields an overview of the four meme examples in terms of conveyed messages, compositions, expected addressees, presented attitudes, and communicative functions. It also highlights the interconnections between these memes, which are based on shared similarities across the three memetic dimensions. Nevertheless, insights that the three dimensions offer are not specific enough in the following three aspects.

First, while the dimensions of content and form focus respectively on the expressed ideas and the concrete elements involved in memes, they are proposed somewhat independent of each other. As a result, they provide limited insight into questions such as how ideas are specifically express through these concrete elements. In the debate between mentalist- and behaviour-driven memetics (see section 2.1.1 for a review of relevant studies). Gatherer (1998) argued that abstract or internal ideas cannot exist or spread widely without being manifested through concrete and external units. Concepts are transmitted along with behaviours that are observed, imitated, reinforced, and prevail within social and environmental contexts. This behaviourist perspective shares a fundamental similarity with Saussure's (1983) definition of the bilateral sign, which asserts that meaning is rooted in the interconnection between a concept or mental representation (the signified) and its physical form (the signifier). Adopting this perspective, it becomes possible to further explore memes like those illustrated in the bottom row of Figure 3.2, where the concept of servile flattery toward the US (the signified) is expressed through different concrete elements (the signifier), such as the plate of US dollars and the behaviour of kneeling.

Second, the elements described in the dimension of form can shape the expressed meaning in various ways, yet limited guidance is provided for capturing these nuances. This limitation is particularly evident in the two meme examples presented in the top row of Figure 3.2. While the written texts in these two memes literarily criticise the act of jeopardising Hong Kong, performer of this action is visually presented in a derogatory manner. Without the accompanying texts, ideas conveyed by these two memes will focus primarily on the visual depiction, which mocks Wong's appearance by portraying him as a grotesque or emaciated figure. Although the written texts and images seem to convey distinct meanings, they are strategically collocated to complement one other, jointly making negative comments on both Wong's physical appearance and his role as a political activist. Furthermore, the use of red in the written texts warrants deeper examination as symbolic colour, rather than being viewed as a visually perceived feature.

Third, while the three dimensions are effective in identifying connections between memes, additional approaches are needed to account for the links established by incorporating elements from other context into the produced memes. Taking the top left meme of Figure 3.2 as an example, the duckbill figure presents  $\kappa$  (kappa) in the dimension of form, signalling a reference to Japanese culture in the dimension of content. It is crucial to categorise this cross-cultural relationship, as doing so can lead to a more in-depth examination of the meme producers' position in relation to the referenced cultural elements and their personal backgrounds where these resources are made available.

To enhance the three analytical dimensions in the above aspects, the following three sections introduce additional concepts and approaches drawn from multimodal research, social semiotics, and studies focusing on the phenomenon of recontextualisation.

### **3.2 Multimodality and Diba's memes**

As a widely used communicative tool in digital environments, there had already been multiple studies (Dancygier and Vandelanotte, 2017; Yus, 2019; Hakoköngäs, Halmesvaara and Sakki, 2020) elaborating on the multimodal aspects of internet memes. Thus, instead of reiterating these discussions, this section begins with a brief introduction to multimodality. It then presents two primary approaches for examining multimodal communication and artefacts. The final part of this section links the concept of multimodality to Diba's memes and indicates the analytical approach that this research adopts.



### 3.2.1 Multimodality and approaches to multimodal analysis

Kress (2010, p. 79) defined mode as “a socially shaped and culturally given semiotic resource for making meaning”. Modes involved in representation and communication include, but are not limited to, image, writing, speech, music, gesture, etc. Accordingly, the term “multimodality” is used to highlight that human communication intertwines different means of meaning making. This term is widely applied in interdisciplinary research concerning diverse objects, such as spatial landscapes (Jaworski and Thurlow, 2010), corporate branding (Koller, 2009), films (Bateman and Schmidt, 2011), video games (Lemke, 2014), and translated comics (Kaindl, 2004; Borodo, 2014). Although these works focus on different instances of multimodal communication, as Adami (2017, p. 451) summarised, there are four assumptions generally underpinning all multimodal analyses:

“(1) all communication is multimodal; (2) analyses focused solely or primarily on language cannot adequately account for meaning; (3) each mode has specific affordances arising from its materiality and from its social histories, which shape its resources to fulfil given communicative needs; and (4) modes concur together, each with a specialised role, to meaning-making”

Despite the shared interest in principles underpinning multimodal communication, approaches to examining the intertwined modes vary according to different epistemological perspectives and research traditions (Jewitt, Bezemer and O’Halloran, 2016; Adami, 2017). As introduced below, two of these approaches are developed based on ideas derived from Halliday’s theories.

The first one is systemic functional approach to multimodal discourse analysis (SF-MDA), which draws on Halliday’s (1978) account for language as a semiotic resource and a (multi)functional<sup>1</sup> tool for creating meanings (Halliday and Hasan, 1989). This approach treats modes as semiotic systems, from which semiotic choices are made to perform social functions. Kress and van Leeuwen’s (1996) analysis of images and O’Toole’s (2011) examination of displayed art are pioneers in the application of SF-MDA as a grammatical (bottom-up)

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<sup>1</sup> Halliday (1978) conceptualised language as a semiotic system of interrelated choices for making meaning. To understand how these choices operate to achieve different communicative purposes, he developed a framework comprising three meta-functions that languages serve simultaneously: the first function is concerned with the expression of experience and reality as well as logical relations between the construed phenomena (ideational); the second one relates to speakers’ social interactions with others (interpersonal); the third manages the flow of discourse (textual) (Halliday and Hasan, 1989).

approach (O'Halloran, 2011; Jewitt, 2017). Building on their works, researchers developed meta-functionally organised systems to investigate the integration of different modes in mathematical discourse (O'Halloran, 2007a, 2007b), hypermedia discourse (Djonov, 2007), advertisements (Hu and Luo, 2016; Ananda *et al.*, 2019), and gestures in classroom discourse (Lim, 2019, 2021). Due to its focus on regularities in the functional use of semiotic modes and recognisable configurations of semiotic choices, SF-MDA is particularly useful in examining “multimodal grammatics” (Jewitt, Bezemer and O'Halloran, 2016, p. 39) and functionality of multimodal complexity that arises from intersemiotic interactions (see, for example, O'Halloran and her colleagues' (2009; 2016) analysis of intersemiotic texture in print-media and functions fulfilled by image-text complexes on websites).

Like SF-MDA, the second approach, social semiotic multimodal analysis, also stems from Halliday's theories. However, it stresses the agency of sign-makers, interprets sign-making as a social process, and focuses more on the social dimensions of meaning. As a contextual (top-down) approach (O'Halloran, 2011; Jewitt, 2017), social semiotic analysis explores modes as organised sets of semiotic resources available in a given situation and shaped through social usage. Built upon Halliday's (1978) description of language and ideas from semiotics (Peirce, 1965; Barthes, 1973, 1977, 1983; Saussure, 1983), social semiotic theories and frameworks were developed to provide a social account of sign and examine semiotic principles operating across modes (Kress and Hodge, 1988; van Leeuwen, 2005; Kress, 2010). These works have offered a theoretical basis for analysing various multimodal artefacts, such as webpages (Adami, 2015; Michelson and Valencia, 2016), YouTube videos (Adami, 2009; Zappavigna, 2019), PowerPoint presentations (Zhao, Djonov and van Leeuwen, 2014), educational materials (Bezemer and Kress, 2008; Kress, 2011), and public memorials (Abousnnouga and Machin, 2011). Since social semiotic multimodal analysis focuses on everyday artefacts as sites of ideology (Jewitt, Bezemer and O'Halloran, 2016; Adami, 2017), this approach is particularly useful in exploring how individuals maintain or challenge social values and power roles through different sign-making choices (see, for example, Bezemer and Kress's (2010) analysis of changes in multimodal textbook design reveals shifts in social and pedagogic relations).

### **3.2.2 Diba's memes as multimodal artefacts**

As illustrated earlier in section 1.2 and section 3.1.2, Diba's memes primarily utilise the modes of image and writing. Featured by distinctive modal affordance, these two modes offer different formats and resources for communication. With the linear and non-linear formats of

presenting information, image and writing allow producers of Diba's memes to strategically organise multiple elements within a limited space. Resources provided by these two modes also enable them to prioritise certain elements through shot types, colours, size, typefaces, and other formal properties.

Focusing on the functionality and complementary integration of multimodal meme components, this research initially employed a bottom-up approach. This involved decomposing Diba's memes, systematically describing their material attributes, and exploring the rules that govern their composition (see section 4.2.3 for details). However, given the notable discursiveness and rich cultural references revealed in the initial analysis, the research focus shifted to the social aspects of Diba's memes. Consequently, a top-down approach was adopted to consider Diba's multimodal memes as products of momentary selection, facilitating a context-based examination of Diba participants' meaning-making practices. The following section provides a more detailed introduction of multimodal social semiotics and explain the core concepts used in this approach.

### **3.3 A social semiotic perspective on internet memes**

Building on the brief introduction presented in the above section 3.2.1, this section aims to elaborate on key concepts of a social semiotic perspective to multimodal analysis. These concepts offer the theoretical foundation necessary for developing a social account of Diba's memes and suggest an analytical method for effectively utilising the annotated corpus data.

#### **3.3.1 Sign maker and motivated sign**

In social semiotics, semiotic resources are defined as “the actions, materials and artefacts we use for communicative purposes” (van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 285). These resources could be produced physiologically or technologically, such as through vocal apparatus or computer software used in contemporary communication. Usually, people select a semiotic resource (a signifier) that is available and suitable at a given moment to express the intended meaning (the signified) (Kress, 2010). During this process, the conjunction of a semiotic resource and the expressed meaning constitutes a sign, which is a product of choice-making, while the individual making decisions acts as a sign maker. As briefly introduced in section 3.2, apart from Hallidayan (1978) linguistics, the social semiotic conception of sign is positioned in relation to certain core ideas (Peirce, 1965; Barthes, 1973; Saussure, 1983) advocated in traditional

semiotics. Despite this relation, the social semiotic definition of sign differs from its traditional semiotic counterparts primarily in the following two aspects.

Firstly, unlike the Saussurean sign, which features an arbitrary association between the signifier and the signified, social semiotics views a sign as “a motivated construct” (Kress, 1993, p. 173). As Kress (1993, 2010) argued, a sign reflects the sign maker’s interest in the represented object or event. This interest motivates the choice of a semiotic resource over another as an apt signifier, as it determines the crucial characteristics that the sign maker tends to focus on when constructing the signified. For instance, when children draw multiple circles to represent their ideas of car, wheels become the signified because they are considered as the most prominent or criterial part of a car. Given the resemblance in shape, these children intentionally select circles as a suitable signifier. During this process of sign-making, a specific feature of the represented object is referred to and affects the decision regarding which resource is suitable for expressing the intended meaning.

Secondly, social semiotics opposes the traditional semiotic assumption that meaning is fixed in the text and can be decoded by referring to an impersonal, neutral, and universal coding system (Kress and Hodge, 1988). In elaborating on the motivated process of sign-making, Kress (1993, 2010) emphasised that sign maker’s interest in the represented object or event is not static. Instead, it only temporarily reflects his or her physical, cognitive, social, cultural, and conceptual position at the moment of producing the sign. Returning to the wheel-circle example, as children’s social experience and awareness of culturally existent conventions develop, they may concentrate on other characteristics of car when constructing the signified and evaluate different semiotic resources as appropriate signifiers. In this sense, a motivated sign can reveal producers’ socio-cultural backgrounds and their positions in the communicative context at a particular moment.

Given that communication often occurs within well-established social structures, Kress (1993) pointed out that the social semiotic conception of sign allows an analytical shift from the meaning-making practices of social individuals to those of larger groups in which these individuals act as members and motivated by group interests.

Signs rely on their recipients to function as intended. To ensure effective communication, it is essential for sign makers to make their interests or the focused characteristics of the represented object as transparent as possible. Neglecting this necessity can increase semiotic opacity and foregrounds the presence of power dynamics that compel recipients to accept “esoterically constructed signs” (Kress, 1993, p. 179). In this sense, a motivated sign not only encodes the sign-maker’s ideology and momentary position in the world. It also implies his or

her relationship with others who may find the motivation behind sign-making either transparent enough or too opaque to interpret. Drawing on the notion of “ideological complex” (Kress and Hodge, 1988, p. 2), Kress (1993) highlighted that this situation and the presence of power are equally significant in signs that emerge from conflicting group interests. From his opinion, any semiotic system is constructed, maintained, and reinforced by social groups whose members constantly create and recreate signs. These relatively stable and persistent systems allow for the identification of potential audiences who may be aware of the interests upheld by relevant social groups. In other words, signs created by a social group can be as transparent as possible in order to make the group interests accessible and establish solidarity with a broader range of recipients. Conversely, signs can also be deliberately opaque to impose ideological values on recipients or to interact exclusively with individuals who are already aware of the group interests.

### **3.3.2 Mode and affordance**

As introduced earlier in section 3.2, social semiotic analysis sees modes as organised sets of semiotic resources (Jewitt, Bezemer and O’Halloran, 2016). Crucially, what modes are available in a given situation and how people use them are shaped by the requirements of different societies and their members. For example, gestures develop differently in distinct social groups and settings as communicative modes. Gestures used in hearing communities differ from those performed by dancers and follow different organising principles. Given that selecting appropriate modes or semiotic resources is always an essential part of the sign-making process, social semiotics particularly stresses affordances of modes and their impacts on sign makers’ choices. The term “affordance” was originally defined by Gibson (1977) to refer to the potential uses that an object possesses. Adapted by Kress (2010), modal affordances relate to materially, culturally, socially and historically developed means of meaning-making. The social semiotic conception of this term can be elaborated as follows.

On the one hand, the logic and material features of a mode offer distinctive potentials for communicative and representational needs (van Leeuwen, 2005; Kress, 2010). For example, the logic of time in the mode of speech enables people to put things in sequence, while the logic of space in the mode of static image allows the construction of meaning through layout. Since modal affordances can facilitate or constrain meaning construction to a certain degree, it has become increasingly common for sign makers to deploy multiple modes that complement each other. For instance, posters often involve both image and writing to present a commercial product. Depending on situations that feature different communicative purposes and

interlocutors, the process of transduction (Kress, 1997, 2010) is frequently involved to remake meanings across modes. A typical example is TV news, where orally articulated information is remade through gestures and conveyed specifically to hearing-impaired audience.

On the other hand, modal affordances can be shaped by social usages over time. Jewitt (2016) and her colleague noted that wide application and recognition within a particular community are prerequisites for developing fully and finely articulated model resources. For example, being systematically described and classified in typography, font is widely used as a mature resource of writing (Leeuwen, 2005; Bezemer and Kress, 2009; Adami, 2015). Font sizes and weights enable purposeful emphasis on specific written messages, while font types provide potentials for constructing social meanings that appeal to different readers. Additionally, the range of meaning potentials offered by fonts has broadened over time along with the development of relevant technologies. After the advent of computer, font design moved beyond metal typesetting and became accessible to any sign makers who construct meanings in distinct socio-cultural contexts.

### **3.3.3 Meaning potential of semiotic resources**

The last section briefly exemplified that modal affordances are closely linked to a mode's social history. Meaning potentials of relevant semiotic resources are inevitably shaped or diversified during this history, as they are selected as signifiers for specific interests and in different socio-cultural contexts. In other words, when a semiotic resource is used for representation, it undergoes a process of transformation. In their discussion on semiotic production, Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) explored this process in detail through the following two concepts: provenance and experiential meaning potential.

The first concept, provenance, is proposed to contemplate where the transformed signs come from and to explore relations between different contexts of sign-making. According to Kress and van Leeuwen's (2001), people ceaselessly take signs away from other contexts and import them into communicative moments in which they construct signs to express intended meanings. For instance, the Chinese word “*酱* (*jiang*)” is introduced into daily conversations and political propaganda as a suffix of names. It enables Chinese users to signify values of cuteness, softness, and effeminacy that originally prevailed in anime culture and Japanese society. Through this observable process of transformation, previous uses of a semiotic resource in other socio-cultural contexts are extended to make signs in different communicative

situations and connote values associated with the resource's provenance (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001).

The second concept, experiential meaning potential, is used to explain how meaning potentials of semiotic resources derive

“from what it is we do when we produce them, and from our ability to turn action into knowledge, to extend our practical experience metaphorically, and to grasp similar extensions made by others” (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 10)

This idea can be exemplified by the colour of red, which derives its political meanings from people's experiences of seeing it frequently connected with socialist, communist and anarchistic entities. Thus, in political context, a red flag or banner is predominantly considered as a signifier for left-wing ideologies.

### **3.3.4 Diba's memes as products of sign-making**

In the case of Diba's memes, which were produced and transmitted in distinct communicative situations, the social semiotic perspective offers a theoretical foundation for viewing these multimodal artefacts as semiotic sites reflecting the interests of Diba participants as sign makers. By closely observing how did they exploit the modal features of image and writing, it is possible to gain a micro-level understanding of Diba's memes, including insights into how Diba participants evaluated available resources and selected the suitable ones to construct political meanings in different expeditions. Meanwhile, by emphasising the broader social context, a macro-level interpretation of Diba's memes can be achieved, revealing the social positioning of meme producers or users and their efforts to shape the meaning potential for supporting or challenging specific political ideologies. Put it simply, this dual-level examination can unpack Diba's memes not only as multimodal instruments used by Chinese youths for political communication but also as signs created within distinctive communicative situations of the Diba Expedition and deeply embedded in the socio-cultural context of China.

As mentioned in section 3.3.3, the meaning potential of a semiotic resource is often derived from its historical uses in other social contexts. For political memes, it is common to transform elements from popular culture to reduce confrontation or ridicule politicians. To identify similar instances of transformation in Diba's memes, the concept of recontextualisation is introduced in the next section.

### **3.4 Recontextualisation in meme communication**

Recontextualisation generally refers to the process of extracting a message, text or concept from its original context and transferring it into a new context. This concept is widely applied across multiple fields to explore (1) the dynamic transformation of texts and signs as they move across various social practices and contexts, and (2) the modification of meanings that occurs throughout the process of recontextualisation or transformation.

Adopting different perspectives, researchers have further developed the concept of recontextualisation with their own focuses. Here are some representative works: Bernstein (1990, 1996) developed the concept of recontextualisation in examining educational content shaped by social structures and power relations; Fairclough (2000, 2006) and Wodak (2014, 2015) investigated recontextualisation's role in connecting texts and discourses across time and social practices; Bauman and Briggs (1990; 1992) investigated the fluid nature of meanings transformed during the process of recontextualisation, highlighting the powerful dynamics that influences this socio-cultural process. Moreover, drawing on notions of myth, connotation (Barthes, 1973, 1977), and metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), Kress and van Leeuwen (2001; 2005) specified the transformation of semiotic resources as an instance of recontextualisation.

#### **3.4.1 Capturing recontextualisation through intertextuality**

In analysis concerning recontextualisation, the term “intertextuality” is often used to refer to connections between texts, discourses or artefacts that are transferred from their original contexts to a new one. The notion of intertextuality is rooted in Bakhtin's (1981, p. 338) idea that “people talk most of all about what others talk about”. In his view, language uses can be seen as a social phenomenon, emerging in a world filled with prior utterances that are intertwined in dialogues with the words of others. Hence, the creativity of producing any utterance lies in the varied methods that serve to “transmit, recall, weigh and pass judgement on other people's words, opinions, assertions, information” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 338).

When introducing Bakhtin's ideas to French academia, Kristeva (1980) coined the term “intertextuality” to refer to the absorption and transformation between texts. She further categorised intertextuality in horizontal and vertical axes. The horizontal axe deals with a subject-addressee relationship, analysing sequential relations between texts (Fairclough, 1992; Johnstone, 2008). For instance, a response to a previous remark can be built on that remark,



functioning as a new turn in the conversation. The vertical axis concentrates on the text-context relation, where a text is related to others as part of the broader literary context. Discourse analysts (Silverstein, 2005; Johnstone, 2008) have used this type of intertextuality to refer specifically to links between a text and other text within a larger category, where discourse conventions (such as plots, registers or styles) are reused to create new texts.

### **3.4.2 Three levels of recontextualisation**

In addition to the works and categorisation introduced above, Linell (1998b) proposed a broader approach to define recontextualisation and distinguish the relationship between texts, discourses, or conversations. He posited that any text or discourse exists within a matrix or field of contexts which is comprised of diverse contextual recourses, such as previous discourses, physical environments, social structures, background knowledge, etc (Linell, 1998a). Based on this assumption, recontextualisation is seen as a dynamic process of transfer-and-transform occurring at all levels of discourse: intratextual, intertextual, and interdiscursive.

Intratextual recontextualisation often appears within the same text or conversation, linking an utterance to its responses in the dialogue. In contrast, intertextual recontextualisation involves elements that anchor in specific contexts but travel across different texts or discourses. Interdiscursive recontextualisation is more abstract, as it involves connections between distinct types of discourse. An example of this can be the recontextualisation of statistical results from financial reports into government documents to justify institutional decision-making.

Drawing on Fairclough's (1992) concept of intertextual chains, Linell (1998b, p. 149) stressed that chains of communicative situations emerge from the process of transfer-and-transform across boundaries. Within each chain, meanings, concepts, ideas, and issues are "recurrently reconstructed, reformulated, and recontextualised". Therefore, recontextualisation across different discourses and discourse types not only connect plural voices at the micro-level, but also facilitate the hybridisation (Fairclough, 1992), involving interactions and clashes between relevant discourse communities or conversational subcultures.

### **3.4.3 Diba's memes as devices of recontextualisation**

As reviewed in section 2.1.2, when discussing Shifman's (2011) definition of viral and memetic content, Varis and Blommaert (2015) adopted a social semiotic perspective to reconsider meme communication. They highlighted the semiotic aspect of memes that are imitated and circulated by people in distinct communicative situations. By decontextualising a

meme image and contextualising it into another setting, new interpretations can easily emerge, even if its content and formal properties remain unchanged. This is because the meme image can be repurposed and reused to communicate with people from entirely different backgrounds.

In the analysis of Diba's political memes, the concepts of intertextual and interdiscursive recontextualisation are particularly useful for unpacking layered semiotic meanings and examining cultural references, as they provide insights into the appropriations across texts or discourses. Observing explicit traces of intertextual references, such as direct or indirect quotations and appropriation, facilitates the examination concerning the provenance of borrowed elements and the adaption of these elements for political purposes. More importantly, exploring interdiscursive mixtures enables a deeper analysis of Diba participants' exploitation of intercontextuality (Linell, 1998a), that is, relations between contexts. By focusing on implicit traces, such as the echoing of ways of communication, interdiscursive analysis helps uncover nuanced connections that link Diba's memes to contexts beyond the Diba Expedition, as well as to the norms or semiotic meanings constructed within those contexts. As Fairclough (2003) highlighted, the exploration of interdiscursivity typically features the analysis of relevant social events and practices. Thus, investigating interdiscursive connections between Diba's memes and resources constructed in other contexts can bring the multimodal analysis to a deeper level, which informs the transfer-and transformation of semiotic meanings across social, cultural or political events.

### **3.5 Summary**

This chapter introduced the analytical framework and elaborated on key concepts from meme studies, multimodal research, social semiotics, and studies of recontextualisation. This framework is intended to offer a theoretical foundation, guiding both the methodological approach and the interpretation of findings.

Drawn from meme studies, Shifman's (2014) three memetic dimensions are employed to unpack Diba's memes, obtaining preliminary insights into the expressed political ideas, formal properties, participant structure, tone, and primary communicative functions. Based on the principle of analysing memes as interconnected artefacts, these three dimensions are also used to identify elements recognisable enough for in-depth investigation. To enhance the basic analytical dimensions and achieve a social account of Diba's memes, social semiotic multimodal analysis is incorporated into the framework. This approach facilitates the general description of Diba's memes, supporting a micro-level observation of modal features and

locating the memes within the broader context of representation and communication. By emphasising the social agency of Diba participants as sign makers, it focuses more on the motivations behind their choices of semiotic resources, guiding the interpretation of findings towards elements that reflect Diba's group interests. Additionally, the concept of recontextualisation plays a complementary role, exploring elements that link Diba's memes to China's socio-cultural context and other settings beyond the Diba Expedition. These connections help to further the analysis and streamline the layered semiotic meanings which are embedded in Diba's memes.

Upon the theoretical foundation, the next chapter concentrates on the research methodology, explaining the procedure of data collection, criteria of data selection, corpus construction, corpus investigation, and ethical concerns.

## Chapter 4 Data and Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodology employed for collecting, selecting, and annotating data. It begins by introducing the data collection process which was conducted through a non-participant observation of the Diba Expedition. This introduction also includes an explanation of observational findings and archived materials gathered during the process. Following this explanation, criteria of selecting representative data and corpus structure are detailed. The data annotation process is then elaborated in two parts. The first part reports on an initial attempt, conducting a bottom-up description of the data using the GeM framework and schema, while the second part presents a simplified annotation method designed to assist a top-down investigation of Diba's memes. The third part explains the corpus investigation, clarifying its primary focus and basic rationales. After this, the chapter concludes by addressing ethical concerns pertaining to this study.

### 4.1 Data collection through non-participant observation

Through section 2.3.2 reviewing studies on the Diba Expedition, it became apparent that most of the existing literature primarily focuses on the motivations behind and systemic performance during the first expedition in 2016. However, my research diverges from this trajectory, aiming to investigate how Diba participants deployed multimodal internet memes to articulate political opinions across different expeditions spanning from 2016 to 2019. While previous studies on the 2016 expedition offer valuable insights into the foundational practices of Diba's first expedition, they do not provide a comprehensive coverage of the diverse data sources encompassing Diba's meme circulation over multiple expeditions. Moreover, conducting internet research presents inherent challenges which are exacerbated by the dynamic landscape of digital platforms, the fragmented nature of digital communication content, and ethical considerations (Postill and Pink, 2012; Markham, 2013; Ampofo *et al.*, 2015; Airoidi, 2018). Analysing social media data often entails grappling with the complexities of volume, velocity, variety, and veracity (McAfee and Brynjolfsson, 2012; Kepner *et al.*, 2014). The fluidity of digital platforms and the real-time nature of social media data further compound the challenge of assessing pertinent contextual information (Bonilla and Rosa, 2015). This issue is particularly prominent when exploring the semiotic meanings of social media data within specific situational contexts.

Given the above two requirements, I opted for a non-participant observation approach to identify suitable sources for data collection and gather relevant contextual information. Section

4.1.1 elucidates the rationale supporting this decision. Section 4.1.2, section 4.1.3, and section 4.1.4 explain the application of this approach in three steps, detailing findings obtained at each stage. Finally, section 4.1.5 provides a summary of collected data and contextual information.

#### **4.1.1 Introduction of non-participant observation**

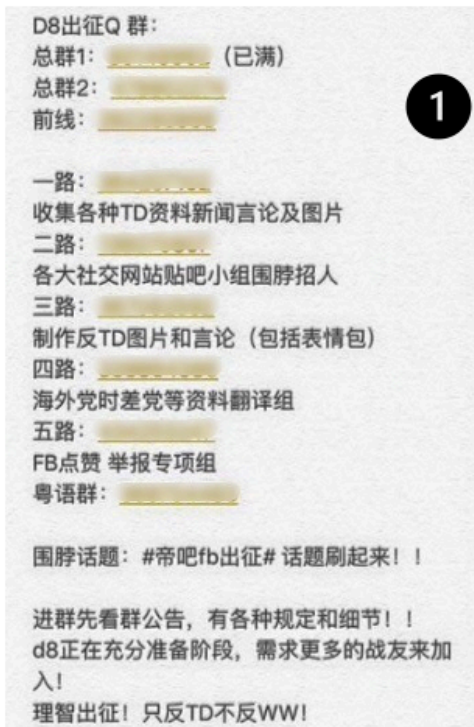
With the rapid evolution of online communication over the past decades, there have been discussions and debates regarding the necessity of adapting traditional fieldwork methods, designed for physically situated contexts, to the digitally mediated contexts (Markham, 2013; Airoidi, 2018). In physical settings, fieldwork serves as an ideal method for collecting raw data and information by immersing oneself in ongoing social activities or phenomena (Wolcott, 2005; Jie and Blommaert, 2010). Non-participant observation, a form of observational fieldwork, is widely recognised as a useful method for gathering qualitative data in natural settings (Spradley, 1980). It allows researchers or observers to enter a social system or community without direct interaction, facilitating an understanding of a specific phenomenon within its natural context (Barner-Barry, 1986; Liu and Maitlis, 2010). In their exploration of the first Diba Expedition, Yang and his colleagues (2017) noted that despite the collective activities being performed publicly on Facebook pages, participants appeared to be suspicious and declined interview invitations or questions. In light of this situation, non-participant observation emerges as a suitable method to ensure the naturalness of collected data and to obtain a relatively comprehensive view of contextual information without deliberate distortion or concealment.

Lurking around in the internet environment may be a common activity for many users. Nevertheless, for research purposes, systematic and purposeful steps are demanded to locate representative sources and collect suitable data for analysis. Spradley (1980) delineated the non-participant observation into three stages: descriptive observation, focused observation, and selected observation. In the descriptive stage, researchers gain an overview of the studied setting; in the focused stage, attention narrows to specific activities; and in the selected stage, elements of greatest importance are identified and examined. Given the need to identify suitable data sources involved in Diba's expeditions after 2016, these three stages are particularly relevant. They are also useful (1) to familiarise me as a researcher with the broader scene at a superficial level and (2) to uncover the basic characteristics of the overall context, facilitating more detailed examinations of the collected data.

#### **4.1.2 First stage: descriptive observation for data overview**

In the digital-mediated context of social media, observation is often accompanied by note taking and archiving. It can be tempting to archive everything on the internet, especially during the initial stage of observation. Nevertheless, this all-encompassing archiving may result in heterogeneous data that are difficult to organise. It may, therefore, not serve the purpose of identifying appropriate digital fields for the subsequent focused and selected observation. As Markham (2013) emphasised, the practice of archiving and taking notes during digital fieldwork should be guided by the specific research purpose. Researchers should constantly ask questions like what should be included, what to do with the note and archived information, and when to take note. My primary purpose of conducting the non-participant observation is to locate suitable data sources and obtain contextual information for each Diba Expedition. Therefore, it is essential to record significant information about collective activities before, during and after each expedition.

The stage of descriptive observation commenced in 2017. At the early phase of this stage, news reports and academic research on the first expeditions in 2016 served as avenues to access the digital fields relevant to Diba's collective activities. Upon reviewing these secondary materials, it became evident that organisers typically disseminated information about timing, targeted Facebook pages, and participation methods via Diba's official Weibo account or Facebook group. Starting from the expedition on 8 September 2017, I regularly monitored Diba's Weibo account and conversations inside its Facebook group. During this process, announcements regarding newly organised expeditions were successfully retrieved. Archived information regarding timing, targeted Facebook pages, and participation methods facilitated a real-time overview of the studied settings. Two announcements are exemplified below in Figure 4.1.



(translation)

**1. QQ groups for the Diba Expedition:**

Head group 1: 00000 (full)

Head group 2: 00000

Frontline: 00000

**First troop: 00000**

Collect news reports and images about Taiwan independence

**Second troop: 00000**

Recruit participants on social media platforms and Tieba

**Third troop: 00000**

Produce images and written texts opposing Taiwan independence (including Biaoqingbao)

**Fourth troop: 00000**

Overseas participants and translators

**Five troop: 00000**

Press "like" bottom for anti-independence Facebook comments, report pro-independence Facebook comments

**Group for Cantonese participants: 00000**

Weibo topic: #Diba Expedition to FB# let's publish Weibo posts under this topic!!

Please read the announcements after joining these QQ groups. You can find guidance and more detailed information there!!

Diba organisers are preparing for the expedition. We need more comrades to join in!

During the expedition, it's important to stay rational! Our opposition is directed towards supporters of Taiwan independence, not all Taiwanese people!

2. **Diba Central Theatre Command Amy (Facebook group)** shared a Page  
 # Diba Expedition  
 # We will gather tonight at 21:30  
 CUHK Student Union (main battlefield)  
<https://www.facebook.com/CUHK.SU/>  
 HKU Student Union (camp of pro-independence students, second battlefield)  
<https://www.facebook.com/hkusupage/>  
 Consulate General of the United States, Hong Kong and Macau (pro-independence foreign  
 force, third battlefield)  
<https://www.facebook.com/USAinHKMacau/>

*Figure 4.1 Announcements posted by organisers of the Diba Expedition<sup>2</sup>*

The left announcement lists several QQ groups dedicated to specific preparation tasks, including meme production and accommodating participants from different backgrounds. Furthermore, it introduces methods for promoting the upcoming expedition on Weibo and underscores the essential requirements for participation. Primarily serving as a participation guide, the right announcement indicates the timing and targeted Facebook pages. Despite focusing on different aspects of the expeditions, both announcements offer insights into the organisation of the Diba Expedition. Additionally, they show how organisers metaphorically likened online expeditions to offline military actions by referring to Diba as “*中央集团军 (zhongyang jituanjun, Central Theatre Command Amy)*”, addressing participants as “*战友 (zhanyou, comrades)*” or “*路 (lu, troop)*” and describing the targeted Facebook pages as “*战场 (zhanchang, battlefield)*”. Through this comparison, collective activities in QQ groups were framed as military preparations, involving training personnel for combat readiness as well as equipping them with translated materials and self-generated memes as weapons.

The metaphorical expressions in Diba’s announcements serve a dual purpose. Firstly, they demonstrate the systematic operation of the expeditions. Secondly, they evoke a sense of heroism, mobilising and unifying potential participants who position themselves as protectors of the nation state. Prior to collecting and analysing any data, the above information revealed how the organisers interpreted themselves in relation to the self-generated memes, the recruited participants, and the collective expeditions. This subjective interpretation presents a fundamental stance (Shifman, 2014), which was endorsed by early participants gathering in

<sup>2</sup> QQ groups serve various purposes, functioning as interest groups or work-specific chat groups. Each group is identifiable through distinct IDs, allowing users to search and join them. To address privacy concerns, the group IDs shown in the first screenshot have been blurred. When I translated the captured Chinese text, these group IDs have been replaced by “00000”.



QQ groups as meme producers and other participants activating on the targeted Facebook pages as meme users. Moreover, this preliminary finding can serve as a basis for subsequent qualitative analysis to examine how Diba’s fundamental stance is embodied in the multimodal memes.

In addition to the archived announcements, it was observed that similar guiding information circulated across various digital platforms, where organisers and Diba participants engaged in diverse activities. Table 4.1 enumerates the domestic<sup>3</sup> platforms involved in the Diba Expedition and collective activities undertaken by Diba participants.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Diba participants’ activities</b>
QQ	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Sharing self-generated memes</li> <li>2. Announcing latest plans of action</li> <li>3. Sharing VPNs and links to access the targeted Facebook pages</li> <li>4. Sharing opinions on relevant political issues</li> </ol>
WeChat	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Sharing self-generated memes</li> <li>2. Announcing latest plans of action</li> <li>3. Sharing VPNs and links to access the targeted Facebook pages</li> <li>4. Sharing opinions on relevant political issues</li> </ol>
Tieba	Promoting the Diba Expedition and announcing plans of action
Douban	Promoting the Diba Expedition and announcing plans of action
Weibo	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Promoting the Diba Expedition through Weibo posts and topics</li> <li>2. Recruiting more participants through pre-designed posters</li> <li>3. Announcing latest plans of action</li> <li>4. Posting pre-designed or self-generated memes</li> <li>5. Sharing links to access the targeted Facebook pages</li> <li>6. Sharing video recordings of the expedition process</li> <li>7. Posting opinions on relevant political issues</li> </ol>
YY	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Announcing latest plans of action</li> <li>2. Live streaming the expedition process</li> <li>3. Sharing opinions on relevant political issues</li> <li>4. Facilitating audio interactions between organisers and participants</li> </ol>
Bilibili	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Live streaming Diba’s activities on YY</li> <li>2. Sharing opinions on relevant political issues</li> </ol>

*Table 4.1 Domestic digital platforms involved in the Diba Expedition and Diba participants’ activities*

Both QQ and WeChat, two instant messaging-focused applications, were used to prepare Diba participants for combat readiness and operate the expedition process. In contrast, Tieba and Douban, two platforms featuring online forums, primarily served to promote the expeditions. As a microblogging website and one of the biggest social media platforms in China, Weibo played multiple roles in the Diba Expedition. It not only facilitated organisers in

<sup>3</sup> I use “domestic” to indicate that the listed digital platforms are widely used in mainland China without technological constrains.

recruitment and operation but also allowed them to attract attention by showcasing how Diba participants flooded into the targeted Facebook pages along with the pre-designed memes. Considering YY and Bilibili’s shared function of fostering audio interaction through livestreams, organisers employed these two platforms to present the expedition process and encourage participants in real-time.

Meanwhile, in addition to Facebook, specific foreign<sup>4</sup> digital platforms were also involved in the Diba Expedition. As presented below in Table 4.2, the roles played by these platforms partially overlapped with those undertaken by their domestic counterparts in Table 4.1.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Diba participants’ activities</b>
Telegram	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Sharing self-generated memes</li> <li>2. Announcing latest plans of action</li> <li>3. Sharing links to access the targeted Facebook pages</li> <li>4. Sharing opinions on relevant political issues</li> </ol>
Twitter/X	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Recruiting more participants through pre-designed posters</li> <li>2. Posting pre-designed or self-generated memes</li> <li>3. Posting opinions on relevant political issues</li> </ol>
Instagram	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Posting pre-designed or self-generated memes</li> <li>2. Promoting the Diba Expedition through hashtags</li> </ol>
Facebook	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Recruiting more participants through pre-designed posters</li> <li>2. Announcing latest plans of action inside Diba’s Facebook group</li> <li>3. Posting pre-designed or self-generated memes as comments under the latest posts presented on the targeted pages</li> <li>4. Replying to other users with pre-designed or self-generated memes</li> <li>5. Liking or reporting other users’ comments</li> </ol>

*Table 4.2 Foreign digital platforms involved in the Diba Expedition and Diba participants’ activities*

Similar to QQ and WeChat, Telegram primarily facilitated organisers in preparing and operating the expeditions. Nevertheless, since this platform is commonly inaccessible for people from mainland China, it was likely deployed to communicate with Diba participants who were based overseas. This possibility also is reflected in Diba participants’ activities on Twitter/X and Instagram. The observed activities on these platforms mainly focused on promoting the expeditions, a task also performed on the three domestic platforms: Tieba, Douban, and Weibo. However, given that Twitter/X and Instagram are unavailable in mainland China, these platforms should be used to attract attention from users based overseas. The last foreign platform involved in the Diba Expedition was Facebook. As shown earlier in Figure 4.1, organisers metaphorically referred to the targeted Facebook pages as “战场 (zhanchang,

<sup>4</sup> I use “foreign” to indicate that mainland-based users can only access the listed digital platforms by using VPNs.

battlefield)”. Although activities of recruitment and operation were observed on this platform, Diba participants concentrated more on collectively flooding into the targeted Facebook pages’ comment areas along with multimodal memes which were pre-generated and circulated on other identified digital platforms.

In other words, the comment areas of the targeted Facebook pages served as the ultimate destination for the Diba Expedition. The process of reaching this destination and perform the announced collective activities on Facebook were supported by efforts made on other digital platforms. Figure 4.2 summaries the essential roles played by these platforms and illustrates their relationships in the Diba Expedition.

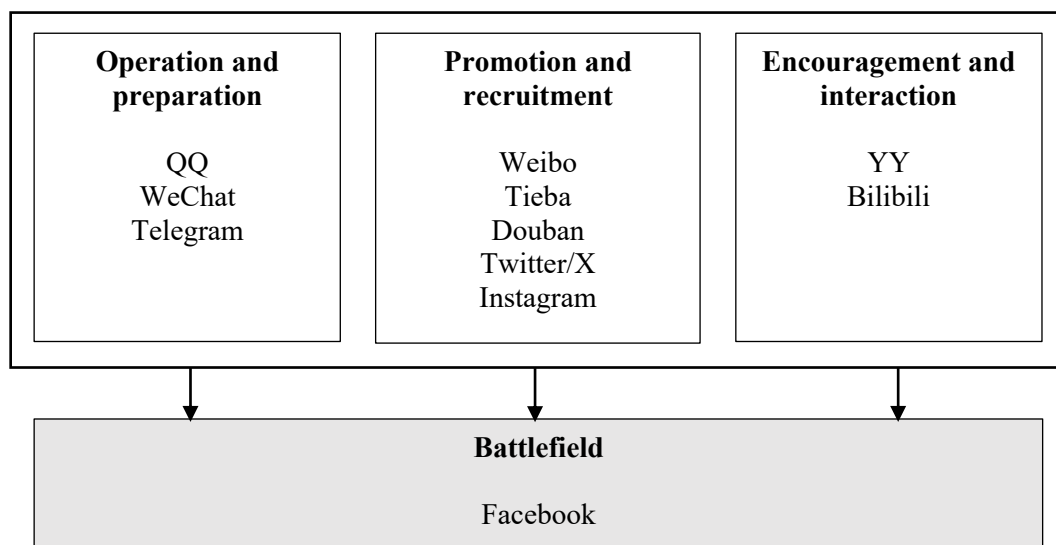


Figure 4.2 Roles played by the involved digital platforms and their relationships in the Diba Expedition

By clarifying the roles played by the involved platforms and their interrelations, the organisational mechanism of the Diba Expedition becomes clearer. This mechanism not only demonstrates how Diba participants unified on different digital platform for a collective goal, but it also provides useful information for considering how Diba’s memes were transmitted during the expedition process. Although my research purpose does not involve examining meme transmission, I needed to decide from which digital platform I should collect suitable data. As elaborated earlier in Table 4.1 and Table 4.2, Diba participants shared or posted memes on several platforms for different purposes. Therefore, it was necessary to determine which platform contained the data that could represent Diba participants’ practices of making meanings and articulating political opinions. Based on the above findings from my descriptive observation, Facebook was selected as the suitable platform of data collection. This decision was made for the following two reasons.

Firstly, it was explained that the targeted Facebook pages served as the ultimate destination of the Diba Expedition, while other platforms played subordinate roles supporting the collective activities on Facebook by facilitating preparation, promotion, and operation. Thus, memes circulated in Facebook comment areas worked towards a common goal: communicating Diba participants' political opinions directly to owners or administrators of the targeted pages.

Secondly, as illustrated in Figure 4.3, after Diba organisers recruited participants for meme production, the self-generated memes were initially shared within the three instant messaging-focused platforms: QQ, WeChat, and Telegram. Memes in this phase formed the initial meme pool (Dawkins, 1976), reflecting how a small group of producers selected suitable resources to represent the announced political positions. Moreover, memes at this point scattered across diverse chat groups, where Diba participants sent additional memes solely for internal communications.

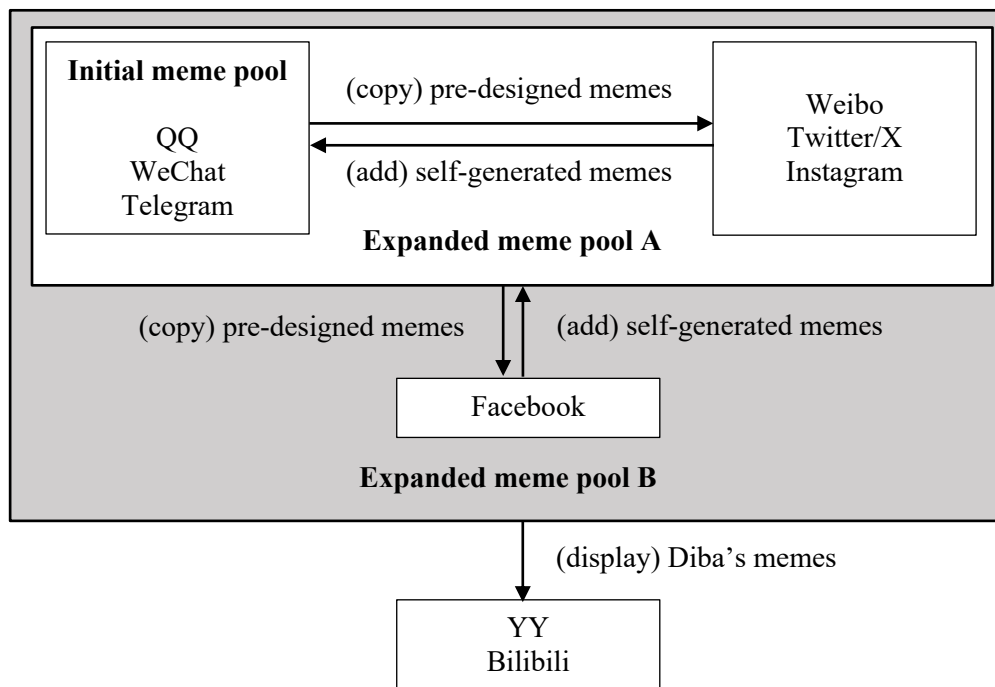


Figure 4.3 A cross-platform route of expanding Diba's meme pool

According to the archived information in Table 4.1 and Table 4.2, Diba participants circulated memes on Weibo, Twitter/X, and Instagram while promoting the expeditions. These three platforms witnessed a round of meme transmission outside the small group of meme producers, as part of the posted memes were copied from the initial meme pool according to specific requirements of attracting attention from and motivating the platform users. Meanwhile, Diba participants on Weibo, Twitter/X, and Instagram also generated additional

memes to promote the expedition and the announced political position. The resultant memes expanded the initial meme pool, from which participants on Facebook could select and imitate. This route of transmission and expansion was similarly found in Diba participants' activities on Facebook. As demonstrated in Figure 4.3, participants either copied available memes from other digital platforms or create alternatives when they activated in Facebook comment areas. Since YY and Bilibili were deployed to livestream the expedition process, it was common to see that the memes circulated on different platforms were selectively displayed. Instead of expressing opinions on relevant political issues, the displayed memes contributed more to informing about latest developments and spiritually encouraging Diba participants.

In addition to selecting the targeted Facebook pages as suitable data sources, I chose Diba's official Weibo account and Facebook group for focused observation, the second stage of my non-participant observation. This decision was based on two main considerations. Firstly, in one of Diba's Weibo posts<sup>5</sup>, it was clarified that participants of the Diba Expedition voluntarily separated themselves from the *diaosi* discourse, which was formulated before 2016 in Li Yi Bar (see section 2.3.1 for a review of relevant studies). Since the 2016 expedition, Diba's Facebook group has served as a space allowing participants to interact and discuss the details of organising multiple expeditions. Therefore, activities in Diba's Facebook group could inform me of any expeditions that were either conducted before my descriptive observation or not examined in previous studies. Regular visits to this Facebook group also provided updated information about expeditions organised after I started my descriptive observation in 2017. Secondly, although Diba's official Weibo account was registered in 2019, it has functioned similarly to Diba's Facebook group in organising expeditions. Searchable content and public discussions in this account could provide additional information indicating how Diba participants interpreted their relations with the expeditions and meanings expressed by the circulated memes.

#### **4.1.3 Second stage: focused observation for narrowed activities**

The focused observation began on 1 October 2019 and lasted for about four months. After reviewing content in Diba's Facebook group and Weibo account, a full list of the targeted Facebook pages was obtained. As shown below in Table 4.3, expeditions in 2016, 2017, and 2018 targeted diverse individuals and institutions, including politicians, military departments,

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<sup>5</sup> Although Diba's official Weibo account was registered in 2019, this post functioned as the first formal self-introduction on domestic digital platforms: <https://weibo.com/7010131150/4397235850538440>

consulates, business airlines, university student unions, and news agencies. The targeted individuals and institutes link to different countries and regions, encompassing the United Kingdom (UK), the US, Australia, Sweden, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Name of targeted Facebook page</b>
2016	1. Tsai Ing-wen 2. <i>Apple Daily</i> (Taiwan) 3. SETN
	1. Virgin Atlantic 2. Virgin America 3. Virgin Australia
2017	9.8 1. Undergrad, H.K.U.S.U. Instant News 2. Student Union of the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) 3. Student Union of the University of Hong Kong (HKU) 4. Consulate General of the United States, Hong Kong and Macau
2018	9.24 1. Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2. Jesper Rönndahl 3. Sveriges Television (SVT)
	12.31 1. Eric Chu Li-luan 2. Taiwanese Air Command
2019	4.10 1. Talk to East Turkestan 2. World Uyghur Congress
	7.23 1. Hong Kong National Front 2. Civil Human Rights Front 3. Hong Kong Police
	8.17 1. <i>Apple Daily</i> (Hong Kong) 2. <i>Stand News</i> 3. Hong Kong Police 4. Joshua Wong 5. Nathan Law 6. Junius Ho Kwan Yiu 7. Rebel Pepper Cartoons 8. Hong Kong State
	8.31 1. <i>Apple Daily</i> (Hong Kong) 2. <i>Stand News</i> 3. Hong Kong Police
	9.30 1. <i>Apple Daily</i> (Hong Kong) 2. Denise Ho 3. Joshua Wong
	10.7 1. Daryl Morey 2. The National Basketball Association (NBA)
	10.13 Celine Ma
	10.17 Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor

*Table 4.3 Date of each expedition and names of the targeted Facebook pages*

However, in comparison to the preceding years, 2019 witnessed the most active actions by Diba participants, targeting individuals and institutions who represent national authority,

promote human rights for Uyghur people in Xinjiang, or support Hong Kong’s independence and localism.

Furthermore, a completed collection of recruiting posters was obtained during the focused observation. Although announcements, as illustrated earlier in Figure 4.1, were disseminated for every expedition, well-designed posters of recruitment only appeared since 2017. These visually appealing posters not only indicate methods of joining the planned expeditions but also clarify each expedition’s major cause, goal, and regulations. Figure 4.4 exemplifies an informative poster designed to recruit participants for the expedition to Hong Kong on 23 July 2019.



(translation)

1. Diba
2. Supporting Hong Kong police. Upholding the rule of law. Opposing violence and chaos in Hong Kong. Safeguarding the principle of one country, two systems  
《Together, we oppose violence and cherish the rule of law》
3. Date of expedition: 23 July, 8:00 PM  
Targeted Facebook pages: Join Diba’s official Weibo group chat for details
4. Diba goes on the expedition, nothing can survive  
Where there are Chinese people, there is Diba
5. Facebook (group) Diba’s Theatre Command Amy, Facebook (group) Sino-US competition  
Patriotism: no explanation needed. Civility: rejecting insults. Rationality: listening to both sides for mutual understanding. Truth-seeking: pursuing truth and rejecting falsehoods  
@ Diba’s official Weibo account

Figure 4.4 An informative poster designed for recruiting expedition participants

In the poster's background, China's national flag and the historic Great Wall are integrated with Hong Kong's flag and multiple modern skyscrapers. These image elements demonstrate that this round of expedition focused on issues involving mainland-Hong Kong relationships. It positions China as a time-honoured country while depicting Hong Kong as a modern metropolis. In the foreground, key information about the expedition's organisers, joining methods, and primary purpose is placed in the central and bottom areas. Moreover, the collective resolution of eliminating violence and upholding the rule of law is highlighted through written slogans of larger size. Based on these elements, a general understanding of the involved expedition can be achieved. That is, participants were recruited to oppose dissidents who disobeyed the authority's enforcement of the One Country, Two Systems principle in Hong Kong society. As listed in Table 4.3, two of the Facebook pages targeted on 23 July 2019 are institutions advocating for Hong Kong's independence and localism. Thus, the poster not only clarifies the expedition's primary purpose, but it also promotes an attitude negatively interpreting Hong Kong's independence supporters and localists as mobs who subverted the social order and rule of law.

Although posters, as exemplified in Figure 4.4, were mainly used for recruitment, they present the essential political stances that Diba participants would recognise and that the circulated memes would imply. Recognising this significance, I manually archived the recruiting posters obtained during my focused observation. In the subsequent four chapters analysing and discussing Diba's memes, these posters will be utilised to introduce relevant expeditions' contextual information and primary political stances.

At the beginning of section 4.1, it was mentioned that working with social media data is inevitably challenged by the dynamic landscape of digital platforms (Postill and Pink, 2012; Markham, 2013; Ampofo *et al.*, 2015; Airoidi, 2018). Digital communication content can become inaccessible due to various reasons, such as ethical considerations, platform regulations, or state censorship. Information in Table 4.3 only indicates which Facebook pages were targeted during the Diba Expedition rather than which pages were accessible for data collection. Additionally, each round of expedition targeted a different number of Facebook pages, and the addressed political issues were not necessarily identical. Thus, I depended on a selected observation, the third stage of my non-participant observation, to ensure that the archived Facebook pages are accessible and representative for data collection.



#### **4.1.4 Third stage: selected observation for accessible and representative data sources**

The selected observation began in March of 2020. To ensure the accessibility of the targeted Facebook pages, I manually checked all post content and comment amounts published on the specific dates of expedition. To ensure representativeness, I relied on human attention and search behaviour as criteria for measurement. The following paragraphs will present the rationale of my selection, primary findings, and the number of data collected from the qualified data sources.

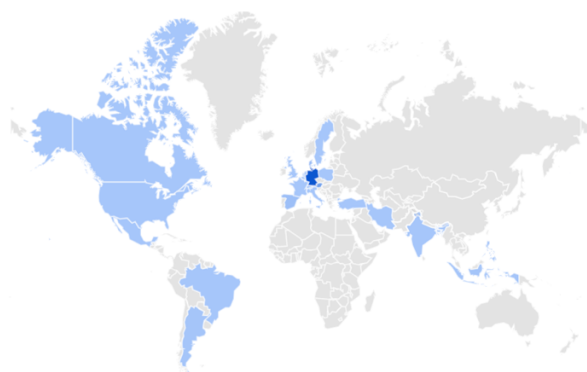
Human attention plays a crucial role in the process of meme transmission (Dawkins, 1976; Blackmore, 1999; Beck and Davenport, 2001; Shifman, 2011; Marwick, 2015a). The amount of public attention that each expedition received is a useful criterion to estimate the influence of each expedition and qualify specific Facebook pages as representative data sources. Typically, public attention refers to the resources, such as time, that people willingly devote to a publicly debated issue (Newig, 2004). In contemporary participatory media ecology, non-institutional actors can use the affordances of social media as pathways to direct attention towards social movement messages and collective ideologies. Therefore, public attention is closely related to mobilisation, validation, and scope enlargement (Tufekci, 2013; Dadas, 2017). While the Most Important Problem (MIP) polls (Dunlap and Scarce, 1991; Maxwell Mc Combs and Zhu, 1995; Wlezien, 2005; Jennings and Wlezien, 2011; Yeager *et al.*, 2011) and media coverage (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Helbling and Tresch, 2011) are often employed to measure public attention, Ripberger (2011) criticised them as insufficient and proposed a new indicator of public attention based on trends in internet searching activity. With data on search behaviour, researchers can probe the degree of people's thoughts about a specific public issue, because the time and energy invested in searching for information can be seen as proof of their interests and attentions towards that public issue.

In the fields of infodemiology and infoveillance, demand-based indicators refer to data generated from people's searching and navigating behaviours in the virtual environment (Eysenbach, 2009). Building upon public health and economic trend research, Ripberger (2011) proposed the application of demand-based infoveillance to illustrate the relationship between public attention and political issues. Among these indicators, it is recognised that Google dominates search engine market (NetMarketShare, 2020), with Google Trends providing a valuable tool for researchers to monitor public attention through search terms or keywords (Ripberger, 2011). However, Google is not accessible to most internet users based in mainland China. Instead, Baidu serves as the predominant search engine, and Baidu Index furnishes extensive search volume data for academic research (Vaughan and Chen, 2014). This data

spans various subjects, from stock markets (Shen *et al.*, 2017) and tourism flows (Huang, Zhang and Ding, 2017; Li *et al.*, 2018) to disease trends (Zhao *et al.*, 2018). In light of this, I used search volume data from Google Trend and Baidu Index to determine which rounds of expedition can represent Diba participants' endeavour of directing domestic and international attentions towards their pro-government memes.

At the initial phase of the selected observation, I explored Google Trends using four keywords: Diba, the Diba Expedition, 帝吧 (*diba*), and 帝吧出征 (*diba chuzheng*, the Diba Expedition). It was evident that international users generally showed little interests in Diba's collective actions, while Asia-based users demonstrated more enthusiasm in searching for Diba-related information.

According to the worldwide interest illustrated in Figure 4.5, from 1 January 2016 to 31 December 2019, no users based in China searched for information using the English keyword "Diba". Conversely, search behaviours were recorded for users located in other regions, such as Southeast Asia, Europe, North and South America. Notably, Germany stood out for the largest search volume.



*Figure 4.5 Worldwide interest across geographical regions for the English keyword "Diba"*

However, Google Trends specified that the recorded search behaviours were linked to ING-DiBa AG, a German bank, rather than to any collective actions related to China or political issues. As for the English keyword "the Diba Expedition", insufficient search volume data were available to generate explorable trends. On the one hand, this finding implies that despite the involvement of several mainstream international digital platforms in the Diba Expedition, Diba's collective actions and articulated opinions were not necessarily acknowledged by internet users who primarily use English as their native language or lingua franca. On the other hand, this finding allowed me to formulate a hypothesis that could be tested through

quantitative and qualitative analysis of the collected data. Specifically, when conducting the expeditions on international digital platforms, Diba’s memes might utilise English or other foreign languages to attract attention and provoke reactions from a larger group of potential viewers. Nevertheless, the expressed meanings were not necessarily be effective in achieving this purpose.

As illustrated in Figure 4.6, within the similar time frame, Chinese keywords “帝吧(*diba*)” and “帝吧出征(*diba chuzheng*, the Diba Expedition)” were searched by internet users located in Asia, Australia, North America, and a few European countries.

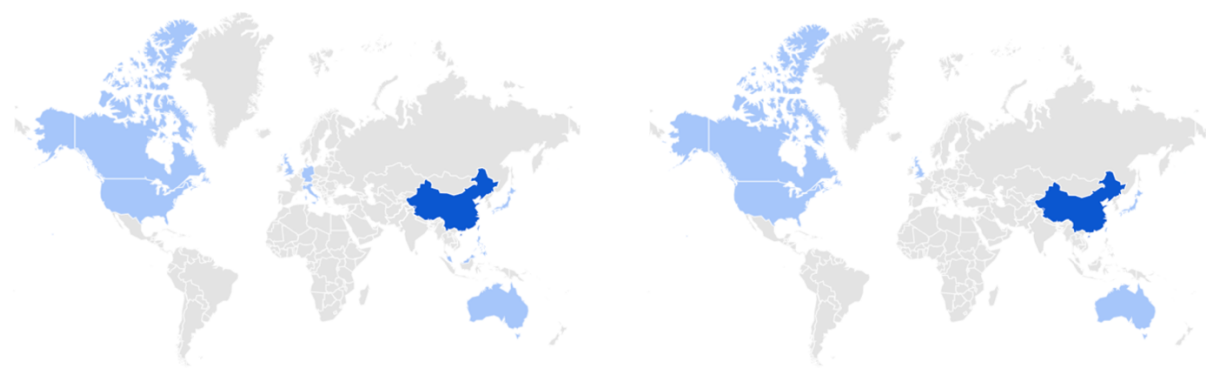


Figure 4.6 Worldwide interest across geographical regions for Chinese keywords “帝吧 (*diba*)” (left) and “帝吧出征 (*diba chuzheng*, the Diba Expedition)” (right)

Despite Google’s services being inaccessible in mainland China, mainland-based users contributed the largest search volume and shown the keenest interest in information related to the Diba Expedition. According to Google Trends’ elaboration, Hong Kong and Taiwan ranked second and third for their search volumes of the two Chinese keywords. This finding indicates that during the process of recruitment and promotion on international digital platforms, Diba participants’ collective actions and political opinions primarily attracted attention from viewers who could understand Chinese. These viewers included Chinese individuals based in the involved locations, as well as international researchers or institutions concerned with Chinese affairs. Furthermore, this discovery underscores the usefulness of Chinese keywords’ search volumes in determining which rounds of expedition can effectively represent Diba participants’ political communication facilitated by memes.

In addition to worldwide interest distributed across geographical regions, Google Trends generated charts presenting how search volumes of the two Chinese keywords changed from 1

January 2016 to 31 December 2019. Figure 4.7 shows that the global search volume for “帝吧 (diba)” had been fluctuating continuously, with six periods of prominent increase.

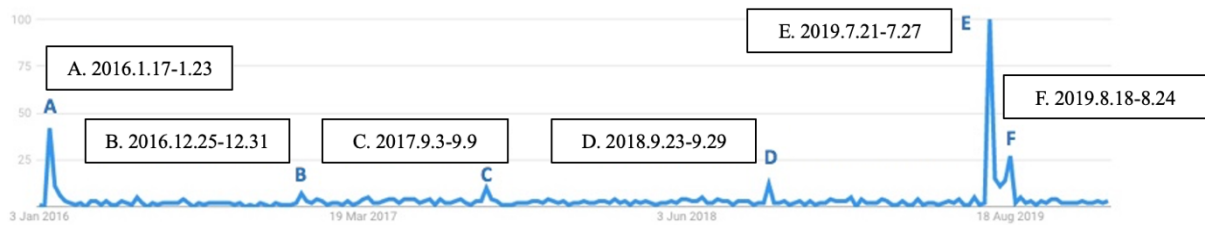


Figure 4.7 Worldwide interest across time for the Chinese keyword “帝吧 (diba)”

Two of these increases occurred in the summer of 2019. According to archived information in Table 4.3, these spikes were related to Hong Kong’s pro-democracy individuals, news agencies, and government institutions. The round of expedition in July attracted the highest search volume in four years, while the round in August ranked third. Additionally, the expedition at the beginning of 2016 attracted the second-highest search volume, and this round involved Taiwanese politicians and news agencies. Search volumes during the other three periods of increase were roughly similar. The increases in 2017 and 2018 were respectively associated with expeditions targeting individuals and institutions located in Hong Kong and Sweden, while the increase at the end of 2016 did not correspond to any specific expedition.

In contrast to the trend observed for “帝吧 (diba)”, Figure 4.8 illustrates a slightly different pattern for another Chinese keyword “帝吧出征 (diba chuzheng, the Diba Expedition)”.

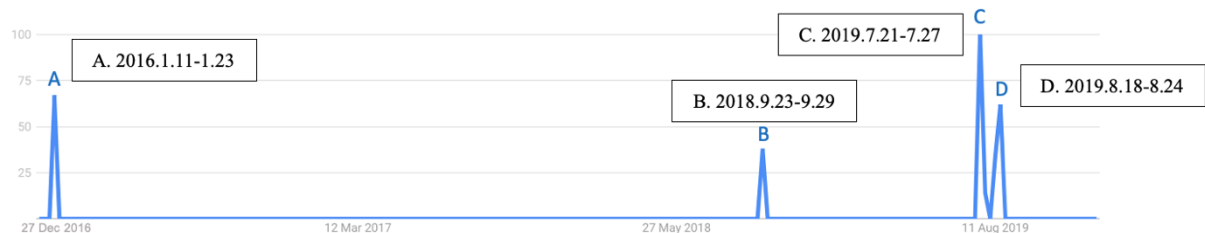


Figure 4.8 Worldwide interest across time for the Chinese keyword “帝吧出征 (diba chuzheng, the Diba Expedition)”

Throughout the four years, this keyword’s search volume experienced only four periods of notable increase. Similar to “帝吧 (diba)”, “帝吧出征 (diba chuzheng, the Diba Expedition)” saw its highest search volume during the summer of 2019. Specifically, expeditions in July and August attracted the highest and third-highest search volumes, while the round at the beginning

of 2016 ranked second. Apart from the last period of increase occurred in 2018, no significant fluctuation was observed.

After exploring Baidu Index by using the Chinese keywords “帝吧 (*diba*)” and “帝吧出征 (*diba chuzheng*, the Diba Expedition)”, it was found that from 1 January 2016 to 31 December 2019, China’s nationwide interest in Diba-related information generally resembled the worldwide interest presented above. However, as illustrated in Figure 4.9, there are noticeable differences in the distribution of China’s nationwide search volume over the four-year period.

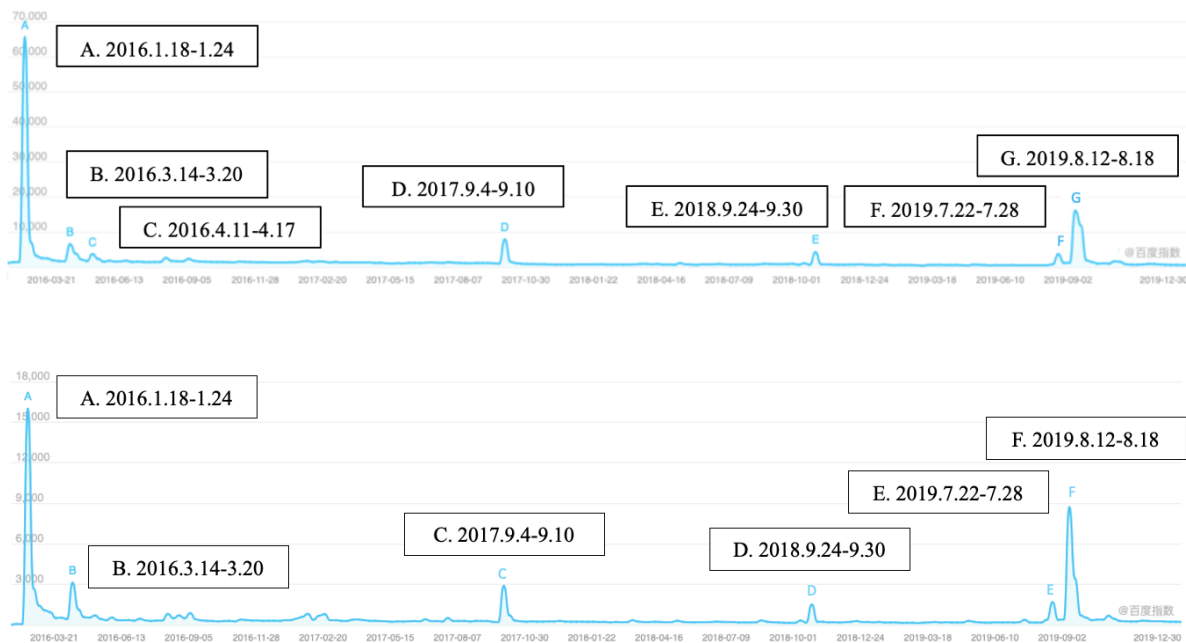


Figure 4.9 China’s nationwide interest across time for the Chinese keywords “帝吧 (*diba*)” (top) and “帝吧出征 (*diba chuzheng*, the Diba Expedition)” (bottom)

Although expeditions at the beginning of 2016 and in the summer of 2017 attracted the most domestic attention, the former one witnessed larger search volumes for both Chinese keywords, while the latter one ranked second, with significantly lower interest in the July expedition compared to August. It is worth noting that Chinese internet users demonstrated particular interest in the 2016 expedition, which targeted the Facebook pages of several business airlines constituting parts of Virgin Group, a British conglomerate. The last minor increase occurred in April 2016. Nevertheless, based on the archived information in Table 4.3, Diba participants did not conduct any expedition during this period.

Based on the above findings, I decided to concentrate on Facebook pages involved in expeditions during seven different periods as representative sources of data collection: January

2016, September 2017, September 2018, July 2019, August 2019, September 2019, and October 2019. The first expedition in January 2016 was triggered by a cross-strait conflict concerning Taiwan’s political status in the international community, while the expedition in September 2017 was ignited by an offline argument concerning Hong Kong independence. Additionally, the expedition in September 2018 was aroused by a TV show presented by SVT, a Swedish national public television broadcaster. These three rounds of expedition attracted notable attention inside and outside China. As for the other four rounds in 2019, all of them were conducted in response to Hong Kong’s Anti-ELAB Movement, which lasted for months. While only the expeditions in July and August attracted significant search volumes on Google and Baidu, I included expeditions in September and October for a more comprehensive analysis of how Diba’s memes addressed Hong Kong-centred issues in 2019.

Among the 31 Facebook pages targeted by the focused expeditions (see Table 4.3 for the full list), 19 were excluded because their owners or administrators either did not activate the function of making comment via images (Z. Wang, 2019) or cleaned up the comment area before I started the data collection process. As shown in Table 4.4, this left 12 targeted Facebook pages, where 49 posts received comments from Diba participants. During the Diba Expedition, all these posts were at the forefront of the timeline, but they did not necessarily express opinions on any political issues. For instance, the Facebook page of Daryl Morey, an America basketball executive, was targeted on 7 October 2019, and the involved post presented a photo depicting Daryl and another person on a basketball court. Thus, I did not archive the specific content of the involved Facebook posts. The numbers in the third column of Table 4.4 are only used to indicate which Facebook pages were the major focuses of the relevant expeditions.

Year	Name of targeted Facebook page	Number of involved Facebook posts	Number of collected data	Total number of collected data
2016	1. SETN	13	3,066	3,224
	2. Apple Online	5	158	
2017	CUHK Student Union	1	1,070	1,070
2018	Jesper Rönndahl	1	773	773
2019	1. Hong Kong Police	10	2,893	6,319
	2. <i>Apple Daily</i> (Hong Kong)	3	732	
	3. <i>Stand News</i>	2	673	
	4. Joshua Wong	10	1,408	
	5. Nathan Law	1	407	
	6. Rebel Pepper Cartoons	1	48	
	7. Hong Kong State	1	69	
	8. Daryl Morey	1	89	
<b>12</b>		<b>49</b>	<b>11,386</b>	<b>11,386</b>

*Table 4.4 Names of the Facebook pages targeted in representative expeditions and numbers of collected data*

Unlike Wang (2019), my research does not focus on text-only comments, which are characterised by default formal features. To simplify the data collection process, I decided to collect all image comments from the involved Facebook posts. These collected image data were then subject to another step of selecting suitable and representative ones for corpus construction. By using Octoparse, a web scraping tool, a total of 11,386 image data were automatically collected. As shown in Table 4.4, during the first expedition in 2016, Diba participants made notable efforts of collectively posting image comments on the Facebook page of SETN, a Taiwanese media outlet leaning towards Taiwan's nationalist Pan-Green coalition. Although data related to the 2017 and 2018 expeditions were not distributed across multiple Facebook posts, the amount collected was considerable large compared to counterparts involved in other expeditions. In 2019, the Facebook pages of Hong Kong police and Joshua Wong, a pro-democracy activist, accommodated most of the collected data. Additionally, a large amount of data was obtained from the Facebook pages of *Apple Daily* and *Stand News*, Hong Kong publications known for their pro-democracy editorial positions.

#### **4.1.5 Summary of collected data and contextual information**

In summary, this section primarily elaborated on my approach of data collection, which involved non-participant observation across multiple expeditions over a four-year period. Through this approach, I obtained an overview of Diba participants' online activities. Archived information and materials revealed how both foreign and domestic digital platforms were deployed for preparation, operation, recruitment, promotion, interaction, and encouragement. Additionally, they demonstrated how Diba participants transmitted pre-designed memes across platforms and expanded the meme pool by generating additional memes in different phrases of the Diba Expedition. Based on these discoveries, the scope of non-participant observation was narrowed to focus on representative digital platforms for identifying a full list of data sources and obtaining relevant contextual information. Subsequently, human attention and search behaviour were utilised as criteria to check the representativeness of the identified data sources. Ultimately, 11,386 image data were collected from representative and accessible sources. The following section elaborates on the procedure of corpus construction.

## **4.2 Corpus construction**

This section focuses on methods that I used to process the 11,386 collected data and construct a multimodal corpus to support the examination of Diba's meaning-making practices. The first section elaborates on approaches and tools that were applied for data selection, ensuring that the constructed corpus is manageable and representative. After presenting the finalised corpus structure and size in the second section, the third and fourth sections explain methods of data annotation, including my initial attempt of annotating meme data by following the Genre and Multimodality framework, issues arising from this attempt, and a consequent shift to simplified steps of annotation.

### **4.2.1 Data selection**

In section 4.1.4, I detailed the collection of 11,386 image data from 49 Facebook posts associated with expeditions conducted over four different years. As mentioned earlier, the automatic data collection process was streamlined by focusing exclusively on image-based comments. No predefined criteria were used to determine whether the collected images were pro-government memes shared by Diba participants. Consequently, the dataset includes image comments from other Facebook users who may not have supported the political views of the Diba Expedition. Moreover, my descriptive observation revealed that each expedition was facilitated by pre-designed multimodal artefacts, including user-generated memes and posters. It was common for participants to copy and paste similar memes within a single expedition or even across multiple expeditions. Given these two considerations, this section firstly addresses the issue of duplicated data. It then discusses how to ensure that the sampled data is eligible to represent Diba participants' meaning-making practices.

#### **4.2.1.1 Structural and perceptual similarities as criteria**

As discovered in my descriptive observation, the copy-and-paste transmission not only effectively enhanced the virality (Shifman, 2011) of Diba's memes but also contributes to the creation of a meme pool (Dawkins, 1976), where individual memes are made recognisable for a collective identity. On the one hand, the duplication highlights the perceptual similarities between Diba's memes. On the other hand, it is a useful criterion for identifying representative memes that have been assessed by at least two Diba participants as suitable resources for their political communication. Nevertheless, the duplication also presented challenges for my data annotation by requiring redundant labelling. To ensure the efficiency of data annotation while



accounting for duplicate rates, I depended on structural and perceptual similarities as criteria to classify Diba’s memes, identify duplicated data, and select representative ones for corpus construction.

Based on the timing of each expedition, the 11,368 collected data were firstly divided into four datasets: Y2016, Y2017, Y2018, and Y2019. Next, the online service of *Similar Pictures Search* (Fedulov, 2019) was utilised to find all duplicates in each dataset. Relying on structural and perceptual similarities, this service offers a ready-to-use tool for finding duplicates within an assigned dictionary. For images depicting the similar objects from different views and lighting conditions, this tool will not recognise them as duplicates. After the identification process, all duplicate data were automatically classified into clusters. Figure 4.10 exemplifies two clusters of duplicated memes transmitted by Diba participants during the 2017 expedition. Each cluster lines up the identified duplicates and lists their file names for easy retrieval.

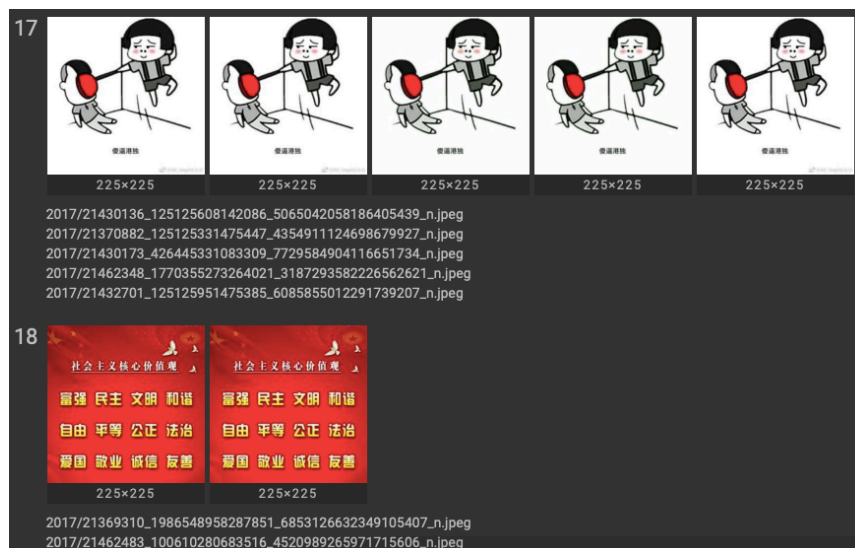


Figure 4.10 A screenshot exemplifying two clusters of duplicated memes

After completing the identification and classification process, 1,341 clusters were obtained, revealing 6,933 duplicated memes. Table 4.5 shows their distributions across the four datasets and the last column gives percentages of duplicates within relevant datasets.

Dataset	Number of clusters	Number of duplicates	Percentage (duplicates)
Y2016	357	1,443	44.76%
Y2017	147	589	55.05%
Y2018	89	623	80.60%
Y2019	748	4,278	67.70%
	<b>1,341</b>	<b>6,933</b>	<b>60.89%</b>

Table 4.5. Clusters and duplicates identified in the four divided datasets

According to the table, more than half of the 11,386 collected data are duplicates, reflecting a predominant pattern of copy-and-paste dissemination. 748 clusters are included in the largest dataset, Y2019, with 4,278 duplicates making up 67.70% of the data. While Y2016 also has a notable number of duplicates, they only comprise 44.76% of the total data. In Y2017, 147 clusters were formed, with 589 duplicates representing 55.05% of the dataset. Although Y2018 contains fewer clusters, it is featured by the highest volume of duplicates, accounting for 80.60% of the data. As mentioned earlier, the duplication of memes resulted from users' subjective evaluation based on their communicative needs. Therefore, the 6,933 duplicates were considered as representative data, reflecting the meme distribution typically seen in the Diba Expedition and the political messages that these distributors intended to convey. To avoid redundancy, each cluster is represented by a single meme data, resulting in 1,341 memes moved to another round of selection to ensure that the final corpus only includes those likely produced and transmitted by Diba participants.

#### 4.2.1.2 Political bias as a criterion

Since no Diba participants were recruited to identify their own image comments, I relied on the expeditions' pro-government stance as the primary criterion when identifying images likely transmitted by Diba participants. This decision was informed by Shifman's (2014) definition of stance, the third analytical dimension of memes. As explained in section 3.1.1, a key concern in this dimension relates to the self-positioning of Diba participants. For the Diba Expedition, the pro-government stance was a defining characteristic that set Diba participants apart from pro-independence supporters and other viewers who did not necessarily share the same political views. Thus, if a data did not explicitly express an anti-China, anti-Beijing, or anti-Chinese Communist Party (CCP) sentiment, it was tentatively classified as a comment posted by a Diba participant. Three meme images are presented in Figure 4.11 to illustrate this classification.



- (translation)
1. Chinese people cannot vote, they can only reincarnate
  2. Hey, wake up
  3. Don't be stupid
  4. Support the Hong Kong police

*Figure 4.11 Memes with clear political bias or without explicit political messages*

The first meme depicts Xi Jinping, who has been the general secretary of the CCP and the paramount leader of China since 2012. By representing him speaking in a political meeting, this meme converts the included traditional Chinese text into an absolute directive which vetoes Chinese people's right of voting. The integration of Xi as a paramount political leader and his veto upon voting as a civil right constructs a sarcasm against mainland's political system. It also highlights the written ridicule mocking that Chinese people can pursue the right of voting only if they reincarnate and are reborn in a different country. The second meme features a panda-like cartoon character clapping hands and advising someone not to do anything stupid. No political message is discernible from this decontextualised meme. The third meme includes three cartoon characters holding hands and waving flags of China and Hong Kong as political symbols. Furthermore, Chinese and English texts overlaying these characters clarifies that they represent individuals who support the Hong Kong police, a typical symbol of state authority.

According to the basic messages conveyed by these three memes, the first one is eliminated due to its explicit criticism of China's political system. In contrast, the second and third memes are retained, as they either align with Diba's pro-government stance or require context-based analysis to further explore the nuanced meanings. Meme like these two examples were used to construct the final corpus assisting the qualitative analysis of this research.

#### **4.2.2 Corpus structure and size**

The Diba-meme corpus was compiled following the data selection process. Table 4.6 outlines its details and structure, featuring four paralleled sub-corpora.

<b>Corpus ID</b>	<b>Name of involved Facebook page</b>	<b>Targeted country/region</b>	<b>Number of meme</b>	<b>Number of poster</b>
<b>2016</b>	1. Apple Online 2. SETN	Taiwan	291	0
<b>2017</b>	CUHK Student Union	Hong Kong	140	1
<b>2018</b>	Jesper Rönndahl	Sweden	81	2

2019	1. Hong Kong Police	Hong Kong	468	2
	2. <i>Apple Daily</i> (Hong Kong)			
	3. <i>Stand News</i>			
	4. Joshua Wong			
	5. Nathan Law			
	6. Rebel Pepper Cartoons			
	7. Hong Kong State			
	8. Daryl Morey			
			980	5

*Table 4.6 Structure of the Diba-meme corpus*

Each subordinate corpus is named after the year of a specific Diba Expedition. As part of the basic contextual information, names of involved Facebook pages were obtained during my selected observation (see section 4.1.4 for details), while names of the targeted country or region were primarily retrieved from Diba’s five recruiting posters which are preserved in each sub-corpus. In addition to the five posters indicating primary purposes of the relevant expedition, 980 representative memes are included in the corpus. To assist the social semiotic qualitative analysis, these 980 memes are subject to another process of annotation, which is elaborated in the following sections.

#### **4.2.3 Attempt of data annotation following the Genre and Multimodality (GeM) framework**

Before introducing my methods of annotating the 980 corpus data, this subsection elaborates on my initial attempt of data annotation by following the GeM framework and annotation schema. As explained in section 3.2.2, I initially focusing on the functionality of Diba’s memes, aiming to explore its internal composition. Based on this research purpose, the GeM framework was selected as a methodological basis for conducting a bottom-up and systematic analysis of Diba’s memes. However, given analytical issues arouse in the application, I simplified the annotation steps, refined research questions, and switched to the contextual approach. Thus, this subsection is presented more like a report explaining my initial annotation methods and provide a basis for introducing the simplified annotation steps.

##### **4.2.3.1 Overview of the GeM framework**

Bateman (2019) argued that the application of the SF-MDA approach should be testified and supported by empirical research. He specified that data-driven empirical approaches can enable more detailed and systematic investigations on multimodal communication, allowing

analysts to explore regularities and patterns based on larger bodies of real-word data. Drawing on experiences from corpus linguistics, Bateman (2002, 2004; 2003) and his colleagues proposed the GeM framework and developed annotation toolkit during their exploration of page-based documents. This framework was later applied to construct multimodal corpus of both dynamic and static multimodal artefacts, such as narrative films (Bateman, 2013), instruction manuals (Bateman and Delin, 2003), tourist brochures (Hiippala, 2012, 2015b), traditional and electronic newspapers (Bateman, Delin and Henschel, 2007; Bateman, 2008; Kong, 2013), product packaging (Thomas, 2009, 2014), advertisements (Mazzali-Lurati and Pollaroli, 2014), tourism and theatre websites (Nekić, 2015; Rusňáková, 2017), in-flight magazines (Hiippala, 2015a), and public posters (Zhang, 2017; Kang and Jiang, 2021).

Based on Lemke's (1999) idea of seeing genre as a space of possibilities, the GeM framework centres on the idea of "relating any individual document encountered to its 'generic' context by means of explicitly identifiable design decisions" (Bateman, 2008, p. 182). Consequently, application of this framework often emphasises functional constraints related to medium, production, and consumption (Bateman, Delin and Henschel, 2004; Bateman, 2008). To investigate trivial design decisions, such as the selection and organisation of resources, the framework suggests employing separated layers to describe different aspects of the analysed artefacts. Focus of this description includes (1) content structure organising elements for information communication, (2) genre structure consisting of generic phrases through which messages are conveyed, (3) rhetorical relations between content elements, (4) linguistic features of textual elements, (5) layout structure of spatial hierarchy, and (6) navigation structure which supports consumption of the artefacts. This layered description facilitates a relatively comprehensive investigation of multimodal artefacts performing generic functions. It also theoretically informs a multi-layer annotation schema which was developed for analysing page-based documents across different levels (Bateman, 2008) and was preliminarily applied in my initial attempt to annotate Diba's memes. The following section details the major annotation steps that I followed, modifications made to accommodate the characteristics of meme images, and experimental findings obtained through this approach.

#### **4.2.3.2 Modifying the GeM schema for data annotation**

As detailed below, my annotation was fundamentally based on Bateman's (2008) definition of three divided but interconnected layers of description: the base layer, the layout layer, and the Rhetorical Structure Theory (RST) layer. To separate annotation across these three layers

more clearly while facilitating enquires into different aspects of the examined memes, I followed Bateman's suggestion and deployed the Extensible Markup Language (XML) to store the multi-layer annotation into individual files (see Appendix A for examples of base, layout and RST annotation files). The annotation files were later used alongside Python for enquiry and visualisation.

The base layer was used as the starting point of the annotation process, decomposing a single meme into minimal units, labelling them, and providing a flat list of labelled base units. Identifying written text as a base unit was restricted into levels of orthographic sentences and sentence fragments. If a textual component can be distinguished from its surrounding orthographic sentence by typography, background, or border, it was treated as an independent or embedded base unit. The GeM annotation schema confines the decomposition of visual components, as it was originally developed for examining page-based documents (Bateman, 2008). The primary focus of the base layer is to divide document pages into candidate units and label them according to their functions. Nevertheless, the mode of image is a fundamental resource that Diba's memes rely on for making meaning. Moreover, prescriptively annotating base units with predefined functional labels conflicted with my former research goal of descriptively exploring the functions performed by Diba's memes and their multimodal components.

Given these two concerns, I drew on Gestalt principles (Verstegen, 2006; Graham, 2008) from perceptual psychology as criteria for decomposing image components in Diba's memes. Perceptual features such as spatial distance, colour, shape, and size were used to make distinguishment between these components. Furthermore, instead of annotating identified base units with labels of predefined functionality, the written texts in Diba's memes were annotated for their textual extractions. Based on Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996, 2006, 2021) discussion of visual representation (see section 4.2.4.1 for further elaboration), image components were transcribed and annotated as alternative texts, indicating the represented individual or object, action, and setting or circumstance. Figure 4.12 exemplifies a meme marked for identified base units.



(translation)

1. Idiots boycott classes, I go to class
2. When I write this, I have already arrived in New York, preparing to enrol at Yale University. The 12-hour time difference makes it difficult for me to stay updated to current situation in Hong Kong. I often wake up to a flood of messages and have to review all of them. Countless Hongkongers living overseas have had similar experiences. No matter where we are, we can still find ways to contribute to Hong Kong and make a difference for the future of the city.
3. The shrewdest consumer in Hong Kong, Nathan Law
4. @Eastday

Figure 4.12 Minimal units in a meme originally transmitted in the 2019 expedition

Table 4.7 presents a plain annotation of the eleven base units identified in this meme. Seven of these units involve the mode of image, while the other four involve the mode of writing. Each unit is assigned a unique ID to facilitate easy retrieval of annotation information. All base units were described and annotated in the layout layer according to their physical manifestation.

ID	Extraction or transcription (as alternative text)
u-NL2019081703.01	A crowd sit in a public place
u-NL2019081703.02	Speech bubble
u-NL2019081703.03	A screenshot of Nathan Law's Facebook post
u-NL2019081703.04	An airplane
u-NL2019081703.05	Nathan Law carries a bag and holds a mobile phone
u-NL2019081703.06	The lower part of a smiling emoji

u-NL2019081703.07	Sina Weibo
u-NL2019081703.08	傻仔去罷課 (Idiots boycott classes)
u-NL2019081703.09	我先去上課 (I go to class)
u-NL2019081703.10	全港最精明消費者 羅冠聰 (The shrewdest consumer in Hong Kong, Nathan Law)
u-NL2019081703.11	@東方網 (@Eastday)

Table 4.7 Identified base units and labels of ID

The layout layer focuses on visually perceptible meanings conveyed through material characteristics (Bateman, 2008). Annotation within this layer not only describes visual and spatial aspects of the data but also captures evidence for interpreting how producers and users interact with the included elements and their structural integrations. Following the original annotation steps suggested in the GeM schema, I first annotated the realisation information of the minimal units identified earlier in the base layer. My description of image components concentrated on shot types and visual styles (see section 4.2.4.1 for further elaboration), while for components of written text, the description primarily involved their colours, typefaces, and script types (see section 4.2.4.2 for further elaboration). The sole modification that I made related to the annotation of meme data's hierarchical layout structure. As mentioned earlier in section 4.2.3.1, the GeM schema was initially developed for examining page-based documents as multimodal artefacts. Consequently, its original methods for describing and annotating spatial composition were designed based on a grid-like structure, allocating units into sub-areas of columns and rows. This structure differs from its counterpart observed in meme images, where multimodal elements often overlap.

To accommodate the specific structure of meme images and facilitate investigation of their spatial compositions, I adopted an image layer-based structure commonly used in graphic design. Minimal units were grouped into individual chunks based on spatial proximity, which were then allocated to distinct image layers. Each chunk was labelled with sequence numbers and annotated for the modes involved. This annotation aided in subsequent analysis of meme complexity in terms of structural consumption and the integration of meme components in terms of modes. Additionally, it provides structural cues to support the annotation work conducted in the next layer, the RST layer.

Drawing on Mann and Thompson's (1986, 1987) RST, the primary focus of the RST layer is on the discourse relations that connect decomposed parts of the data for specific communicative purposes. As an approach originally analysing linguistic texts, RST is based on



the core idea that smaller units of texts are interconnected as “spans” within hierarchical structures through a set of “rhetorical relations”, such as elaboration, contrast, repetition, cause-effect, etc. Each relation links the central message as a “nucleus” to supporting information as a “satellite”. For example, a small unit of a long paragraph may provide additional information for another paragraph which positions above or below it. The sequence of these units is termed as a text span. While a rhetorical unit can serve as the head or nucleus of an asymmetric relation, it can also be connected to other units through symmetric relations as nuclei of equal importance. Adapting RST and its approach of capturing rhetorical relations, the GeM schema utilises the RST layer to annotate the rhetorical relations between divided minimal units, determine their positions within the constructed spans, and label these units as nuclear, satellite, or nuclei.

My annotation in the RST layer was primarily based on the 24 classic and pre-defined RST relations (Mann and Thompson, 1988; Stede, Taboada and Das, 2017). As explained earlier, minimal units of Diba’s memes often overlap each other, resulting in a layout structure that differs from those found in linear sentences and page-based documents. Thus, I began by determining the rhetorical relations between minimal units, which were previously grouped into layout chunks. After this, my attention moved to annotating relations between the remaining units that might be semantically linked. Taking the meme in Figure 4.12 as an example, the following Figure 4.13 demonstrates its RST structure, which involves relations of elaboration, preparation, summary, interpretation, contrast, and evidence.

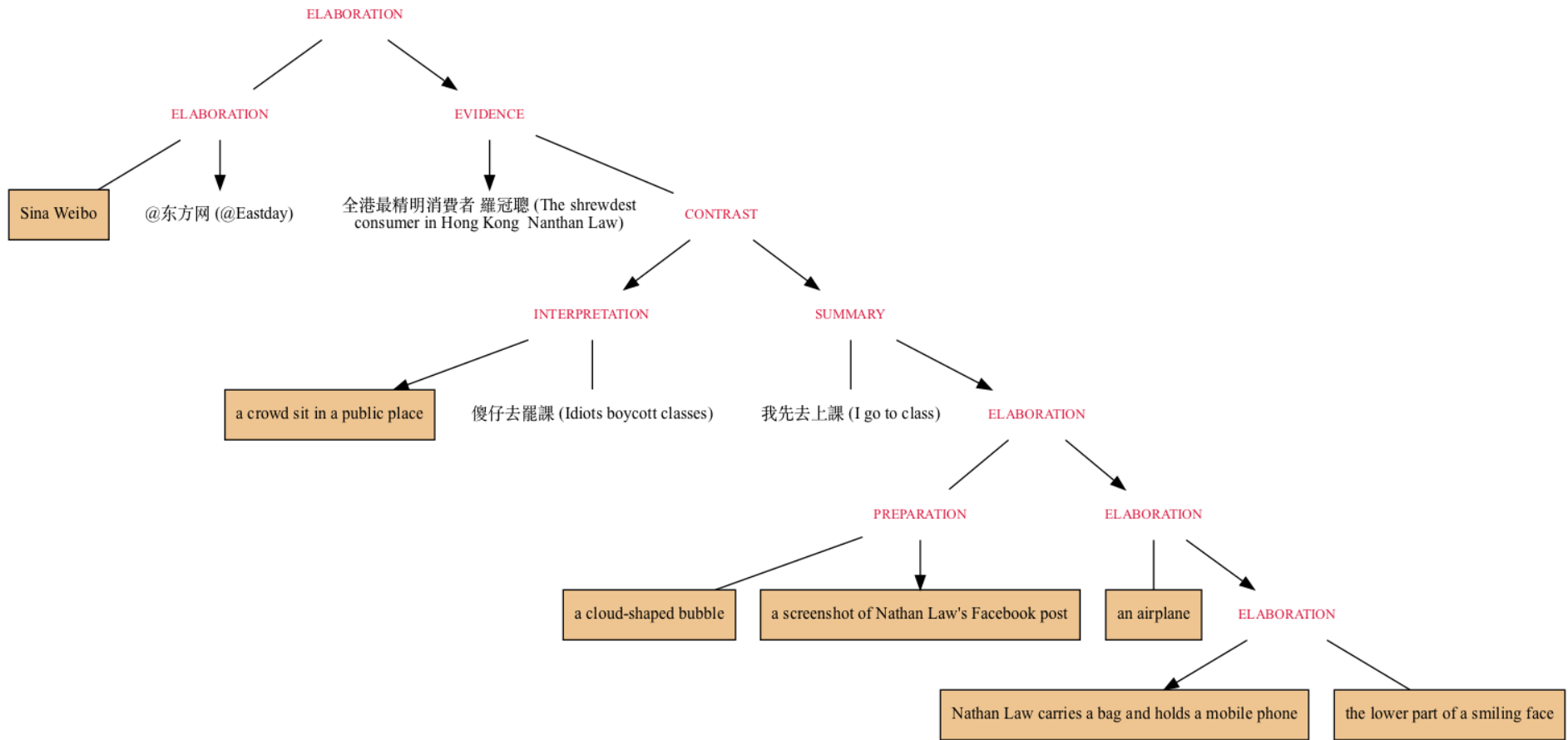


Figure 4.13 The RST structure of the meme sample

As demonstrated above, the annotation of the RST structure not only provides an overview of the involved rhetorical relations and status of the multimodal units. It also helped clarify how the messages are constructed hierarchically. Specifically, the lower part of a smiling face is visually related to Nathan Law who is holding a phone. This relationship features an asymmetric elaboration and elaborates Nathan's mood as happy. Moreover, viewers are likely to associate this smile with the yellow smiling emoji. The yellow colour also appears in the cloud-shaped dialogue box that overlaps with the photo depicting Nathan and a screenshot presenting one of his Facebook posts. This structure guides viewers to focus on the content of the screenshot, highlighting Nathan's plan of flying to the US for study. These effects are achieved through preparation and elaboration relations.

Another overlapping unit is a photo illustrating a crowd in a public space, with its meaning clarified by the written text that labels the crowd as “*傻仔 (shazai, idiots)*” and their action as “*罷課 (bake, boycott classes)*.” This integration establishes an interpretation relation, providing context that is not immediately clear in the image. The text “*傻仔去罷課 (shazai qu bake, Idiots boycott classes)*” contrasts with “*我先去上課 (wo xianqu shangke, I go to class)*,” highlighting a semantic antonymy. These phrases are further connected to the photo of Nathan through a semantic reference, helping viewers to distinguish between Nathan, who played a leading role in the protest, and other activists, who were portrayed as supporting participants. The three remaining units exhibit spatial parallelism. The text “*全港最精明消費者 羅冠聰 (quangang zui jingming xiaofeizhe luo guancong)*” critiques Nathan as Hong Kong's shrewdest consumer, supported by the contrast mentioned earlier. Additionally, the text “*@東方網 (@Eastday)*” and the logo of Sina Weibo form a watermark, elaborating on the source of this meme.

At the beginning of this section, it was explained that all annotations were store in XML files, enabling a cross-reference between the base, layout, and RST layers. By using the traceable labels attached to each base units (see Table 4.7 for examples), it became possible to explore across the three annotation layers for specific enquiries, such as the most frequently used formal properties, the general complexity of layout structure, a list of rhetorical relations, and the asymmetric or symmetric status of the image and writing modes. Despite the

availability of these retrievable information, two issues arose, as explained in the following section.

#### **4.2.3.3 Issues arose from application**

The first issue arose from the application of the GeM framework and its schema relates to their descriptive nature and focus on the functionality of multimodal artefacts. The bottom-up approach did provide a general understanding of Diba's memes as digital artefacts featuring particular spatial compositions, a limited list of formal properties, and rhetorical complementation between the divided meme components. However, these findings tell little about Diba participants' meaning-making practices beyond the contemporary technical environment. As explained earlier in section 4.2.3.1, the GeM framework primarily aims to uncover functional constraints affecting trivial decisions. Thus, focus of the corpus investigation is more about how meme producers navigate the socio-technical environment, in which different digital resources are made available for memetic remixing and imitation. This focus is explicitly reflected by Bateman (2002, 2004; 2003) and his colleagues' decision of labelling the segmented minimal units without elaborating on theoretical basis for examining their semantic or semiotic meanings. Given that these meanings are not static, my findings obtained from the GeM annotation revealed more flexible and contextualised practices that Diba participants used to articulate political ideas in different communicative situations. To understand the resultant messages, it is essential to resort to a top-down approach and embed Diba's memes in the specific socio-cultural context of communication rather than the broader socio-technical environment of meme production. This analytical requirement drove me to modify research questions, theoretical framework, and switch to conduct a contextual analysis of Diba's memes.

The second issue aroused from the application of the GeM schema relates to the heavy workload of annotating Diba's memes manually in XML format. Although the ultimate goal of the GeM schema is to realise an automatic procedure of processing multimodal data, no available model can be directly applied to Diba's memes which were produced in response to different communicative needs. As a result, my GeM annotation was confined with a rather small amount of data. 179 memes were selected for their high repetition frequency in the classified datasets, and the retrieved quantitative results might not be representative enough to showcase Diba participants' meaning-making practices.

To level up the size of corpus and assist a social semiotic analysis of Diba's memes, I simplified the annotation steps which are explained in the following section.

#### **4.2.4 Simplified steps of data annotation**

The simplified annotation was conducted manually with Excel files. Its procedure was primarily based on my modifications to the GeM base layer. Rather than conducting a comprehensive description of Diba's memes in terms of layout and rhetorical structures, my simplified steps focused on (1) what image elements and linguistic expressions are used for meaning construction, and (2) what formal properties are involved in these image elements and written texts as semiotic resources.

##### **4.2.4.1 Image**

To explore the messages conveyed by Diba's memes and make this exploration measurable, I draw on Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996, 2006, 2021) discussion of visual representation and transcribed the representational meanings of these memes. Adapting Halliday's linguistic model of systemic functional grammar, Kress and van Leeuwen proposed that images are also governed by a set of visual grammar that people use to communicate and make sense of the world. Through the representational function, an image or visual composition can convey information, depict objects, or present specific events. From their perspective, representational meaning is constructed through the depiction of participants (e.g. people, objects, places) and the relationships between them. Participants can be represented as either active in narrative structures or static in conceptual structures. In narrative structures, participants are shown engaging in activities, actions, events, and processes. For instance, an image of an individual clapping hands in a meeting illustrates a narrative action. The represented individual is an active participant in a dynamic process and within a circumstance. In contrast, conceptual structures focus on classifying, defining, or describing participants. Typical examples are a map showing a small area of the world and a portrait indicating the age, gender, or occupation of an individual. Arranging and collocating these visual elements in an image can create meanings that reflect practices, ideologies, and norms in a specific socio-cultural context. Given my research purpose of embedding Diba's memes within the broader context and examining their political ideas, my transcription focused on what participants, actions, and circumstances can be explicitly observed in Diba's memes.

To investigate the visual styles commonly seen in Diba's memes as digital artefacts, I used four categories to annotate image elements, focusing on different levels of details and the potential influences of image processing technologies: (1) The photographic style was deployed to annotate elements that show a high degree of realism, capture real-life scenes or objects, generate a sense of reality, and symbolise authenticity. (2) The realistic style was utilised to annotate elements that seek to present a high degree of resemblance to real-life scenarios or objects by artistically emphasising accurate texture, lighting, and proportions. (3) The filtered style typically annotated elements that are explicitly enhanced through digital filters or other tools in various ways, such as adjusting colour, brightness, or contrast. (4) The cartoonish style was employed to categorise elements that feature simple lines and show a relatively low degree of resemblance to real-life scene or objects.

Another formal property that I annotated for image elements is shot types. Unlike the existing studies (Snoek and Worring, 2005; Bateman and Schmidt, 2011) exploring camera shots and angles of photography and film making, I used the term "shot" to categorise levels of detail and context provided by the annotated image elements. As a typical digital product of remixing, internet memes commonly integrate materials taken from different sources, such as movies, news reports, TV series, or social media posts. When capturing content directly from a digital screen, meme producers need to decide whether to focus on a particular elements or detailed area or to include larger portion of the displayed scene. Such decisions are inevitably motivated by specific communicative purposes. For instance, to appropriate resources from a movie, meme producers may capture the face of the character for emotive expression or capture the upper body for more contextual information. Therefore, I drew on labels, such as close-up, head, medium, and full shots, to describe Diba participants' focus of capturing elements from content on screen. Social media posts recontextualised into Diba's memes were not annotated in terms of shot type, as they are transcribed as "social media post" and extracted for any perceptible written texts (see section 4.2.4.2 for further elaboration).

#### **4.2.4.2 Writing**

The process of annotating written texts in Diba's memes began with the manual extraction. Since internet memes can become blurred during cross-platform transmission, the manual extraction ensured that when encountering unclear texts, I could use Google Image to trace the source and verify or complete the blurred parts. Furthermore, extracted texts were classified according to the involved languages.

In terms of formal properties, I firstly annotated written texts for their typefaces. As Bellantoni and Woolman (2000, p. 6) pointed out, printed words carry two possibilities of expressing meaning: they can act as “word image” to present the intended idea by themselves and construct the meaning through strings of letters, while they can also work as “typographic image” to convey meaning through the printed words’ “holistic visual impression”. Serafini and Clausen (2012) also agreed that typefaces or fonts function as the vehicle to materialised written languages. In this sense, written texts’ typography is eligible to be treated as a medium of expression (Neuenschwander, 1993). Both van Leeuwen (2005) and Stöckl (2005) asserted that most typographies can be considered as complex connotative sign systems of meaning potentials. The connotative meaning of a typeface or font is determined by its associative relations with the domain from which it originated, and these relations are usually conventionalised within cultural groups. Furthermore, van Leeuwen (2005) emphasised that typefaces can also convey meanings as material signifiers through their metaphorical potentials, which justifies angular fonts’ ability to represent certain emotions or concepts. In the case of internet memes, Brideau and Berret (2014) revealed that Impact, a sans-serif typeface, has been sustaining as the meme font in English image macros for decades. Given that the fixed role of this typeface primarily resulted from the predefined procedures that are widely and automatically applied by digital meme generators, my annotation focused more on other typefaces, such as handwritten and script typefaces, serving as semiotic resources.

The second formal property that I annotated for written texts related to colour as semiotic resources. Specifically, this step was further divided into annotating colours of the text and any colourful backgrounds that are used to highlight specific textual elements.

Appendix B presents three representative memes to exemplify my simplified annotation methods. With the annotated corpus at hand, the next section elaborates on tools and focuses of corpus investigation.

### **4.3 Corpus investigation**

My switch to the contextual approach was not motivated by retrieving a list of statistic findings or frequency numbers from the annotated corpus. Instead, as mentioned earlier, this theoretical and methodological shift intends to locate Diba’s memes in the communication moment of each expedition. Thus, the annotated corpus functioned more to assist me to navigate diverse resources included in Diba’s memes and elicit the notable ones for the subsequent qualitative analysis. Basically, my corpus investigation featured a process that was

guided by the research questions listed in section 1.3, involved iterative navigation between annotated elements, and was informed by significant occurrence frequency and concordance.

During the corpus investigation, AntConc was used to explore English transcriptions of image elements and Anglophone extractions of written text, while DocuSky and Voyant Tools were employed to examine Chinese extractions of written text.

Specifically, the investigation began from word lists automatically generated using AntConc and DocuSky. The primary focus of this step was to identify keywords with noticeable occurrence frequencies. Since AntConc often divides texts into individual word units, adjustments were made to ensure meaningful results. In addition to excluding functional words such as “the” and “a/an” from English transcriptions and extractions, the n-gram range was modified to include both individual and multiple word units. This adjustment ensured that lexical words providing descriptive information about annotated image elements were retained in the analysis. Typical examples are discussed in section 5.5.1 and section 7.2.3, where adjective words like “red” and “chained” play a crucial role in examining the layered symbolic meanings of the depicted participants. A similar method was applied when investigating Chinese extractions using DocuSky, although the n-gram range was adjusted based on single or multiple Chinese characters. After generating word lists for both English and Chinese, the next step involved inquiring their collocations using AntConc and Voyant Tools. As exemplified in Appendix B, each meme data was assigned an ID number, with all transcriptions and extractions for a specific meme represented by sub-IDs. This hierarchical ID labelling system enabled the tracing of noticeable collocations across related meme data. This step of investigation not only helped focus analytical attention on elements that informed Diba participants’ meaning-making practices but also facilitated an initial classification in terms of content, including the expressed ideas or themes.

As indicated in section 3.3.1, I meant to consider Diba’s memes as multimodal constructions motivated by Diba participants’ goal of expressing pro-government opinions and different communicative situations of the expeditions. Thus, the corpus investigation was embedded within an analytical procedure that began by identifying the overarching theme and purpose of each expedition. This analytical step was followed by corpus investigation and contextually grounded explorations of how semiotic meanings in Diba’s memes are constructed to align with the overarching purpose of each expedition and reinforce the pro-government stance. Based on this analytical route, the following four chapters will present findings not only from the annotated meme data but also from the background information and recruiting posters collected during my non-participant observation. In each analysis chapter, the recruiting posters



and the motivations behind each expedition will come first to introduce the situational context of Diba's meme communication at a macro level. Drawing on the concept of participant structures (see section 3.1.1 for further elaboration), the findings will be organised to demonstrate (1) how Diba's memes represent China, other involved country or regions, Diba participants, and targeted individuals or institutions as the primary participants, and (2) what semiotic meanings are expressed through these representations and how they contribute to conveying Diba's political opinions in each expedition.

#### **4.4 Ethical concerns**

Addressing ethical concerns is an essential part of research that involves collecting data from digital platforms. In internet-based research, it is crucial to maximise benefits and minimise harm to all parties involved at each stage (Markham and Buchanan, 2012).

As explained in section 4.1, I identified suitable data sources and collected representative meme data through my non-participant observation of Diba participants' activities across various digital platforms. Although the data collection process focused exclusively on image comments publicly posted by Diba participants or other Facebook users during the limited time frames of the expeditions, the distinction between public and private online information varies depending on the context (British Psychological Society, 2017). According to the *Code of Human Research Ethics* (2021), if online data cannot reasonably be considered as information from public domain, valid consent should be obtained from participants to ensure they retain the right to withdraw and amend all or part of the collected data. Similarly, Sharf (1999) advocated for obtaining informed consent, even when the research is purely observational. In light of these concerns regarding participant rights and the handling of potentially private information, it is important to underline that this research focuses primarily on examining Diba's meaning-making practices as a pro-government group rather than on collecting or analysing personal information.

During my non-participant observation, I acted as a covert observer and had no interaction with any individuals or institutions participating in targeted by the expeditions. As justified in section 4.1, this method was selected only for gaining a general understanding of the Diba Expedition as an online phenomenon, collecting data in natural settings, and obtaining contextual information without deliberate distortion or concealment. Moreover, as detailed in Table 4.3, the data sources identified during my focused observation were Facebook pages owned or administrated by public figures and institutions. These pages often function as an

online public space, enabling their owners or administrators to communicate with the broader community about public issues and engage potential audiences through options of commenting or reacting. Consequently, posts on these identified Facebook pages can be regarded as public propaganda or information intentionally made public, as their primary purpose is to attract attention and foster discussion.

In addition to the public nature of these identified Facebook pages, it is worth emphasising that the accessibility of each page was manually checked during the selected observation, and the post content posts was not archived (see section 4.1.4 for further elaboration). In other words, the meme data forming the final corpus only included image comments posted within the limited time frame of each expedition and that remained visible on public posts at the time of data collection. More importantly, as revealed by my observational findings in section 4.1.1, Diba participants typically expanded their initial meme pool by disseminating pre-designed memes and continuously incorporating new ones during their cross-platform activities. Many of these memes were circulated with hashtags for mobilising potential participants. Furthermore, through screenshots and livestreams, Diba participants also displayed these memes to draw public attention and highlight the latest developments of their collective actions on Facebook. These observational findings support my argument that, from the perspective of Diba participants as meme producers and users, the accessible meme images on the identified Facebook posts were considered as public content serving to communicate political opinions to a broad audience.

Based on the above considerations, it is ethical to conduct my non-participant observation of the Diba Expedition and collect data from the 12 selected Facebook pages. Nevertheless, following the data collection process, I applied for an ethical review in 2021 (refer to Appendix C for the ethical approval). As elaborated below, this decision was prompted by the political turmoil in Hong Kong, which resulted in the inaccessibility of meme data collected from several Facebook posts involved in the 2017 and 2019 expeditions.

As briefly introduced in section 4.1.4, the 2017 expedition was triggered by an offline argument over Hong Kong independence, and it primarily targeted the student unions of Hong Kong's local universities which had demonstrated pro-independence views during the conflict (see section 6.1 for detailed background information). In contrast, expeditions in 2019 were organised in response to Hong Kong's Anti-ELAB Movement with the targeted Facebook pages predominantly owned or administrated by pro-democracy individuals and institutions (see section 8.1 for detailed background information). After the enactment of the Hong Kong National Security Law in June 2020, *Apple Daily* (Hong Kong) ceased operations due to

escalating government suppression of news media and the arrest of its founder, Jimmy Lai (BBC News, 2021a). Additionally, pro-democracy activists, including Joshua Wong and Nathan Law, faced imprisonment or fugitives sought by Chinese authorities (BBC News, 2020, 2021b), while *Stand News* and the CUHK student union were forced to dissolve (Kwan and Graham-Harrison, 2021; Leung, 2021). As a result, content on the Facebook pages of *Apple Daily* (Hong Kong), *Stand News*, and the CUHK student union became inaccessible. Some posts on the Facebook pages of Joshua Wong and Nathan Law were also made unavailable. These developments affected the online accessibility of over 200 meme data in the 2017 and 2019 sub-corpora. These data not only formed a substantial portion of my corpus but also played a significant role in analysing how Diba participants expressed pro-government opinions in two different years and addressed mainland-Hong Kong disputes.

Given that all the meme data were collected before the upheavals, the ethical inclusion of these data in the corpus should be evaluated based on their relationship to the changed political situation and my analytical focus. Although the data were no longer accessible online after the associated Facebook pages were made unavailable, they did not directly contribute to the tension between the authorities and the pro-democracy individuals or institutions. Thus, it can be argued that the public nature of the meme data as social media comments remains intact. Furthermore, as highlighted earlier in this section, the content of the commented posts was not collected. Rather than exploring the political advocacy of pro-democracy individuals or institutions, my analytical focus is on Diba's memes as a reflection of their meaning-making practices. Therefore, no confidential information is used in this research, and the risks to the pro-democracy individuals or institutions whose Facebook pages were restricted from public access are minimal.

In addition to the above ethical concerns, another issue that needs to be addressed relates to internet users whose personal information is included in Diba's memes. This situation often arises from the regulations of China's digital platforms, particularly those that automatically overlay usernames on shared or downloaded images in the form of watermarks. Although this practice was introduced to protect intellectual property, promote platform branding, and discourage misinformation (Lian, Chen and Wang, 2012), it inevitably exposes the transmission routes of shared content and raises privacy concerns. To safeguard the privacy of internet users whose usernames or ID numbers are included in Diba's memes, I implemented anonymity methods to conceal the relevant watermarks and reduce the possibility of tracing their platform accounts. However, these methods were not applied to watermarks displaying logos or names of digital platforms and public institutions, such as news media and government

organisations. This information was preserved as it plays an important role in my analysis to uncover the cross-platform transmission of Diba's memes and their connections with public institutions as sources of semiotic resources.

#### **4.5 Summary**

This chapter outlined methods that this research used for collecting, classifying, selecting, and annotating representative data.

Through a non-participant observation, a total number of 11,386 image data were collected. During this process, contextual information, such as Diba's recruiting posters, were archived to facilitate the subsequent qualitative analysis. Based on the criteria of perceptual similarity and political bias, the collected data were further classified for selecting representative memes.

Focusing on four paralleled sub-corpora and 980 sampling data, this chapter elaborated an attempt of data annotation following the GeM framework, explained the aroused issues, and presented simplified annotation steps. The simplified annotation concentrates on the representational meanings and formal properties of the corpus data, assisting the navigation and investigation of notable semiotic resources, occurrence frequency, and concordance. Preliminary findings obtained in this corpus investigation are then embedded in the communicative situation of relevant expedition to facilitate the qualitative analysis in the following four chapters.

## Chapter 5 The 2016 expedition to Taiwan

The 2016 expedition was primarily conducted to oppose the Taiwan independence and support the One-China principle. In line with this stance, Diba participants flooded several Facebook pages belonging to media agencies and public figures. The main targets were *Apple Daily* (Taiwan), SETN, and Tsai Ing-wen. Their Facebook pages received a large number of memetic comments generated by Diba participants. The expedition was organised on 20 January 2016, shortly after Tsai Ing-wen won the Taiwanese presidential election on 16 January. As a member of the traditionally pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), Tsai (2016) repeatedly referred to Taiwan as a country in her inaugural speech. She also highlighted the need to safeguard the sovereignty and territory of the Republic of China (ROC). Given the timing of the 2016 expedition and the Taiwanese presidential election, it is reasonable to attribute Diba participants' collective action to their backlash against the election result. However, previous studies (Yang *et al.*, 2017; Liu, 2019; Wu and Fitzgerald, 2023) suggested that the examination of the 2016 expedition should trace back to a fandom incident in November 2015, which served as the initial trigger.

### 5.1 Background of the expedition

The incident originated with Chou Tzu-yu, a Taiwanese singer based in South Korea. Chou was publicly criticised by Huang An, a mainland-based Taiwanese singer, for waving the flag of ROC on a Korean television show. Known for his anti-independence stance, Huang exposed several Taiwanese artists' pro-independence comments between 2015 and 2016 (Song, 2016). Typically, artists exposed by Huang would face the loss of their commercial relationships with mainland partners. Given this potential impact, Huang's critical posts on Sina Weibo drew rebuttals and denials from Chou's fans (Global Times, 2016a). While SETN (2016b) supported Chou in a news report, Huang deleted the relevant posts on the same day. However, when knowing Chou and her K-pop group were scheduled to work with mainland TV stations for celebrating the Spring Festival, Huang revived his criticism on 8 January 2016. In several Weibo posts, he repeatedly censured Chou for waving the ROC flag in Korea and condemned SETN for promoting Chou as a symbol of Taiwan independence. Like other artists previously exposed by Huang, Chou's commercial collaborations with mainland TV stations and companies were immediately suspended. Additionally, criticisms on Chou intensified across various Chinese social media platforms. Alongside Huang, more Chinese internet users began demanding that Chou should apologise and publicly acknowledge the One-China principle.

After days of pressure and criticism, Chou's Korean employer, JYP Entertainment, issued a formal apology on Weibo on 13 January (China Daily, 2016). However, this move did not stop the Chinese internet users from continuing their boycott against Chou and her K-pop group. As public outrage grew and JYP's stock price fell (The Korea Herald, 2016), JYP (2016) released another statement emphasising Chou's acknowledgement of the One-China principle. This statement sparked extensive discussion and dissatisfaction in Taiwan. One day before the 2016 Taiwanese presidential election, JYP uploaded a short video<sup>6</sup> in which Chou read a pre-prepared apology statement. Mainland internet users questioned the sincerity of Chou's apology. Lin Gengxin, a mainland-based Chinese actor, mocked her not being well-prepared to memorise the script. Meanwhile, the video ignited a firestorm of controversy among Taiwanese internet users. Many criticised the mainland, JPY, and Huang for forcing the 16-year-old Chou into this situation and treating her like a hostage. While Chou received support from all three Taiwanese presidential candidates, Show Lo, a Taiwanese artist, publicly asserted that "we're all Chinese people" (Cheung, 2016).

Due to their pro-mainland comments, the Facebook pages of Lin and Lo encountered spontaneous attacks from Taiwanese internet users. After Tsai Ing-wen led the pro-independence DPP to win the presidential election, online confrontations and tensions reached the peak. In this climate, a Weibo user called for a collective expedition to Facebook (Wu, Li and Wang, 2019). This led to the launch of the first Diba Expedition.

## 5.2 Responses to different One-China policies

In all identified written texts, Taiwan is mentioned bilingually for 152 times. Simplified Chinese is used to mention Taiwan for 103 times, while traditional Chinese acts to refer to Taiwan for 44 times, surpassing their English counterparts (n=5). Although these bilingual words of "Taiwan" literally convey an identical meaning, they reflect Diba participants' intention of communicating with potential audiences from different language backgrounds. Furthermore, the use of bilingual expressions allows Diba participants to engage with how Taiwan is represented in different communities: the mainland Chinese community, the Taiwanese community which commonly uses the traditional Chinese, and the international community where English serves as a global lingua franca.

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<sup>6</sup> This video was simultaneously uploaded to JYP's official website, YouTube channel, Twitter, Facebook, and Sina Weibo. Also, it was broadcasted repeatedly and widely on Taiwan's TV programs: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t57URqSp5Ew>

Figure 5.1 presents three memes that collocate anti-independence texts either with the flag of the PRC or with its administrative maps. The first meme involves the flag of the PRC and uses traditional Chinese to assert that “there is only one China in the world” and “Taiwan is an inalienable part of” it. The other two memes collocate bilingual texts with the PRC’s administrative map which is depicted in a cartoonish visual style. Although this style can only roughly outline the curving borders, it highlights the intentional inclusion of Taiwan as a small part of the map. Moreover, an English text is placed on this map, stating that all the people living in the depicted regions are Chinese. Through the other English and simplified Chinese texts, this meme restates the one-China concept, targeting audiences who can read English or simplified Chinese. Also, it explicitly delivers this message to the international community where English is commonly used as a lingua franca. Another notable feature is in the third meme where the two Chinese texts in red state that the Diba Expedition aims to eliminate all pro-independence individuals. This functions not only as a slogan but also reflects the assertive attitude of Diba participants.



(translation)

1. There is only one China in the world. Taiwan is an inalienable part of China
2. Taiwan belongs to my country
3. Taiwan is an inalienable part of China
4. Taiwan belongs to my country
5. Diba goes on the expedition
6. No pro-independence individuals can survive
7. Taiwan is an inalienable part of China

*Figure 5.1. Diba’s memes bilingually repeating the core idea of the One-China principle*

Conveying territorial claims through written texts is not rare in Diba’s memes. The following Table 5.1 shows that in Diba’s memes, 21 simplified Chinese texts are used either to present Taiwan as China’s territory or define it in terms of administrative division. This practice

is also seen in another 4 written texts, employing traditional Chinese and English to restate that Taiwan forms a part of China.

			<b>Number (Freq)</b>
Simplified Chinese	台湾 (Taiwan)	是中国不可分割的领土 (is an inalienable territory of China)	8
	台湾 (Taiwan)	自古以来就是中国的领土 (is China's territory since ancient times)	5
	台湾 (Taiwan)	是中国的 (belongs to China)	3
	台湾 (Taiwan)	是中国不可分割的一部分 (is an inalienable part of China)	2
	台湾 (Taiwan)	属于我国 (belongs to my country)	1
	台湾 (Taiwan)	属于中国 (belongs to China)	1
	台湾 (Taiwan)	是中国领土不可分割的一部分 (is an inalienable part of China's territory)	1
			<b>21</b>
			<b>Number (Freq)</b>
Traditional Chinese	台灣 (Taiwan)	是中國不可分割的一部分 (is an inalienable part of China)	1
	台灣 (Taiwan)	是屬於中國的！ (belongs to China!)	1
			<b>2</b>
			<b>Number (Freq)</b>
English	Taiwan	is an inalienable part of China	1
	TAIWAN	BELONGS TO MY COUNTRY	1
			<b>2</b>

*Table 5.1 Bilingual territorial claims over Taiwan*

As introduced earlier, the 2016 expedition fundamentally reflects the longstanding confrontation between the two political positions of supporting and opposing Taiwan independence. In other words, the core argument in the expedition was about the political status of Taiwan not only in cross-strait relations but also within the international community. During the process of transforming the fandom incident into a political event, it is also noticeable that the one-China concept was iterated almost at every stage. However, there are diverse ways to



interpret the concept of “one China” and define Taiwan’s political status (Kan, 2014; Drun, 2017). Each of them constructs a distinctive representation of Taiwan and its cross-strait relations with mainland China. In the case of the 2016 expedition, the following three ways of interpretation are involved.

The first interpretation of the one-China concept is usually referred to by the CCP as the One-China principle. This principle, which Chou was compelled to recognise, is the foundation underpinning Diba participants’ anti-independence stance. Before 2016, China’s central government elaborated in two white papers (1993, 2000), asserting Taiwan’s inalienable status as part of China based on their geographical, historical, social, cultural, and economic ties. The latest white paper (Xinhua News Agency, 2022) continues to present "one country, two systems" as a solution for governing Taiwan post-reunification. Nevertheless, the One-China principle is always emphasised as the premise for any promised autonomy.

The second interpretation relates to the 1992 Consensus, stemming from a semi-official cross-strait meeting between the CCP-led mainland and the Kuo Min Tang (KMT)-led Taiwan. While the mainland views the consensus as an agreement corresponding to the One-China principle (2016), the KMT interprets it as “one China, different interpretations”, with each side not explicitly agreeing on which government represents “China”. Under Ma Ying-jeou’s administration (2015), this ambiguity helped maintain cross-strait stability and reopen dialogues (Chen, 2013; Matsuda, 2015). However, the 1992 Consensus has been contentious in Taiwan’s partisan debates (Xu, 2000; Lams, 2018; Lee, 2019). In the 2016 inaugural speech, although Tsai acknowledged this consensus as a historical fact, she rejected it after Xi’s 2019 speech commemorating the 40th anniversary of the *告台湾同胞书* (*gao taiwn tongbao shu*, Message to Compatriots in Taiwan) (Tsai, 2019).

The third interpretation depends on individual countries’ approaches to China and Taiwan, shaped by historical interactions and diplomatic policies. The US’s One-China policy, for example, is framed by the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), three joint communiqués, and the Six Assurances, agreed upon from 1972 to 1982 (Kan, 2014; Lawrence, 2023). Despite differences between these agreements, the US consistently uses its One-China policy to assert key positions: non-support for Taiwan’s *de jure* independence, commitment to Taiwan’s self-defence, and opposition to unilateral changes to the cross-strait status quo. As for Taiwan’s claim of sovereignty and the PRC’s claim over Taiwan, the US’s attitude is strategically ambiguous.

Considering the above distinct interpretations of Taiwan's political status, it is arguable that the bilingual emphasis of territorial integrity can reflect Diba participants' attitude towards how Taiwan is represented under the 1992 Consensus and other countries' One-China policies.

Specifically, simplified Chinese texts consistently iterate what has already been stated and justified in the One-China principle. However, traditional Chinese and English texts are deployed more than to echo "Taiwan is an inalienable part of China" and Taiwan "belongs to" China. For Taiwanese and international communities, the 1992 Consensus and the ever-evolving One-China policies facilitate them to form a more ambiguous and even different interpretations of Taiwan and China. In this sense, traditional Chinese and English texts not only repeat the core idea of the One-China principle but also emphasise that the term "China" in all relevant agreements only refers to the PRC. This emphasis is rather notable if put the bilingual texts into relevant memes. Through the bilingual written texts, Diba's memes proclaim that there is only one interpretation of the one-China concept. This claim is in explicit contrast to the KMT's understanding of "one China, different interpretations". Alongside the national flag of the PRC, Diba participants specifies that the sole China is the PRC rather than the ROC. The first meme in Figure 5.1 therefore represents a firm deny against the KMT's ambiguous position in the 1992 Consensus.

The other two memes in Figure 5.1 collocate bilingual texts with the PRC's administrative map. The map is presented in a cartoonish visual style. Although this visual style can only roughly outline the curving borderline, it helps highlight the intentional inclusion of Taiwan as a small part. Moreover, the English text is utilised to restate the One-China principle's core statement. This repetition targets potential audiences who can read English. Also, it reacts to how Taiwan is politically represented in the international community. Earlier in this section, it was exemplified that different countries often adopt distinctive approaches to Taiwan and the mainland. These diplomatic approaches are highly dependent on a country's historical interactions with Taiwan and the mainland. As a result, how Taiwan's political status and the one-China concept are interpreted by the involved countries often evolves according to different situations and interests. From this perspective, the last two memes in Figure 5.1 intrinsically present Diba participants' opposition to the strategic ambiguity in other countries' One-China policies. Specifically, they challenge their One-China policies with the multimodal representation of Taiwan as an inalienable part in the PRC's administrative map.

Additionally, the third meme in Figure 5.1 uses the red colour to highlight the simplified Chinese text which chants Diba's group slogan. By integrating this slogan with other multimodal elements, this meme adds an extra layer of sentiment to Diba participants' anti-

independence stance. It not only states that Taiwan belongs to the PRC but also constructs a serious threat, claiming that the Diba Expedition will destroy anyone who does not endorse the One-China principle. Nevertheless, this combative threat is only perceptible for receivers who can read Chinese.

### 5.3 Justifications of territorial claim

In addition to highlighting China's territorial integrity by referring to the One-China principle, it was found that Diba's memes also serve to justify the specific territorial claim over Taiwan in diverse ways. As analysed and discussed in the following sub-sections, they construct these justifications not only by underlining the geographical, administrative, cultural relations shared across the Taiwan Strait during different historical periods but also by defining Taiwan's political position in the international community.

#### 5.3.1 Taiwan as an island

The first part of the 1993 white paper states that "Taiwan is China's largest island and forms an integral whole with the mainland". On the official website of the PRC's state council (2020), it is also explained that Taiwan was originally connected to the mainland before it was submerged by the raised sea level and other geographic changes. Based on this ready-made justification, one of Diba's memes refers to Taiwan as an island and compares it to a slice of *angelica sinensis*. As demonstrated below in Figure 5.2, this meme deploys a simplified Chinese text to claim that Taiwan island is the PRC's sacred and inviolable territory.



(translation)

1. Although you are not as good as the mainland is  
Taiwan island belongs to China  
The sacred territory of the PRC is inviolable
2. Angelica sinensis

Figure 5.2 Diba's meme comparing the Taiwan island to a slice of angelica sinensis

In the corner of this meme, a traditional Chinese text is added to elaborate the adjacent image element as angelica sinensis, a kind of herb indigenous to China. Different from the simplified Chinese text, the traditional Chinese text is featured by the script typeface that mimics the Chinese calligraphy. This feature highlights the aesthetic history of Chinese as a writing system. It also reflects the long history of angelica sinensis being used as a traditional medicine in China.

The angelica sinensis does have a profound relation with China's traditional culture. However, including the angelica sinensis in Diba's meme seems neither cohesive in the multimodal combination nor coherent in the communicative situation of the 2016 expedition. To figure out its role in constructing Diba' participants' anti-independence stance, it is necessary to resort to the formal properties of the depicted objects. As discussed below, it is also necessary to consider their interdiscursive relations with other historical contexts and contemplate whether semiotic meanings of angelica sinensis constructed within those contexts are appropriated into the expedition for political purposes.

For the image elements in Figure 5.2, the depicted angelica sinensis has an uneven surface and a silhouette which resembles the shape of Taiwan island. The upper right part of this meme employs the edge of another slice of angelica sinensis to represent mainland China. This depiction helps to construct a visual analogy, representing two sides of the Taiwan Strait as two separated slices of angelica sinensis. Through this analogy, Diba participants express the idea that Taiwan and mainland China are like two slices of angelica sinensis. Despite being separated geographically, they share a common origin.

This idea is also reinforced by the traditional Chinese term 當歸 (*danggui*, angelica sinensis). This term sounds like “*danggui*”, which conveys the meaning of “ought to return”. (Furth, 1986). According to 本草綱目 (*Ben Cao Gang Mu*)<sup>7</sup>, this meaning is also related to an ancient story, in which a husband used the angelica sinensis to bring his wife back to life. Therefore,

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<sup>7</sup> 本草綱目 (*Ben Cao Gang Mu*) is also known as the Compendium of Materia Medica. It was compiled and written by Li Shi-zhen in the Ming dynasty. This compendium is regarded as the most comprehensive medical book in the history of the traditional Chinese medicine.

當歸 (*danggui*, *angelica sinensis*) implies the meaning of “return” and the feeling of gratitude towards the husband. In *三國志* (*sanguo zhi*, *Records of the Three Kingdoms*)<sup>8</sup>, it is also recorded that *angelica sinensis* was once deployed by 曹操 (Cao Cao) to show his intention of recruiting 太史慈 (Taishi Ci) into his camp.

Given the above implications, it is evident that the meme in Figure 5.2 conveys implied meanings through the *angelica sinensis*. That is, the mainland intends to bring the Taiwan island into its camp, and the island ought to return to or unite with the mainland. Moreover, this meme implies that the Taiwan island is not as good as the mainland is, but the mainland is still willing to take it in and use the medicine to bring it back to life. For most viewers, it is not hard to notice the visual analogy between the slice of *angelica sinensis* and the Taiwan island. However, the implied meanings of “ought to return” and “back to life” can be exclusive to a very limited group of viewers, as these meanings were formed previously in ancient stories or records that present *angelica sinensis* as a symbolic object. By transferring these semiotic meanings from historical discourses to Diba’s online expedition, meaning potentials of *angelica sinensis* are extended. In addition to indicating cultural references to China’s traditional medicine and historical figures, it serves to highlight Diba participants’ political opinions which claim Taiwan should return to the mainland and the reunification is beneficial for Taiwan’s future development. Thus, to fully understand the inclusion of *angelica sinensis* in Diba’s meme and the layered semiotic meanings, viewers not only should be able to read traditional Chinese but also need to be familiar with the historical discourses, in which the symbolic role of *angelica sinensis* was constructed and shaped.

### 5.3.2 Taiwan as prefecture or province in history

Among the 103 simplified Chinese terms of 台灣 (Taiwan), 18 is used to address Taiwan as a prefecture or province in history. In the PRC’s first white paper (Xinhua News Agency, 1993), it is regarded as a basic fact that Chinese imperial central governments established administrative bodies to exercise jurisdiction over Taiwan in different historical periods. The white paper further elaborates how the administrative authority was developed from the dispatch of a garrison during the Song dynasty to the reinstatement of the Taiwan Province in the mid-nineteenth century. Despite this official elaboration, Diba participants focus more on

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<sup>8</sup> *三國志* (*sanguo zhi*, *Records of the Three Kingdoms*) was written by Chen Shou. It covers the Chinese history of the end of the Han dynasty and the following Three Kingdoms period.

explaining how the administration of Taiwan was upgraded from a prefecture to a full province in the Qing dynasty.

In terms of content, the relevant memes can be classified into two types. Both feature text-heavy memes. Nevertheless, the first type justifies jurisdiction over Taiwan by briefly introducing certain historical events, while the second type employs the technique of personification to describe the cross-strait relations.

Figure 5.3 presents two memes to exemplify the first type. They both use worn-out margins to create a visual expression of brown papers. In addition to the cartoonish map of Taiwan, goose-quill pens are inserted to introduce a sense of history. The simplified Chinese texts respectively explain the origin of the Taiwan Province and mainland people's first visit to Taiwan through indirect quotations of historical texts, such as *三国志* (*sanguo zhi*, *Records of the Three Kingdoms*).



(translation)

1. The origin of “Taiwan Province”. The establishment of Taiwan Province can be traced back to the Qing dynasty. In 1684 (the 23<sup>rd</sup> year of the reign of Emperor Kangxi), there was the Taiwan Prefecture was set up under the jurisdiction of Fujian Province. In 1885 (the 11<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of Emperor Guangxu), there was the Taiwan Province. And this is the origin of the Taiwan Province.
2. The visit to Taiwan during the Eastern Wu dynasty. According to the *Records of the Three Kingdom*, Sun Quan launched an expedition to Yizhou in 230. Some scholars identified “Yizhou” as the ancient Taiwan.  
The Prefect of Linhai Commandery in Eastern Wu during the Three Kingdoms period can be considered the earliest scholar of Taiwan. His work, *Records of the Waters of Linhai* (see the 780<sup>th</sup> volume of *Prefect's Compendium*), contains specific accounts of Taiwan, which was then referred to as "Yi Zhou". Unfortunately, this book has been lost, and its main contents are recorded in the *Prefect's Compendium*. From the information preserved, it appears to be the most comprehensive written account of Taiwan from that era.  
Of course, some argued that "Yi Zhou" at that time might have referred to somewhere in Guangdong or Hainan. However, based on evidence regarding location, climate, terrain, natural resources, and customs, it is more likely that the term referred to Taiwan. Through *Records of the Waters of Linhai*, many inland residents far from the Taiwan Strait gained limited but incredibly valuable knowledge about the specific situation of Taiwan.

Figure 5.3. Diba's text-heavy memes justifying the mainland's jurisdiction

The conveyed messages in Figure 5.3 echo the PRC's 1993 white paper, which claims Taiwan as a part of China since ancient times. Nevertheless, this type of memes may not be successful to achieve the intended communicative effects. This failure can result from the organisational style of the expedition and the text-heavy nature of these two memes. During the expedition, numerous memes were posted by multiple Diba participants simultaneously and within a very short timeframe. As previous studies uncovered (Yang *et al.*, 2017; Wu, Li and Wang, 2019; Chen, 2023; Zhuang, Huang and Chen, 2023), this collective action inherits the characteristics of China's 爆吧 (*baoba*, bar bursting) and fandom culture. When people unite to burst or attack an online bar or a social media account, self-generated memes or other templated materials are utilised either to interrupt the targeted forums' daily activities (Luo and Zhao, 2012) or to manipulate the visible comments (Zhang and Negus, 2020; Zhai and Wang, 2023). To fulfil these two purposes, memetic content needs to be concise and eye-catching. On the contrary, Diba participants' text-heavy memes are too lengthy to convey the two memes' core ideas within the limited timeframe. Moreover, memes are often resized during cross-platform transmission. Consequently, written texts in memes can become too blurred to be recognised. Even for receivers who can read simplified Chinese, the two memes in Figure 5.3 are merely meaningless images. Instead of communicating any meaningful information, this

type of memes simply satisfies Diba participants themselves through self-performance or imagination of the romantic heroism.

This feature can also be found in memes of the second type. As exemplified in Figure 5.4, Diba's memes of this type repeat a very long Chinese text, which is presented and translated in Table 5.2. Different from memes of the first type, these three memes do not involve any image elements. They are simply screenshots that Diba participants manually generated on their mobile devices. According to the captured interface and watermark, it is evident that these screenshots were taken on iPhone or from a Weibo post. This similarity highlights the connectiveness between the three memes, and it also demonstrates the technical aspects of Diba's meme production.



Figure 5.4. Diba's memes transmitting a similar text through different screenshots

Original text (simplified Chinese)	Translation
<p>你开始愤懑，你开始不满，你高举着小旗子，高喊，我是台湾国。 可是你还记得，是谁给你的这个名字吗？ 那年崇祯皇帝指着你， “在那儿建立台湾省，以后你就叫台湾。” 你还记得，什么时候你失而复得的吗？ 那年，郑成功拼死守护你，他说，你是中国不可分割的领土。 那年，签订了丧权辱国的条约，你拼死要回来，却无能为力。直至那一天，抗日战争结束，你得以光复，你却说，我要走。 如何舍得，如何放下。 好几千年前，你就已经和我们在一起了啊，你不知道换了多少个名字，但你依旧不变啊。 地理书上总是念你，历史书上更是频频出现你，我记得你，我记得你的经纬，我记得曾给你设立过的都护府，网名说你们背叛，挖苦你们，那都是用泪融出来的字。 你可以不屑于，但是你要记得公元230年，我们第一次见面。 你笑容明媚，用着好奇的眼光打量着我，围着我绕了几个圈，最后向我伸出你细嫩的双手：“你好啊，我还没有名字，我也没有依靠。” “你好，我是华夏。你可以跟随我，以后你就叫夷洲，如何？” 你粲然一笑。</p>	<p>You start to get angry. You start to feel dissatisfied. You hold a small flag and shout: I am the Republic of Taiwan. Do you still remember who named you as Taiwan? In that year, Emperor Chongzhen once pointed at you, "Establish a Taiwan Province there, and the island is called Taiwan from now on." Do you still remember when you were reclaimed? In that year, Zheng Chenggong fought hard to protect you. He said that you were China's inalienable territory.</p>



<p>那年，签订了丧权辱国的条约，你拼死要回来，却无能为力。直至那一天，抗日战争结束，你得以光复，你却说，我要走。如何舍得，如何放下。</p> <p>好几千年前，你就已经和我们在一起了啊，你不知道换了多少个名字，但你依旧不变啊。</p> <p>地理书上总是念你，历史书上更是频频出现你，我记得你，我记得你的经纬，我记得曾给你设立过的都护府，网民说你们背叛，挖苦你们，那都是用泪敲出来的字。</p> <p>你可以不屑于，但是你要记得公元230年，我们第一次见面。</p> <p>你笑容明媚，用着好奇的眼光打量着我，围着我绕了几个圈，最后向我伸出你细嫩的双手：“你好啊，我还没有名字，我也没有依靠。”</p> <p>“你好，我是华夏。你可以跟随我，以后你就叫夷洲，如何？”</p> <p>你粲然一笑。</p>	<p>In that year, a humiliating treaty was signed. You desperately wanted to come back, but you were unable to do anything. Until that day, when the second Sino-Japanese War ended and you were liberated, you said, I want to leave. How could you be willing to let go, how could you put everything down.</p> <p>Thousands of years ago, you were already with us. No matter how many names you changed, you are the same island.</p> <p>You are often mentioned in geography books, and you appear frequently in history books. I remember you, I remember your geographical location, and I remember the Protectorate that was established for you. Internet users say that you are a traitor, and they ridicule you. Their ridiculing words were typed with tears.</p> <p>You can be dismissive, but you need to remember:</p> <p>In AD 230, we met for the first time. You smiled brightly, looked at me curiously, and walked around me for several times. Finally, you gave your delicate hands to me: "Hi, I don't have a name yet, and I feel helpless."</p> <p>"Hi, I am Huaxia. You can follow me. From now on, your name will be Yizhou. How about that?"</p> <p>You smiled brightly.</p>
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Table 5.2. Original text in Diba's memes (left) and its translation (right)

The textual extraction presented in Table 5.2 shows that Diba participants intend to justify the mainland's jurisdiction over Taiwan through the technique of personification. This technique enables Diba participants to depict an intimate cross-strait relation. After the 2016 expedition, the first meme in Figure 5.1 was forwarded by *China Daily* (2016b) in a Weixin article. Although Diba participants' lengthy text was praised as heart-touching, it includes several inaccurate narrations of Taiwan's administrative history. As discussed below, it also reveals Diba participants' deep-rooted ideology of Han-centrism and their limited imagination of femininity.

The text in Table 5.2 narrates that the Chongzhen Emperor set up Taiwan Province, and Taiwan insisted to be independent when the second Sino-Japanese War was over. According to the PRC's white papers and relevant studies (Yang, 1985; Chen, 1987), Taiwan was only made a full province in 1885 under the reign of Emperor Guangxu. The Chongzhen Emperor

was the last emperor of Ming dynasty, and he die 241 years before Taiwan Province was set up. The official establishment of Taiwan Province was closely related to the island's increasingly important role in coastal defence (Chen, 1986). After it was ceded to Japan in the first Sino-Japanese War, Taiwan experienced a colonial period of 50 years. Following Japan's surrender in the second Sino-Japanese War and the resume of Chinese Civil War, Taiwan's political status was determined by the complex situation rather than solely by the island's self-choice. Furthermore, Diba's memes assert that there was a "都护府 (*duhufu*, protectorate)" in ancient Taiwan. The Qing dynasty did set up a Taiwan Prefecture Administration under the jurisdiction of Fujian Province, but the administrative division of protectorate was only established in frontier regions during the Han and Tang dynasties (Xie, 2013).

The final part of Diba's lengthy text tries to present an affectionate scene, in which the personified Taiwan and mainland interacted for the first time in 230. It is notable that Taiwan is compared to an "没有名字 (*meiyou mingzi*, unnamed)" and "没有依靠 (*meiyou yikao*, helpless)" female, while the mainland is depicted as a more powerful and resourceful male. In political contexts, techniques of national personification are commonly seen to represent a specific country or its citizens. John Bull and Uncle Sam are two typical examples, which respectively manifest a conventional impression of Englishmen (Taylor, 1992; Matthews, 2000) and American's patriotic emotion (Mitchell, 1996). National personification not only demonstrates the ideologic and cognitive strategies of nation-building (Engström, 2018) but can also influence the attitude formation (McGraw and Dolan, 2007). In this sense, Diba participants intrinsically use the personification to highlight Taiwan's dependency on the mainland since ancient times. This dependency further acts as evidence to justify the anti-independence position. However, this depiction ignores the fact that the earliest inhabitants of Taiwan "dated from 15,000 to 5,000 BP or even earlier" (Tsang, 2005, p. 64). Moreover, other Chinese ethnic minorities are excluded when Diba participants address the mainland as "华夏 (*huaxia*)", a term intrinsically referring to the precursor of China's Han people in the pre-Qin era (Li, 2022).

More importantly, it is important to note that the affectionate tone of Diba's memes implies an intimate dependency between the personified Taiwan and mainland. This kind of implication is rare in other cases of national personification. Considering the expedition's cultural context, this implication can result from Diba participants' consumption of China's

online literature as well as Japan's 二次元 (*nijigen*) and オタク (*otaku*) subcultures. In *nijigen* subculture, personification usually takes the form of 萌え (*moe*) anthropomorphism (Galbraith, 2014; Miyake, 2016; Sousa, 2016). This unique form functions in anime, comics, and video games (ACG) to personify non-human objects, concepts, or phenomena. In ACG-related *otaku* subculture, *moe* anthropomorphism is commonly used to personify non-human objects into beautiful or cute female characters. Thus, relevant studies (Sone, 2014; Galbraith, 2019) considered it as a representative method of creating sexual fantasies through fictional female characters. Under the influence of Japan's ACG products, Chinese youths mimetically apply the *moe* anthropomorphism when they produce internet memes (Saito, 2017) and discuss public topics (Gao, 2021). Also, official discourses appropriated this tactic to promote patriotic sentiments and introduced two virtual female idols in 2020 (Yang, 2022; Wang and Ouyang, 2023). By echoing the practice of *moe* anthropomorphism, Diba's memes turns the cross-strait political tension into a romantic affair. An interdiscursive connection is also established to link the communicative situation of Diba's expedition to the *otaku* subcultural context where personifying non-human objects as delicate females is a typical way of meaning-making. Therefore, the memes inevitably inherit the sexist ideologies which feature the practice of *moe* anthropomorphism and are rather ubiquitous in Japan's socio-cultural contexts. Based on the sexist depiction, Diba participants intentionally assign a subordinative, tender, and harmless role to the personified Taiwan.

As explained below, this inherited sexism also demonstrates Diba participants' consumption of China's online literature. Fang and his colleague (2017) pointed out that the female label of little pink was increasingly popularised during and after the 2016 expedition to refer to China's irrational nationalists. They also found that this gendered label was originally coined and reframed to humiliate nationalist users of 晋江 (*Jinjiang*), China's earliest and most influential women-oriented online literature website (Feng, 2009, 2013; Yang and Xu, 2016). The website not only provides female members with a cybersphere to form an affective community but also witnesses how did they shape the femininity in different romantic stories. Previous studies (Feng, 2013; Hu, 2023) agreed that *Jinjiang* romance enables female members to claim for sexual and political power at individual and collective levels. However, this empowerment is still rooted in the patriarchal ideology which highly values masculine strength. This feature can also be found in Diba's memes. Its romantic narration describes Taiwan as a helpless female who was protected by males since ancient times. By interdiscursively appropriating the

narrative style of Jinjiang romance, Diba participants soften the expedition's aggressiveness. However, their efforts similarly feature sexist values and limited imagination of femininity that are shaped in China's socio-cultural context and reinforced in the romantic narratives of Jinjiang users' online literature. In this sense, the gendered nationalism seemingly values feminine elements, but it is intrinsically dominated by the patriarchal ideology. The femininity is appropriated strategically to support the emotional mobilisation of a masculine expedition.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that Diba participants captured this lengthy text as screenshots on multiple devices, and these screenshots were transmitted as media content across different platforms. Therefore, the relevant memes also faced the challenges of seizing attention within a short timeframe while maintaining image resolution in the resizing procedure. Like the memes illustrated in Figure 5.3, if the simplified Chinese text is too blurred to be recognised, the meme itself will be meaningless. Thus, it is eligible to argue that the affectionate narrative tone and personification only facilitated in-group emotional mobilisation. The lengthy justification of Taiwan as an administrative subordinate was mimetically used for self-satisfaction.

### 5.3.3 Taiwan as modern province

It was found that Diba's memes refer to Taiwan as a modern “*省* (*sheng*, province)” for eight times. Figure 5.5 illustrates two typical examples involving this expression. The left meme employs medium shot to present Tsai's happy mood. Since the 2016 expedition was organised right after Tsai won the 2016 Taiwanese presidential election, this happiness can be related to the positive election result. Nevertheless, a traditional Chinese text is inserted into this meme to elaborate that Tsai is happy for being elected as a “*省長* (*shengzhang*, provincial governor)” rather than as a president.



(translation)

1. Finally become the provincial governor
2. Official seal of the Diba expedition and against the Taiwan independence
3. Diba's subdivision of bomb attack. Diba goes on the expedition, nothing can survive
4. When shop on Taobao, you still need to select the Taiwan Province as your delivery address

*Figure 5.5. Diba's memes representing Taiwan as a modern province*

The right meme in Figure 5.5 represents a mainland business man, 马云 (Ma Yun). The photographic visual style vividly illustrates his frowning expression. This meme uses Ma's facial expression to demonstrate emotions of disdain and pity. The disdain is a reaction to the political orientation of Taiwanese independence. The pity is utilised to mock Taiwanese who oppose the cross-strait reunification while favouring “淘宝 (taobao)”, an online shopping platform established by Ma. Like the memes exemplified earlier in Figure 5.3 and Figure 5.4, the above two memes address Taiwan as a subordinative province. Nevertheless, attitudes and sentiments behinds these memes are slightly different. More importantly, as explained below, the two memes in Figure 5.5 relate to the evolution of Taiwan's administrative division after the Qing dynasty.

After China's Qing emperors set up Taiwan Province, Taiwan's administrative division had undergone a series of modification during the Japanese colonial period and the Chinese Civil War (Wang, 2002; Copper, 2009; Fell, 2018). In 1920, Japan introduced a three-tier system of local government into Taiwan. Under this system, Taiwan's administrative division was comprised of province and sub-province, municipality and county, and the lowest-level township and village (Wang, 2002). Between 1945 and 1949, the KMT-led Nationalist government turned Taiwan into a province of China. Nevertheless, the Chinese Communist proclaimed its control of the mainland in 1949, while the Nationalist was forced to retreat to Taiwan. Consequently, Taiwan had a central government in the late 1949, and the small island started to accommodate a four-tier governmental system (Cheng and Liao, 1998; McBeath, 2000; Wang, 2002). Since the 1950s, county officials were decided through the election process, but the governor of Taiwan was appointed by the KMT. Furthermore, functions of the central and provincial governments were overlapped in multiple policy areas. The year of 1994 marked Taiwan's first democratic election for the Taiwan Province's governorship. Despite of this improvement, the 1997 constitutional reform helped the DPP to promote administrative restructuring and downsize the provincial government (Tan, 2000). Based on constitutional

amendments, provincial governor was officially abolished at the end of 1998. Meanwhile, the provincial government ceased to work as a local self-governing body, and its administrative power was mostly transferred to the central government.

In this context, the left meme in Figure 5.5 constitutes a ridicule of Taiwan as a subordinative province. For Taiwan, streamlining the provincial government was a solution of reducing the operational redundancy. It was also another step of declaring an independent Taiwan. For the mainland, this reform was inevitably seen as a further move towards Taiwan independence. Moreover, the provincial government did not simply symbolise Taiwan's subordinative relation with China's Qing emperors. The island's complex historical background also added at least two implications to the provincial government. That is, an administrative body modified under the Japanese colonial rule and reclaimed by the KMT-led Nationalist China. Thus, by representing Tsai Ing-wen as a provincial governor, Diba's memes do not solely highlight the close cross-strait relations since ancient times. This representation explicitly denies the abolishment of the provincial government in 1998. It also presents a denial against the legitimacy of the Tsai administration, which is fundamentally developed from the 1949 nationalist central government. In other words, the left meme in Figure 5.5 underlines that Taiwan always and only belongs to the PRC as a subordinative province. Since the traditional Chinese is involved in this meme, the anti-independence message may target Taiwanese people.

As explained earlier, the right meme in Figure 5.5 also represents Taiwan as a modern province. However, this representation is justified by drawing on Taiwanese people's experience of shopping on Taobao. Ma Yun established the online platform of Taobao in 2003. After the huge success in the mainland market, global customers are allowed to the use international payment options since 2012 (Bloomberg News, 2012). Alibaba, Taobao's head quarter, expanded a daily deals site of 聚划算 (Juhuasuan) in 2013 to attract more Taiwan-based customers (Summers, 2013). Furthermore, Taobao also worked with FamilyMart convenience store chain to provide pick-up service inside Taiwan (Taipei Times, 2013). When shopping on Taobao, customers in Taiwan can choose different delivery methods. Although all the available delivery methods ask Taiwanese customers for their detailed addresses, platforms generally address Taiwan as “台灣 (Taiwan)” or “台灣地區 (*taiwan diqu*, Taiwan region)”. In contrast to Diba participants' assertion, none of the delivery services utilise the term “台灣省 (*taiwan sheng*, Taiwan Province)”. Therefore, the right meme in Figure 5.5 intentionally

conveys an unwarranted misinformation. The major purpose is not to evidentially justify the representation of Taiwan as a province. Instead, Diba participants employ this meme to show superiority, as both the English and simplified texts emphasise China’s modern role as the world’s factory.

The above analysis demonstrates how Diba’s memes represent and justify Taiwan as a prefecture or province. These justifications primarily follow explanations provided in official white papers (Xinhua News Agency, 1993, 2000). As introduced earlier, China’s central government consistently states that the policy of “one country, two system” is an ideal solution to realise cross-strait reunification. This idea is echoed in two memes, although only one of them includes the traditional Chinese term “特別行政區 (*tebie xingzheng qu*, special administrative region)”.



(translation)

1. The Taiwan Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China
2. This belongs to China
3. This belongs to China
4. This belongs to China
5. This is China

Figure 5.6. Diba’s memes representing Taiwan as the PRC’s administrative region

As illustrated in Figure 5.6, the left meme integrates the flag of Taiwan with an image element depicting a plum blossom. Traditional Chinese and English texts are placed in the surrounding area to elaborate Taiwan as a special administrative region of the PRC. According to the comparison presented in Figure 5.7, Diba participants deliberately imitates formats of Hong Kong and Macau’s regional emblems which integrate symbolic flags and flowers. With the bilingual elaboration, this imitation enables Diba participants to categorise Taiwan as a special administrative region subordinated to the PRC.



(translation)

1. The Taiwan Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China
2. The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China
3. The Macau Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China

*Figure 5.7. Diba's meme and regional emblems of Hong Kong and Macau*

The right meme in Figure 5.6 does not linguistically mention Taiwan. However, the flag of Taiwan is lined up with those of Hong Kong and Macau. Additionally, adjacent traditional and English texts restate that these three areas belong to China. At the bottom of this meme, the PRC's flag is added to clarify that the bilingual expressions of "China" in this meme specifically refer to the PRC rather than the ROC. Given that these two memes only involve traditional Chinese and English, they should target potential viewers who can read these two languages. As explained in section 5.2, Taiwanese and English communities are featured by different interpretations of the one-China concept. Therefore, it is arguable that the two memes in Figure 5.6 once again present Diba participants' negative attitude towards the strategic ambiguity in the 1992 Consensus and One-China policies endorsed by foreign countries.

#### 5.3.4 Taiwan as a Chinese-using community

The traditional Chinese term “*繁體字 (fántǐzì, traditional Chinese)*” was identified for five times, reflecting how Diba participants justify their anti-independence stance by highlighting Taiwan as a Chinese-using community. As shown in Figure 5.8, the relevant memes mainly involve traditional Chinese and English. The first meme does not contain any image elements, while the other two memes collocate cartoon characters with filtered faces. As a typical practice of self-representation, this collocation and its implication are specifically elaborated in section 5.5.1.





(translation)

1. Do you know you are typing Chinese? Since you ask for Taiwan independence, you should not use this language. →\_→ It was us who left over the traditional Chinese
2. If you want independence, invent your own language
3. Don't use your dad's traditional Chinese
4. Do you think that people from the mainland cannot understand traditional Chinese?
5. Do you think whether Americans can understand English or not

Figure 5.8. Diba's memes highlighting Taiwan as a Chinese-speaking community

Primarily, the first meme in Figure 5.8 questions Taiwanese people's right of using Chinese. It adopts a patronising tone to emphasise that traditional Chinese was left over by mainland people. This emphasis is in noticeable contrast to the second meme, which claims that traditional Chinese belongs to the mainland as a cultural symbol. The third meme constructs an analogy between Chinese-speaking mainland people and English-speaking Americans. On the one hand, the analogy enables Diba participants to point out that traditional Chinese is not only used in Taiwan. On the other hand, the expressed meaning contradicts their claim that traditional Chinese only belongs to China, as English is not exclusively utilised by the American people. This paradox stems from the contentious boundaries between simplified and traditional Chinese. It also results from the symbolic roles of Chinese language in different situations. It generally symbolises Chineseness as a cultural identity (Chun, 1996; Leeman and Modan, 2009; Wang and Gao, 2021). However, its written or spoken variants specifically represent certain communities' group identities, such as the Taiwanese (Su and Chun, 2021).

Traditional and simplified Chinese share the same origin. However, as explained below, they carry different ideological implications in the socio-cultural context of mainland China.

During the 1919 May Fourth Movement, traditional Chinese was considered as a typical representation of China's traditional culture and the outdated Confucianism. Against the historical background of domestic turmoil and foreign aggressions, China's anti-imperialist intellectuals at that time suggested discarding traditional Chinese and searching for an

alternative to develop modernity in China (Zhou, 1986; Rohsenow, 2004; Wang, 2024). In this situation, traditional Chinese was considered as an unwanted symbol representing feudal Chineseness. This consideration sustained during the following wartime, in which the CCP deployed simplified Chinese as a lingua franca to engage with illiterate farming and working population. In this case, character standardisation and simplification functioned more like an instrument facilitating society reform and nation-building. Furthermore, simplified Chinese developed into a tool of class struggles in China's Anti-Rightist Movement (Luo, 2018). It was valued as a symbol of the socialist masses. This ideological implication differentiated simplified and traditional Chinese, as traditional Chinese were primarily accessible for privileged, elitist, and exploiting classes.

Nowadays, traditional Chinese is not applied to mainland's school education, but it is used in traditional calligraphy and architectures as a symbol of China's traditional culture. The previously unwanted tradition Chinese is now cherished as a heritage in constructing national identity and fostering national confidence. Thus, within the socio-cultural context of mainland China, the contentious boundaries between simplified and traditional Chinese fundamentally results from ideological struggles. It demonstrates how the mainland has deconstructed and reconstructed the Chineseness in different periods. As a Chinese-using community, Taiwan endorses traditional Chinese as its standard writing system. Taiwan's language policies focus more on local languages and the construction of Taiwanese as a unique identity (Sandel, 2003; Chen, 2006; Wu, 2011). Despite different developing environments, entertainments and cultural products from Taiwan provided China's post-80s and 90s generations with vital accesses to traditional Chinese in daily settings.

Considering the above contextual information, it is arguable that the three memes in Figure 5.8 present Diba participants' superior intent of replacing the Taiwanese with the Chineseness as a collective identity. Moreover, this superior intent mistakes traditional Chinese as a culture symbol which solely evolved in mainland China. In the mainland's historical development, tradition Chinese was “*用剩* (*yongsheng*, left over)” for symbolising feudalism and exploiting classes. In cross-strait interactions, traditional Chinese in entertainment products is a cultural symbol regulated and evolving in a different environment of Taiwan. Thus, the term “*繁體字* (*fanti zi*, traditional Chinese)” represents two distinctive ideological backgrounds. Although these memes try to highlight Taiwan as a Chinese-using community, the relevant representations are intrinsically based on the Chineseness shaped in the socio-

cultural context of mainland China. In other words, these memes justify the anti-independence stance by disregarding the Taiwaneseess, which is constructed based on more than traditional Chinese.

### **5.3.5 Taiwan in the international community**

In section 5.2, it was elaborated that different countries form unique One-China policies according to specific political interests and situations. Among these ever-changing diplomatic policies, Taiwan's political status is represented in a rather ambiguous manner. However, this ambiguity can be removed in some cases to pick a side in the cross-strait tension. This removal often helps relevant countries explicitly show their political orientations and keep distance with cross-strait conflicts.

In the 2016 sub-corpus, it was found that Norway (n=21), Sweden (n=17), Singapore (n=2), Netherlands (n=2), and the US (n=1) appear frequently in extractions of Chinese texts. In terms of diplomatic relations, these five countries are featured by different historical interactions with Taiwan and mainland China. Since two of the most frequently mentioned countries are from Northern Europe, relevant memes can be used to exemplify how some of Nordic countries reacted to geopolitical tensions across the Taiwan Strait.

Figure 5.9 illustrated two memes capturing Weibo' posts of the Consulate General of Norway in Shanghai and the Swedish Embassy in China. Written texts in these two memes only utilise the simplified Chinese, which is lengthy and blurred. Therefore, like memes examined in section 5.3.2, they can also be considered as instances which were distributed for fulfilling Diba participants' self-satisfaction.



(translation)

1. Consulate General of Norway in Shanghai: “Norway has always adhered to the one-China position since 1970, and this position will not change. We will communicate with the Norwegian Immigration Service about this incident.”
2. @ Global Times: In response to SETN saying that the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration recognised Taiwan as a country. Fuld Overland Andersen, head of the media team at the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, responded to the *Global Times*: “Norway has always adhered to the one-China position since 1970, and this position will not change. We will communicate with the Norwegian Immigration Service about this incident.”
3. Weibo account of the Swedish Embassy in China: On May 9, 1950, Sweden became the first Western country to establish diplomatic relations with the PRC. Sweden supports the One-China policy, which indicates that we do not recognise Taiwan as an independent and sovereign country. Moreover, Sweden did not establish diplomatic relations with Taiwan.

Figure 5.9. Diba’s memes capturing Weibo posts of the Consulate General of Norway in Shanghai and the Swedish Embassy in China

In terms of content, the above two memes respectively present Norway and Sweden’s attitudes towards cross-strait conflicts escalating in January 2016. As introduced in section 5.1, SETN’s Facebook page was one of the targets in the 2016 expedition. This situation was not simply caused by its support of Chou Tzu-yu and promotion of Chou as a symbol of Taiwan independence. It also resulted from one of its news reports published after the pro-independence DPP won the 2016 Taiwanese presidential election. In its report, SETN (2016a) stated that both Norwegian and Swedish officers recognised Taiwan as an independent country. *Global Times*, a state-owned media outlet, reposted SETN’s report on Sina Weibo (as shown by the first meme in Figure 5.9). Both SETN’s news report and *Global Times*’s Weibo post

came out on 20 January 2016. The contentious content soon attracted mainland internet users to question Norway and Sweden's political orientation in cross-strait issues.

To certain extent, the heated online discussion fuelled the confrontation between pro-independence Taiwanese internet users and anti-independence mainland counterparts. Amid growing dissatisfaction on Sina Weibo, Norwegian Consulate General and Embassy forwarded *Global Times's* Weibo post to clarify that Norway adheres to “一个中国的立场 (*yige zhongguo lichang*, one-China position)” and “一个中国政策 (*yige zhongguo zhengce*, One-China policy)”. As shown by the first meme in Figure 5.9, this clarification was made by directly quoting what the Norwegian officers said in *Global Times's* interview. The second meme in Figure 5.9 illustrates how the Swedish Embassy responded to mainland internet users' increasing fury. It followed the suit and deployed a Weibo post to explain its political orientation. Different from Norway, the Swedish Embassy elaborated that Sweden's One-China policy does not recognise Taiwan as an independent and sovereign country. It further clarified in another post that Sweden did not have any diplomatic relations with Taiwan.

For Norway and Sweden, their Weibo posts primarily functioned as an immediate solution to tentatively pick a side in cross-strait clash. Their responses also show how the international community utilises the strategic ambiguity of One-China policy to shape Taiwan's political status in specific situations. Moreover, Norway and Sweden's attitudinal posts present that these two Nordic countries intend to stabilise and protect their relations with mainland China at that time. This intent reflects the basic status of the Sino-Nordic relations around 2016, which had experienced decades of twists and turns.

After the Tiananmen Square crackdown on 4 June 1989, international concerns of China's human rights and political conditions led to suspension and reduction of modern Sino-Nordic relations. This situation was shortly changed when the PRC's new generation of leaders realised the retrocession of Hong Kong in the late 1990s and adopt the One China, Two Systems policy. From the perspective of international community, these political movers signalled that the PRC was willing to embrace political liberalisation and pluralism. Especially after the PRC joined the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001, the Sino-Nordic relations was greatly improved through bilateral cooperations of trade and investment. According to previous reports (Sverdrup-Thygeson, 2016; Tucker and Nordin, 2021), Norway attracted a large amount of China's foreign direct investment (FDI) through its natural resources and high technologies. Meanwhile, Sweden was Europe's largest-single receiver of China's FDI.

Alongside economic cooperation, Norway became aware of China's technical espionage since the early 2010s, and the public started to question the continuously growing FDI from China. In addition, Sino-Sweden relations were also getting darken after 桂民海 (Gui Minhai), a Hong Kong-Swedish bookseller, was detained in the PRC. This incident was closely related to the Sino-Sweden clash, which led to the 2018 Diba Expedition. A detailed examination on relevant memes and socio-political context is provided in Chapter 7.

Given the evolving Sino-Nordic relations, it is not hard to realise that Norway and Sweden's Weibo posts not simply help them keep distance from cross-strait conflicts. Different expressions in their posts also reflect their diplomatic attitudes towards the PRC at the beginning of 2016. Through the direct quotation and avoidance of elaborating its One-China policy, Norway presented a rather cautious attitude in its post. In contrast, Sweden's attitude was relatively optimistic, because its post shows a firm support of the mainland rather than the newly elected Tsai administration. The two memes in Figure 5.9 promptly capture the subtle divergence in Norway and Sweden's attitudinal representations of Taiwan's new government. More importantly, they strategically highlight the dilemma that the international community needs to face when evaluating geopolitical interests and develops diplomatic relations in the Taiwan Strait region.

*Global Times* purposefully deployed responses from the Norwegian officer for domestic propaganda and mobilisation. It generates an impression that international community does not recognise Taiwan as an independent country, and the newly elected Tsai administration is not welcomed. Thus, clarifications from Norway and Sweden's official social media accounts were inevitably seen as ideal evidence to justify Diba participants' anti-independence stance. From this perspective, the two memes in Figure 5.9 innovatively utilise screenshots as digital evidence (Golubeva and Drogoziuk, 2019; Jaynes, 2020; Švelch, 2021). Also, they use the behaviour of taking screenshots to directly appropriate post content and attack independence supporters. Originally, simplified Chinese posts targeted mainland internet user who questioned Norway and Sweden's political positions. After being mimetically captured and intertextually recontextualised in the 2016 expedition, these posts went beyond the domestic environment. They were transmitted overseas on Facebook. The conveyed meanings are only accessible to people who can understand simplified Chinese. Nevertheless, they reflect Diba participants' efforts of repurposing foreign voices to support their anti-independence arguments.

As mentioned earlier, Singapore, Netherlands, and the US also appear in Diba’s memes. Like the two memes in Figure 5.9, these three countries are included in Diba participants’ screenshots of social media posts. However, these memes do not act as digital evidence. Instead, they enable Diba participants to directly appropriate the post content and provide suitable background information for argument construction. Figure 5.10 illustrates two representative memes mentioning Singapore, Netherlands, and the US. Both present Weibo posts published in 2015 by *Tonight News Paper*, a local newspaper in Tianjin Province, and illustrate Taiwan passports that are covered by green stickers. According to the simplified Chinese texts, holders of these passports were either investigated or refused entry by immigration officers of Singapore, Netherlands, and the US. In the second meme, a traditional Chinese text repeats a warning from the US, emphasising that Taiwanese visitors should not use the stickers. Furthermore, two emojis and the colour of red are utilised to highlight the adjacent text, which comments that this incident is rather embarrassing.



(translation)

1. Tonight News Paper: [Due to the stickers on their passports, three Taiwanese tourists were refused entry into Singapore] Taiwan's foreign affairs department said that three Taiwanese people were recently refused entry by the immigration officers at Singapore's airport. The refusal was caused by the stickers on their passports. In two cases of entry refusal, the holders had expressed their intention to remove the stickers, but they were still refused entry by the Singapore Customs. In September this year, Dutch border officers questioned: "Do you think putting a Taiwan Republic sticker on the passport can convert Taiwan into an independent country?" Web link
2. Tonight News Paper: [the US: Using the "Taiwan Republic" stickers can cause demands of removal and deportation] The Taiwan Representative Office in the US issued a statement on the evening of the 17<sup>th</sup>. The statement verified that the "Taiwan Republic" stickers were not permitted by the US's customs procedures. If required, the holders may be asked to remove the stickers. In more serious cases, they may be detained for investigation, being refused entry, or even being deported immediately. If relevant behaviours affect the US's customs procedures, the holders will not be able to enjoy the visa-free treatment. Thus, Taiwanese visitors are warned of not changing their passports' original cover in any unauthorised way. The US smashed the dream of Taiwan independence: Using the "Taiwan Republic" stickers can cause demands of removal...
3. The US: Using the "Taiwan passport sticker" can cause demands of removal and deportation. It's so embarrassing. I feel so embarrassed

*Figure 5.10. Diba's memes capturing news reports about Taiwan passport stickers*

Unlike memes mentioning Norway and Sweden, the two memes in Figure 5.10 use the screenshots to bring up incidents concerning "Taiwan Republic" stickers. From 2015, pro-independence activists tried to construct Taiwan's national identity by voluntarily designing and distributing "Taiwan Republic" stickers (Ng, 2015; Allen, 2016; Wu, 2017). As illustrated in Figure 5.11, these green stickers were utilised to modify the cover of Taiwan passport. A fictional name of "台灣國 (*taiwan guo*, Republic of Taiwan)" replaces the official name of "中華民國 (*zhonghua minguo*, Republic of China)". The emblem in centre is covered by a cartoon image roughly representing the Taiwan island. These self-generated stickers symbolise pro-independence efforts of declaring Taiwan's sovereignty and keeping distance from mainland China. However, the modified passports arouse controversies in several foreign countries, such as Singapore and the US. Holders of the modified passports were either questioned or denied entry.





(translation)

1. Republic of China
2. Passport
3. Republic of Taiwan
4. Passport

*Figure 5.11. Comparison between the 2008 version of Taiwan passport (left) and the modified passport (right)*

Against this background, Diba participants directly borrow *Tonight News Paper*'s posts to highlight the international community's negative reactions towards "Taiwan Republic" stickers. The primary purpose is not to kindly notify that any unauthorised modifications to the passport can result in entry refusal or deportation. Instead, by intertextually recontextualising the posts into the 2016 expedition, Diba participants tried to remind pro-independence Taiwanese of the reported incidents. In addition to providing background information, the relevant memes also enable Diba participants to mock Taiwan independence movement. Through the asserted traditional Chinese text, the second meme in Figure 5.10 ridicules that "Taiwan Republic" stickers are useless, and pro-independence activists should feel embarrassed.

As shown in Figure 5.12, in response to the promotion of the "台灣國 (*taiwan guo*, Republic of Taiwan)", two memes visually represent the United Nations (UN), teasing Taiwan for not being recognised as a sovereignty nation-state.



(translation)

1. If you are not convinced, come to the UN and raise your hand
2. Pro-independence dogs, please find out the flag of your “Republic of Taiwan”!
3. Pro-independence dogs, please find out the flag of your “Republic of Taiwan”
4. Official seal of the Diba expedition and against the Taiwan independence
5. Diba’s subdivision of bomb attack.
6. Diba goes on the expedition, nothing can survive

Figure 5.12. Diba’s memes ridiculing Taiwan’s lack of United Nations membership

These two memes utilise the photographic visual style to represent the UN conference and outside view of the UN headquarter. Medium and long shots help frame several detailed and crucial information. For instance, country names in the first meme and the male sitting behind the desk name tag indicate that China holds a seat in the UN. The gesture of raising a hand is depicted in this meme to symbolise China’s involvement in discussing and making decisions on international affairs. When being integrated with the adjacent Chinese text, the symbolism of raising a hand in the UN conference highlights the PRC’s position as a country holding one of the five permanent seats with veto power. It also helps Diba participants demonstrate their anti-independence attitude and express that the UN recognised the PRC rather than the ROC as the only legitimate representative of China. Moreover, national flags in the second meme are cohesively integrated with the Chinese texts. This integration deploys simplified and traditional Chinese to restate that the “*台灣國* (*taiwan guo*, Republic of Taiwan)” does not have UN membership. Therefore, the pro-independence position is not recognised and supported by the international community.

To sum up, this subsection examined how Diba’s memes justify the anti-independence stance by representing Taiwan’s close relations with mainland China and its political status in the international community. This justification faithfully echoes the PRC’s One-China principle, and it does not simply use multimodal memes to shout political slogans. In terms of image elements, Diba’s memes innovatively form a visual analogy between the Taiwan island and a traditional Chinese medicine. This analogy not only helps Diba participants manifest

China's profound history and culture but also recontextualise the medicine's symbolic implications to indicate that Taiwan ought to return. Moreover, Diba's memes rely on screenshots as digital evidence and tools to provide background information. Using screenshots as digital evidence, Diba's memes illustrate how two Nordic countries shape their One-China policies and tentatively picked a side in cross-strait conflicts. Meanwhile, the relevant memes also creatively recontextualised their statements as an instrument to facilitate external propaganda and support Diba participants' anti-independence stance. Working as a tool of providing background information, screenshots of social media posts enable Diba participants to attack Taiwan independence movement and mock pro-independence activists. Despite image elements play a creative role in Diba's memes, lengthy and blurred Chinese texts are notable resources to represent Taiwan's administrative status in different time periods. These representations elaborate cross-strait relations since ancient times, but the elaboration is primarily achieved through sexist personification. Besides, Diba' memes also try to emphasise Taiwan's role of a Chinese-using community. The relevant memes uncover Diba participants' superior intent of replacing the Taiwaneseeness with the PRC-centred Chineseness.

#### 5.4 Superior mainland China

In the 2016 sub-corpus, it was also found that comparing to Taiwan, China is mentioned more frequently in Diba's memes. Simplified Chinese (n=104) is preferred when Diba participants refer to China, while English (n=47) and traditional Chinese (n=34) contribute almost the same to eliciting representations or depictions of China.

According to Table 5.3, simplified Chinese word “*中国* (*zhongguo*, China)” is often collocated with the word “*制造* (*zhizao*, made in)”. This collocation literally highlights China's power of manufacture. Also, it implies economic nationalist ideas that China-manufactured products empower the nation-state and Chinese people in the global market (Gerth, 2004; D'Costa, 2012). Additionally, simplified Chinese word “*中国* (*zhongguo*, China)” is also employed to emphasise Chinese people and the CCP's political theories of socialism with Chinese characteristics. The words “*爸爸* (*baba*, daddy)” and “*爹* (*die*, dad)”<sup>9</sup> enable Diba

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<sup>9</sup> In Chinese, both “*爸爸* (*baba*)” and “*爹* (*die*)” refer to father. However, “*爹* (*die*)” is more frequently used in the old time, while “*爸爸* (*baba*)” is a modern expression to address someone's father. “daddy” and “dad” are utilised to indicate this distinguishment in English translations.

participants to represent China as a father, demonstrating a superiority complex. These expressions also reflect that Diba participants intend to put themselves in the position of power and silence pro-independence voices through the paternalist tone.

		<b>Number</b>
中国 (China)	制造 (made in)	11
中国 (Chinese)	人 (people)	9
中国 (China)	爸爸 (daddy)	6
中国 (China)	特色社会主义 (characterised socialism)	3
中国 (China)	爹 (dad)	1
中国 (China)	天津 (Tianjin)	1
中国 (China)	北京 (Beijing)	1
		<b>32</b>

Table 5.3. Textual collocations involving simplified Chinese word “中国 (zhongguo, China)”

<b>Number</b>			<b>Number</b>		
Made in	China	22	中國 (Chinese)	人 (people)	4
I LOVE	CHINA	14	中國 (China)	爺爺 (grandfather)	3
Taiwan	China	1	中國 (China)	廣州 (Guangzhou)	2
Chongqing	China	1	中國 (Chinese)	人民 (citizen)	1
Beijing	China	1	中國 (China)	台灣 (Taiwan)	1
Guangzhou	China	1	中國 (Chinese)	大陸人民 (mainland people)	1
Tianjin	China	1	中國 (China)	重慶 (Chongqing)	1
<b>41</b>			中國 (Chinese)	米粉 (rice noodle)	1
			中國 (China)	爸爸 (daddy)	1
			<b>15</b>		

Table 5.4. Textual collocations involving English word “China” and traditional Chinese word “中國 (zhongguo, China)”

In Table 5.4, it is notable that English and traditional Chinese texts roughly follow the same patterns of collocation. The English word “China” serves to emphasise China’s role of the world factory and introduce certain cities. Slightly different from simplified Chinese texts, Diba participants rely on the English “China” to express their affection towards to the nation-

state. Traditional Chinese word “*中國* (*zhongguo*, Chinese)” also works to represent China as a father, refer to Chinese people, and elicit names of certain areas.

In terms of image elements, China’s national flag was identified for 42 times, following by Chinese cuisine which is depicted by 32 image elements. Moreover, it was found Diba participants also deploy anime characters (*n*=3) to represent China and specifically portray other symbolic elements, such as soldier (*n*=6), Chinese architecture (*n*=4), and Xi Jinping (*n*=2), to showcase China’s soft and military powers.

Based on these notable elements, the following sub-sections aim to explore how Diba’s memes depict a superior China and highlight its manufacturing, economic, political, cultural, and military strengths.

#### 5.4.1 Power of “Made in China”

Among the bilingual expressions of “made in China”, 16 of them are collocated with the national flag of China. The first two memes in Figure 5.13 typically exemplify this collocation.



(translation)

1. Made in China
2. Child, stop struggling. Look at what daddy holds on hand
3. I am the socialist successor. Who do you think you are. How dare you show off in front of me
4. Fuck you, and I don’t care

Figure 5.13. Diba’s memes including written texts of “Made in China”

The first meme in Figure 5.13 collocates the Chinese flag with the simplified Chinese term “*中国制造* (*zhongguo zhizao*, Made in China)”. At the bottom of this meme, a simplified Chinese text addresses viewers as “*孩子* (*haizi*, child)”, elaborates the adjacent cartoon character as “*爸爸* (*baba*, daddy)”, and draws attention to the photographic tea eggs. It is not hard to understand that this meme wants to elaborate that the presented tea eggs are made in

China. Nevertheless, this quick conclusion cannot explain Diba participants' intent of representing tea eggs and highlighting their origin. As discussed below, to figure out its implied meaning, it is important to embed this meme into the larger context of cross-strait relations.

In cross-strait interactions, tea eggs do not simply act as a random food that people can easily find in stores or street stalls. For several times, they were deployed as symbolic objects by Taiwanese and mainland internet users to ridicule each other's economic situation. This symbolism stems from a Taiwanese TV show<sup>10</sup>, in which a Taiwanese professor pointed out that mainland people cannot afford tea eggs. Although he originally intended to remind audiences of the huge wealth gap, his remark was criticised by mainland internet users as ignorant (Xinhua News Agency, 2014). Moreover, mainland people counterattacked the professor by giving away free tea eggs on the street (Zhou, 2014). Tea eggs were therefore mimetically utilised as a symbol to mock Taiwan's tunnel vision and lack of interactions with outside world.

In this context, the first meme in Figure 5.13 does not simply ask viewers to pay attention to the photographic tea eggs. Instead, it interdiscursively transfers the symbolic meaning of tea eggs from previous social events and appropriate these symbolic objects into the communicative situation of Diba's expedition as an ideal way of mockeries. In other words, Diba's memes rely on the symbolic meaning of tea eggs to ridicule that pro-independence Taiwanese are ignorant and short-sighted. More importantly, the multimodal collocation of "Made in China" further underlines that mainland people are wealthy enough to consume tea eggs as much as they want. Rather than highlighting China's capability of manufacturing tea eggs, this meme emphasises China's economic power and Diba participants' superior disdain against pro-independence Taiwanese. Besides, it is important to note that this implied emphasis can only be successfully interpreted by people who are familiar with the relevant social events which involve mainland people's counterattacks against the Taiwanese professor's discussion on China's economic situation.

The other two memes in Figure 5.13 include the English term "Made in China", but they do not represent any products or foods. Moreover, only the second meme collocates the English text with the image element representing Chinese flag. In this case, it is reasonable to judge that the "Made in China" label does not function to manifest China's manufacturing capability or present any recontextualised implications. During the 2016 expedition, Taiwanese internet

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<sup>10</sup> This Taiwanese show was broadcasted in 2011. It invited a selected group of audience and guests to discuss how to market commercial products in the mainland: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ANTZgMe3nCU>

users also tried to counterattack Diba participants with their own multimodal comments. Unlike the well-equipped Diba participants, Taiwanese internet users occasionally run out of resources for meme production. Consequently, some Taiwanese internet users appropriated Diba's memes or multimodal elements to generate their pro-independence memes. This behaviour aroused Diba participants' dissatisfaction and sarcasm. To prevent this cross-strait appropriation, the "Made in China" label was subsequently added to some of Diba's memes to indicate authorship.

Therefore, this patriotic label not only elaborates memes' origins but also helps Diba participants further strengthen their group identity. For the last central meme in Figure 5.13, the English text of "Made in China" act as a mark to claim ownership of these memes. It also constructs the otherness of pro-independence Taiwanese who do not see themselves as “*社会主义接班人 (shehui zhuyi jieban ren, socialist successor)*”. From the last meme in Figure 5.13, it is easier to note Diba participants' superior and combative attitude of repelling pro-independence Taiwanese. This attitude is not simply expressed through the "Made in China" text. It is also presented through Huang Zitao's, a former South Korea-based Chinese singer, symbolic expression of “*法式不屑 (fashi buxie, fuck you, and I don't care)*”. This term is directly quoted from China's fandom culture where people often deploy it to ridicule Huang's frequent use of "fuck you" in various settings and his exaggerated facial expression of showing disdain. After recontextualising this term and Huang's facial expression, this meme not only generates a sense of playfulness through its intertextual relation to China's fandom ridicules but also highlights Diba participants' disdain against pro-independence Taiwanese.

#### **5.4.2 China as anime characters**

As mentioned in section 5.4, it was found that three image elements are used to represent China through anime characters. The previous section 5.3.2 examined how Diba's memes deploy Japanese and Chinese subcultural elements to personify Taiwan. Unlike the lengthy and blurred texts, representation of China is primarily achieved through cartoonish anime characters. As explained below, this type of representation can demonstrate how fan fiction and Chinese anime influence Diba's meme production and meaning-making practice. This finding can form a comparison with previous instances of national personification which are realised through the mode of writing.

Figure 5.14 provides two representative memes including cartoonish characters. These two memes do not involve too complex collocations. They either include the Chinese flag as a national identity or declare unshakable faith through a simplified Chinese text. The male character in the left meme originates from a Japanese series, *Hetalia*, while the rabbit in the right meme comes from the Chinese series, *那年那兔那些事儿* (*nanian natu nashi*, *Year Hare Affair*).



(translation)

1. Never abandon, never give up  
We are rabbits who cultivate flowers  
And I will protect the home where flowers are cultivated

Figure 5.14. Diba's memes representing China through anime characters

Although these two series were produced in different countries, both developed from webcomics. In terms of content, they similarly present comedic allegories of political and historical events. Nevertheless, *Hetalia* personifies a specific group of countries to narrate well-known events since the second world war, while *Year Hare Affair* deploys anthropomorphic animals to represent certain nations and political events in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In *Hetalia*, China is personified into a young man, *ワン・ヤオ* (Wang Yao). This character is often featured by a ponytail and his Chinese-style costume. In *Year Hare Affair*, China is depicted as a hare or rabbit who is generally harmless but will become aggressive in front of dangers. Although both characters are designed to represent China, the attached personalities are notably different. This difference not only reflects producers' distinct focus in the storytelling but also prompts Chinese audience to consume the depictions in diverse ways.



For *Hetalia*, role conception is always the series' selling point, which is fundamentally based on stereotypes for each country. For instance, the three axis powers, Italy, Germany, and Japan, act as protagonists in *Hetalia*. They are respectively portrayed as energetic, disciplined, and reclusive males. Although *Hetalia*'s storytelling concentrates on well-known events since the second World War, the narration mainly serves to construct and enrich characteristics of the personified nations. Put it simply, producers pay more attention to project the strong feeling of *moe* (Galbraith, 2014; Miyake, 2016; Sousa, 2016) or certain affections. Clarifying criminal acts or objectively introducing war events are not the primary purpose. This typical case of *moe* anthropomorphism aroused controversies that accuse *Hetalia* of espousing Japan's neo-nationalist sentiments and revising its dark history (Sands, 2013). Despite these controversies, *Hetalia* witnessed a rapidly growing fandom community. In the series, most countries are personified into males, and historical conflicts are depicted as daily quarrels that usually happen between families or spouses. This type of depiction attracted many female fans to enthusiastically produce fan fictions about the boy's love between personified countries (Miyake, 2013, 2016).

In China, these fan fictions flourished on Jinjiang, the online literature platform which was previously introduced in section 5.3.2. In addition to heterosexual love stories, Jinjiang also caters female members to produce and consume original 耽美 (*danmei*) fictions or fan fictions depicting boy's love (Feng, 2009; Xu and Yang, 2013; Wang, 2020). For Chinese fans, China's Jinjiang platform and Japan's *moe* anthropomorphism allow them to project patriotic or even nationalist sentiments to *Hetalia* characters. Although the personified China does not act as a primary protagonist, Wang Yao is appropriated into Chinese fan fictions and arts to represent China. Content of these fan works range from subjective narrations of China's history to affective expectations of China's future development.

In this context, Japanese and Chinese subcultures provide an opportunity to Chinese youths to define China's roles in different historical periods, as well as envision China's position in the modernised and globalised community. A typical example of these fan works is the fan comic 为龙 (*weilong*, *Becoming the dragon*), which was subsequently adapted in to a fan song<sup>11</sup>. More importantly, a sentence in the fan comic went viral on Chinese social media, as

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<sup>11</sup> The comic 为龙 (*weilong*, *Becoming the dragon*) was published in 2008. In the same year, it was adapted into a song of the identical title. The song's poetic lyrics glorified China's long history and expressed producers' patriotic love: <http://www.mymmqm.com/music/song.aspx?id=66>

it emotionally articulates that “*这盛世如你所愿* (*zhe shengshi runi suoyuan*, As you would have wanted, China is now a prosperous modern nation)”. This sentence was mimetically used online and in government’s official discourses to describe China’s struggles in the last century and its revival after the PRC was established in 1949 (People’s Daily, 2015; Zou and Lu, 2022). The strong affection is therefore appropriated as a political instrument to evoke Chinese people’s emotional responses and strengthen national identity.

Unlike *Hetalia*, China’s *Year Hare Affair* series does not rely too much on role conception as its major selling point. Instead, the anthropomorphic animals reflect more about producers’ subjective interpretation of each country or region’s political features. For example, the ROC is depicted as a baldhead to refer to its first leader’s, 蒋介石 (Chiang Kai-shek), baldhead. In Chinese, the pronunciation of 秃子 (*tuzi*, baldhead) resembles that of 兔子 (*tuzi*, rabbit or hare). Therefore, the representation of the ROC is also based on the complex cross-strait relations as well as similarities between the two sides. Moreover, Hong Kong is represented as a cockroach to ridicule the Hong Kong pro-democratic activists who are often addressed as cockroaches by the Hong Kong police, while the US is symbolised as a bald eagle according to its national bird. Since the series narrates political and diplomatic events in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the anthropomorphic approach serves to convey explicit pro-government opinions about the relevant historical periods. In this sense, representing China as a rabbit can demonstrate producers’ intention of constructing national identity (Tan, 2018; Guan and Hu, 2020). The harmlessness is closely related to the official policy of “China’s peaceful rise” or “China’s peaceful development”, which was proposed by the Hu-Wen administration. The possibility of becoming aggressive reflects the “*底线思维* (*dixian siwei*, bottom-line thinking)” defined by the Xi administration (Wu, 2023) and China’s increasingly combative diplomatic style.

As Sun (2017) puts it, the *Year Hare Affair* series and its anthropomorphic approach exemplify an application of the *moe* politics. The series interdiscursively recontextualises the essence of Japan’s practice of *moe* anthropomorphism and *Hetalia*’s national personification. Nevertheless, this transnational recontextualisation inherits China’s dominant political ideologies and policies. The inheritance covers the political topics’ seriousness with anime characters’ cuteness. Thus, the *Year Hare Affair* series should be attractive for young people who pay more attention to popular cultures rather than political events. In the second meme in Figure 5.14, a simplified Chinese is added to elaborate the rabbit as “*种花兔* (*zhonghua tu*,

rabbits who cultivate flowers)”. The term “种花 (zhonghua, cultivate flowers)” is used in *Year Hare Affair* to refer to China, as the pronunciation of “种花 (zhonghua, cultivate flowers)” resembles that of “中华 (zhonghua, China)”. This reference subsequently went viral on Chinese social media. It is usually incorporated in a patriotic sentence, which is mimetically deployed by Chinese youths to express that “此生无悔入华夏, 来生愿在种花家 (cisheng wuhui ru huaxia, laisheng yuanzai zhonghua jia, I am proud of being born as a Chinese. If there is an afterlife, I wish to become a Chinese again)”. Therefore, the *Year Hare Affair* series not only demonstrates how national identity is negotiated in China’s popular culture. Its characters and coined expressions also diversify methods of manifesting national self-confidence.

Going back to the two memes in Figure 5.14, it becomes clearer that their use of national personification differs from the personified Taiwan in at least two aspects. First, representations of China in Figure 5.14 primarily rely on the mode of image. Meme content can remain relatively perceptible even it is resized during cross-platform transmission. However, this convenience is accompanied with difficulty of interpretation, especially when linguistic elaboration is not provided. For most potential audience, it is not easy to realise that the first meme in Figure 5.14 represents China by intertextually recontextualising a pre-existed anime character. Not to mention Diba participants’ interdiscursive recontextualisation of practices and ways of meaning-making that prevail in Japan’s *moe* anthropomorphism and China’s fan fictions. These recontextualised practices play key roles in Diba’s memes to articulate patriotic sentiments and resonate with viewers who are familiar with narratives of China’s historical experiences in fan fictions. The second meme in Figure 5.14 involves a multimodal integration, but a correct interpretation still requires relevant contextual information. In the simplified Chinese text, the term “种花兔 (zhonghua tu, rabbits who cultivate flowers)” is cohesively related to the image element representing a rabbit. Nevertheless, this meme does not further clarify the political implication of this rabbit which was initially constructed in *Year Hare Affair* and constantly shaped in other discourses, such as fan products and official propaganda. Therefore, most audience can only uncover part of the representational meaning. That is, the rabbit represents Chinese people who are willing to protect their country. Without knowing the *Year Hare Affair* series and the relevant fan culture,

it can be extremely hard to figure out that the rabbit also symbolises China's national identity and self-confidence.

Second, compared to the personified Taiwan, the visual representations of China intrinsically target a narrower group of viewers. Section 5.3.2 pointed out that Diba's text-heavy memes may be exclusively perceptible for in-group members. The sole requirement of interpretation is Chinese literacy. To interpret representations of China in Figure 5.14, Chinese literacy is simply the fundamental requirement. For viewers who know and who do not know relevant contexts, their interpretations of the two memes can be different. If viewers are not familiar with Chinese and Japanese *nijigen* subcultures, they are likely to see the two memes in Figure 5.14 as Diba participants' self-representations. In contrast, for viewers who consume the *nijigen* subcultures, the two memes not only represent China but also negotiate China's national identity and convey a strong patriotic affection. In other words, successfully and correctly interpreting these two memes can trigger a sense of belongingness. This belongingness is simultaneously related to the nation-state as well as to Japanese and Chinese subcultures. Moreover, this sense of belongingness can function as a very effective tool to mobilise voluntary and enthusiastic participation. It not only gathers participants who want to illustrate national self-confidence but also unites participants who are willing to convert their love towards the anime characters into that towards the nation-state.

### **5.4.3 China's soft power**

As shown earlier in section 5.4, bilingual terms of "China" are used to refer to Chinese cuisines and cities. Meanwhile, 36 image elements are identified for portraying Chinese cuisines and architecture through the photographic visual style. As examined in this subsection, these resources facilitate Diba participants to manifest China's soft power.



(translation)

1. This is Fried Pork in Scoop, we'd like to show it to ww
2. Official seal of the Diba expedition and against the Taiwan independence
3. Diba's subdivision of bomb attack.  
Diba goes on the expedition, nothing can survive
4. We'd like to treat you to the Manchu Han Imperial Feast
5. Official seal of the Diba expedition and against the Taiwan independence
6. Diba's subdivision of bomb attack.  
Diba goes on the expedition, nothing can survive
7. The homeland has so many delicious cuisines! do you not return?

Figure 5.15. Diba's memes representing Chinese cuisines

The above three memes exemplify how Diba's memes represent China's soft power through its cuisines. The first meme deploys the close-up shot, vividly presenting the dish's golden hue. A simplified Chinese text is attached to introduce the dish and show friendliness to Taiwanese people. Nevertheless, the text addresses Taiwanese as "ww", an acronym of Taiwan's Chinese phonetic alphabet. In the mainland, the term "湾湾(wanwan)" is mimetically used online and offline as Taiwan's nickname. Also, government spokesman (2022) explained that the pronunciation of this term creates an expression of cuteness, demonstrating mainland people's intimate feelings for Taiwan. However, for Taiwanese people, "湾湾(wanwan)" is one of their most loathe terms. From their perspectives, this term explicitly belittles Taiwan and ridicules the soft sound of Taiwan people's Chinese pronunciation (Liberty Times Net, 2019). Based on the two different attitudes towards the nickname "ww", it is arguable that the first meme in Figure 5.15 can arouse rather diverse responses. In Diba participants' point of view, this meme intends to friendly seduce Taiwanese people for further interactions and discussions about foods. However, Taiwanese audience is likely to see this meme as a representation of annoying superiority.

The other two memes in Figure 5.15 also represent several Chinese cuisines. However, they collocate the cuisine either with texts of script typeface or with the symbolic rabbit (see elaboration on this symbolism in section 5.4.2). Despite the different collocations, these memes collectively represent China's attractiveness through its cuisines. These representations form a

seduction, through which Diba participants try to persuade Taiwanese people with their pro-unification suggestion.

In addition to Chinese cuisines, Figure 5.16 presents three representative memes showcasing China’s soft power through natural view, ancient architecture, and modern city. It is notable that all these memes involve the photographic visual style and the long shot. In the upper right meme, the bilingual text introduces the represented architecture as the Forbidden City. This meme helps Diba participants demonstrate China’s traditional culture.



(translation)

1. Official seal of the Diba expedition and against the Taiwan independence
2. Diba’s subdivision of bomb attack.  
Diba goes on the expedition, nothing can survive
3. Sincerely welcome Taiwanese compatriots to enjoy the homeland’s natural view.
4. China-Beijing-The Forbidden City
5. Official seal of the Diba expedition and against the Taiwan independence
6. Diba’s subdivision of bomb attack.  
Diba goes on the expedition, nothing can survive
7. This is Suzhou where tea eggs are unaffordable

Figure 5.16. Diba’s memes represent natural view, ancient architecture, and modern city

Unlike the one representing the Forbidden City, the other two memes deploy bilingual texts to elaborate Diba participants’ communicative intentions. In the bottom right meme, the traditional Chinese text clarifies the represented city as “蘇州 (suzhou)”. Furthermore, it utilises a self-mockery tone to response to the Taiwanese professor who stated that mainland people cannot afford tea eggs (see section 5.4.1 for further elaboration). Thus, this meme fulfils two communicative functions. It either shows the mainland’s modernisation level or reacts to

negative remarks about China’s economic development. In the left meme in Figure 5.16, Diba participants adds a bilingual elaboration. However, the bilingual texts do not form a restatement. The simplified Chinese text delivers an invitation to Taiwanese people, but the English text teases them for being short-sighted and ignorant. Although traditional Chinese is not involved in this meme, the expressed meanings and superiority explicitly target pro-independence Taiwanese.

#### 5.4.4 China’s military power

In the 2016 sub-corpus, it is not common to see depictions of government leaders. Only two image elements portray Xi Jinping, the current president of the PRC and the chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC). Despite the low occurrence frequency, all image elements depicting Xi are collocated with other elements representing military forces. These collocations resonate with image elements of soldiers (n=6). As illustrated in Figure 5.17, it is evident that these memes are used to show China’s military power.



(translation)

1. The king’s disdain
2. You seem not understand the value of life
3. One option is you come back to enjoy the snow, and the other option is we go over to visit you
4. Swear to kill and eliminate all traitors and betrayers of the nation-state

Figure 5.17. Diba’s memes representing Xi Jinping and Chinese soldiers

The two memes in the first line respectively depict Xi attending a military parade and holding a gun. In the left meme, the simplified Chinese text describes Xi's facial expression as “王之蔑视 (*wang zhi miaoshi*, The king's disdain)”. This description reflects that Diba participants view Xi as a symbol of the supreme power. This symbolism enables them to judge Taiwan from the position of power. By representing a military parade as the circumstance, this meme highlights that the mainland is stronger than Taiwan in terms of military strength. This comparison can imply a warning that the mainland can easily reclaim Taiwan through military actions. Another meme includes image elements of Xi, a Chinese flag and a submachine gun. These image elements can be integrated to emphasise the mainland government's military power. Also, it reflects Diba participants' support of the “Thought on Strengthening the Military” which was promoted by the Xi administration since 2013 (Xinhua News Agency, 2013). The core idea underpinning relevant policies is to build a people's military that obey the CCP's command, can fight and win, and maintains the excellent conduct. Given this political background, it is arguable that the upper right meme in Figure 5.17 not only threaten pro-independence Taiwanese but also presents an endorsement of the government's military goals.

The two memes in the bottom line of Figure 5.17 only represent soldiers, and both explicitly propose to reclaim Taiwan through military force. The bottom-left meme depicts a group of soldiers who line up to form Chinese characters that collaboratively present “呼伦贝尔 (*hulunbeier*, Hulunbuir)”, a region located in northeastern China. This region is not only featured by vast grasslands and beautiful lakes but also known for its development of eco-tourism. In the central part of this meme, Diba participants utilise the Chinese text to invite Taiwanese to visit Hulunbuir and enjoy its snow view. However, this invitation comes along with a threat. That is, Chinese soldiers will go to Taiwan if the island refuses to reunite with the mainland. This meaning is articulated more explicitly in the bottom right meme, which addresses independence supporters as traitors. Moreover, image elements of bombardment, weapons, and soldiers are integrated with simplified Chinese texts. Inside this integration, the Chinese character “杀 (*sha*, kill)” is highlighted through its red colour, larger size, and script typeface. These formal properties are deliberately used to emphasise Diba participants' death threat targeting independence supporters. Substantially, this intended meaning reflects the mainland's growing nationalist chorus, which proposes to solve cross-strait conflicts through military violence rather than through peaceful negotiation.



In short, Diba’s memes are more dependent on the mode of image when they represent China. Unlike depictions of Taiwan, relevant memes do not involve any historical evidence to justify the mainland’s territory claim. Instead, they pay more attention to present their love towards the modernised and prosperous nation-state. This purpose is mainly fulfilled through symbolic slogan of “Made in China”. In addition to articulating patriotic affections through Japanese and Chinese anime characters, Diba participants’ nationalist sentiments are also manifested by representing China as a powerful father. In the examined memes, paternalist power is justified based on the modern mainland’s soft and military strengths. This justification is constructed either to seduce Taiwan people to accept the unification plan or to threaten the island with military force.

## 5.5 Patriotic and socialist Diba participants

The above sections present notable meme images that demonstrate Diba participants’ interpretation of the long-standing cross-strait disputes and their innovative representations of Taiwan, the mainland, and independence supporters. In contrast, the following sub-sections move attention to Diba participants’ self-position as members of a structured online community and patriotic youths who dedicated to educate pro-independence Taiwanese with socialist ideas.

### 5.5.1 Official seal and templated faces

In the 2016 sub-corpus, 39 unique seals are identified. As illustrated below in Figure 5.18, the seal metaphorically addresses Diba as a military group and mimics the visual style of official company seals in China.



(translation)

1. Official seal of Diba Central Theatre Command Army
2. Official seal of Diba Central Theatre Command Army

*Figure 5.18 Image elements representing Diba’s self-generated official seal*

In China's socio-cultural context, red seals carry different symbolic meanings that have been constructed and developed in history, traditional customs, and modern practices. Beyond their association with good fortune and prosperity through the red colour, red seals in ancient China typically represented the authority of emperors and officials. Thus, within the hierarchical social system, red seals were also seen as symbols representing imperial power and prestigious social status. In modern China, the meaning potential of red seals has been further shaped, as they are widely used by government institutions, companies, and organisations to authenticate agreements, contracts, and official documents. The presence of a red seal in institutional communication often signifies that an agreement or document is legitimate and officially authorised. In business contexts, red seals convey trustworthiness and indicate the formation of binding commitments. Furthermore, red seals fulfil practical functions in traditional customs and more personalised scenarios. For instance, in the domains of traditional art and calligraphy, red seals serve as signatures to validate authorship or ownership, symbolising the artist or calligrapher's personal connection to the work.

In Diba's memes, the self-generated red seal features a thoughtful and deliberate design. On the one hand, by explicitly mimicking the red colour and formal design of red seals commonly used in modern Chinese society, Diba participants craft a visual sign that appropriates the symbolic meanings of credibility and authority. This direct appropriation lends a sense of seriousness to the crafted seal and amplifies the perceived legitimacy of messages expressed through the meme. On the other hand, the inclusion of a dragon in the centre and Diba's group name in the surrounding area exemplifies another practice of intertextual appropriation. By incorporating a dragon, Diba participants link the seal to China's tradition culture, where dragons often symbolise power and prestige. Additionally, Diba's group name is also presented to draw on the representational function of red seals as symbols of authorship. This asserts a collective identity for meme users and position Diba as a cohesive and authoritative entity.

Through the intertextual recontextualisation of red seals as cultural symbols and practical tools rooted in China's historical and modern societies, the self-generated seals in Diba memes transcend their role as mere aesthetic elements. They are transformed into dynamic symbols that bridge the gap between traditional authority and digital creativity. Given that red seals are deeply embedded in the semiotic practices of formal governance and institutional communication, the interdiscursive recontextualisation of these symbols enables Diba participants to incorporate top-down discourse into their grassroots digital activities. This innovative integration not only demonstrates how internet memes can internalise symbolism

constructed within official and institutional discourses but also highlight the efforts that Diba participants made to reinforce their group identity and solidarity.

Moreover, as shown in Figure 5.19 and by memes examined in previous section, a templated integration of cartoon character and filtered face recurs when Diba participants intend to represent themselves. Such integration was found in 44 memes, which intertextually recontextualised filtered faces of nine individuals.



Figure 5.19 Templated integration of a cartoon character and a filtered face

According to Table 5.5, all the filtered faces originate from celebrities or fictional characters activating in different countries and entertaining industries. Despite that most of these recontextualised faces relate to Asian popular culture, it is notable that D’Angelo Dinero, a professional wrestler, is favoured in Diba participants’ meme production process.

Owner of the identified face	Attribute of owner	Number
D’Angelo Dinero	American professional wrestler	12
김관장 (Master Kim)	Korean movie characters	8
조석 (Cho Seok)		5
乌蝇 (Fly)	Hong Kong movie character	8
福尔康 (Fu Erkang)	Characters of Taiwanese novel-based TV dramas	4
福尔泰 (Fu Ertai)		4
王雪琴 (Wang Xueqin)		1
黄子韬 (Huang Zitao)	Artists from mainland China	1
林更新 (Lin Gengxin)		1
		44

Table 5.5 identities of filtered faces found in the 2016 sub-corpus

As an American professional wrestler, D’Angelo Dinero went viral on Chinese social media due to his grinning facial expression after defeating his opponents (Jiang and Vásquez, 2019).

Resonating with Chinese meme culture, his exaggerated expressions were often used to convey humour, surprise, or sarcasm. However, Ying and Blommaert (2020) pointed out, when being inserted into Chinese internet memes, D'Angelo Dinero's facial expression is open to more refined interpretations in different communicative situation. This flexibility is applicable to Diba's memes.



(translation)

1. Propaganda team aiming to spread knowledges to the countryside
2. Diba goes to the countryside, spreading love everywhere
3. The moon represents my heart  
Propaganda team aiming to spread knowledges to the countryside

*Figure 5.20 D'Angelo Dinero and Diba's memes recontextualising his grinning expression*

As illustrated above in Figure 5.20, the filtered faces of D'Angelo Dinero help highlight the affection expressed through the Chinese term “爱(ai, love)” and the gesture of making a heart with hands. In this situation, the grinning faces soften the aggressive nature of the Diba Expedition and present the two memes as demonstrations of friendship and kindness. Nevertheless, the filtered faces can also convey mockery towards independence supporters, as the memes specifically describe the expedition as a campaign, where Diba participants are positioned as superior educators spreading love and political knowledge among Taiwanese.

### 5.5.2 Patriotic slogan of “I LOVE CHINA”

In the 2016 sub-corpus, it was found that the multimodal integration “I ❤️ CHINA” recurs in 14 memes. In all instances, this slogan is decorated on clothes worn by the depicted cartoon characters. Figure 5.21 illustrates three examples.



(translation)

1. You are too ugly to imitate others who claim for independence. Idiot
2. Made in China
3. If you are as capable as you assert, why not rocket yourself to the heaven
4. Made in China
5. Come, I prepared a large amount of medicine for you. Enjoy
6. Medicine for idiots

Figure 5.21. Diba's memes including "I ♥ CHINA" slogan

The first meme explicitly targets pro-independence Taiwanese and humiliates them with insulting words, while the other two memes generally convey a ridicule which can be flexibly used in other contexts. As explained earlier in section 5.4.1, the "Made in China" label enables Diba participants to strengthen their group identity as well as define the pro-independence Taiwanese as others. On the one hand, Diba's memes mimic the iconic expression "I ♥ NY". The slogan of "I ♥ NY" was initially designed for a marketing campaign to promote tourism in New York (Godfrey, 1984; Bendel, 2010). Nevertheless, its contextualised meaning was constantly modified and even replaced after people around the world apply the design template to express love towards other cities, countries, individuals, and so on. The "I ♥ CHINA" slogan in Diba's memes is a typical example of interdiscursive recontextuallisation. By appropriating the symbolic format of "I ♥ NY", Diba's memes exemplify how communicative practices from tourist discourse can be incorporated in digital political activities to express strong affection towards China as a nation-state. On the other hand, the "I ♥ CHINA" slogan elaborates Diba participants' pro-government stance. Comparing to the "Made in China" label, this patriotic slogan can be more effective in preventing pro-independence Taiwanese to appropriate or reuse Diba's memes. In other words, this slogan further emphasises the ideological opposition between anti-independence individuals as internal members and pro-independence counterparts as external opponents.

Since Diba participants always collocate the “I ❤️ CHINA” slogan with insulting text and templated cartoon character, this collocation not only articulates a patriotic love but also presents a nationalist hostility against independence supporters.

### 5.5.3 Socialist love and invitations

In addition to replacing the verb “love” through the heart emoji, the meaning of “love” is expressed through another 14 Chinese characters of “爱/愛 (ai, love)”. 11 involve simplified Chinese, while the remaining three involve traditional Chinese. More importantly, as discussed below, although relevant memes are primarily used to convey “love” towards Taiwanese people, the implied attitude is featured by an offensive superiority.

As exemplified by memes in Figure 5.22, Diba participants tend to classify the targeted Taiwanese people into two groups. One group features individual of a neutral political orientation, while the other group includes independence supporters.



(translation)

1. Mainland compatriots love Taiwanese compatriots
2. But China daddy must beat pro-independence dogs
3. No matter how you humiliate me, I will not blame you, because father always loves you
4. Propaganda team aiming to spread knowledges to the countryside
5. Recording
6. Institute of Caring and Loving Delinquent Children
7. Diba goes to the countryside, love goes everywhere
8. Decent youths who go to the countryside

Figure 5.22. Diba’s memes expressing Diba participants’ love towards the Taiwanese

To address pro-independence Taiwanese, Diba participants linguistically assert that their solution is to care them with paternalistic love and to educate them with socialist knowledge. This superior assertion not only assigns unequal positions to independence supporters and Diba participants themselves but also frames the 2016 expedition as an act of kindness. In this narrative, pro-independence Taiwanese are seen as required to learn the "correct" knowledge about Taiwan's political status, the mainland's advancements, and the legitimacy of cross-strait unification. From this perspective, it is evident that the comparison between the 2016 expedition and the Down to the Countryside Movement by the bottom right meme in Figure 5.22 is not necessarily motivated by the historical implications of the mentioned political event. When Mao Zedong initiated the Down to the Countryside Movement, his goal was to educate privileged urban youth through the harsh realities of rural life, ultimately transforming them into strong and qualified socialists (Chen *et al.*, 2020). This political objective stands in stark contrast to Diba participants' framing of the 2016 expedition. Therefore, the Down to the Countryside Movement is used metaphorically to depict Diba participants as privileged urban youth, while Taiwanese are portrayed as farmers living in underdeveloped areas. Through this depiction, Diba participants position themselves as dedicated to helping the “ignorant” Taiwanese, educating them with socialist ideas, and promoting cross-strait unification.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the bottom right meme in Figure 5.22 features an iconic realistic visual style. This style associates with posters produced during China's Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution campaigns (Sheng, 1990; Shen, 2000; Landsberger, 2002). In the 2016 sub-corpus, this realistic style was found in 17 memes. To facilitate comparison, two posters are provided in Figure 5.23, obtained online by searching for “posters of the Great Leap Forward” and “posters of the Cultural Revolution”. Unlike anime and cartoon characters discussed in section 5.4.2, these posters use a realistic drawing style to emphasise details such as light and shadow, facial expressions, and body contours. These detailed depiction highlights the spiritedness and physical strength of the portrayed characters.



(translation)

1. Work hard, strive for the upper reaches, and build socialism as quickly, efficiently, and economically as possible!
2. Let the philosophical theories become people's sharp weapons

Figure 5.23. Chinese posters designed for promoting the Great Leap Forward (left) and the Cultural Revolution (right)

As illustrated by the four representative memes in Figure 5.24, this visual style is preserved to convey Diba participants' enthusiasm for developing socialist China and "liberating" Taiwan.



(translation)

1. Made in China
2. We live at both ends of the Yangtse River. I miss you so much but cannot meet you in person, we should work together to develop the socialist new countryside
3. Even if the whole world criticise you, I am still willing to have a lengthy talk with you about the core socialist values
4. Refuse willful misconducts
5. Worker and soldier of the capital
6. Don't ask am I still here or do I love you. The most touching confession is realising the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation
7. Liberate Taiwan and unify the Chinese nation
8. We must liberate Taiwan

Figure 5.24. Diba's memes repurposing China's iconic political posters

In addition to maintaining a realist style, it is important to note that the written texts in the above meme selectively inherit certain features of the old posters. As an economic and cultural campaign, the Great Leap Forward relied on posters to mobilise Chinese people to collectively transform China from an agrarian economy into an industrialised society (Sheng, 1990). Along with this push for national development, Mao launched the Anti-Rightist Campaigns to purge intellectuals who supported capitalism and opposed collectivisation (Luo, 2018). The



combination of economic, ideological, and political pressures led local officials to cater to the government's exaggerated expectations by over-fulfilling production quotas, sometimes even faking results. In such a social and political atmosphere, written slogans in the campaign posters often aimed to excite Chinese workers with grandiose content and tone. This style is quite different from posters designed during the Cultural Revolution, which followed the Great Leap Forward and its catastrophic consequences, such as the Great Chinese Famine. The Cultural Revolution, a socio-political movement initiated by Mao, sought to preserve Chinese communism by purging capitalist and traditional remnants (Clark, 2008; Kraus, 2012). Consequently, the movement's posters typically highlighted Mao's political ideas and promoted class warfare.

Given these features, it is evident that Diba's memes do not inherit the magniloquent content and tone of Great Leap Forward posters. Instead, they focus on imitating the written endorsement of the CCP's political ideas. More importantly, their memes also emphasise the ideological struggle between socialism and capitalism.

In Figure 5.24, the upper left meme explicitly mentions the geographical distance between Taiwan and the mainland, while simultaneously extending a socialist invitation suggesting economic cooperation between the two sides. This invitation is further expanded in the upper right meme, where the text indicates that Taiwan is also expected to accept the mainland's socialist ideological values. Although the invitation is framed as a “告白 (*gaobai*, love confession)”, the other two memes in Figure 5.24 adopt a more forceful tone, demanding that Taiwan should unite with the mainland to achieve a great rejuvenation.

When comparing these four memes to the iconic posters, it becomes clear that Diba's memes exemplify an intentional parody. Through these memes, Diba participants highlight the ideological conflict between Taiwan and the mainland. They also implicitly suggest that if Taiwan is reclaimed, only socialism can be applied to the island. This implication not only serves as a warning to pro-independence Taiwanese who advocate for political democracy and a free-market economy but also reflects Diba participants' tendency to attribute cross-strait conflicts to ideological clashes between the two sides.

## 5.6 Cross-strait exchanges of ideological memes

During data selection process, it was found that a very small number of memes were created by independence supporters. Since these memes were not disseminated by Diba participants to express pro-government opinions, they were not annotated and included in my corpus.

However, a brief observation revealed that independence supporters counter-attacked Diba participants through several ideological memes. Specifically, these memes ridiculed Diba participants for their illegal use of Facebook and emphasised the democratic nature of Taiwan’s presidential election. Although pro-independence memes are not the focus of my analysis, they do relate to a few instances of Diba’s pro-government memes. Also, they exemplify how Diba participants responded to mockeries of the mainland’s political system and ideologies.

In the following Figure 5.25, the upper row presents two memes transmitted by pro-independence Taiwanese, while the lower row shows two memes circulated by Diba participants. It is evident that the memes in the upper row are more straightforward. Both utilize images of Xi Jinping and combine it with written mockeries of the mainland’s internet regulations and lack of universal suffrage.



(translation)

1. All of you who climb over the wall, get back, as I said
2. Chinese people can't vote, they can only reincarnate
3. We are not living behind a wall
4. but you are living under a well
5. Exclusive use of dealing with the independence supporters
6. Exclusive use for the PCR. I can use fb even I do not get over the wall  
The population of all the Chinese overseas students is larger than the population of 2.3 million Taiwanese

Figure 5.25. Memes transmitted by pro-independence Taiwanese (top) and Diba participants (bottom)

Unlike pro-independence Taiwanese, Diba participants resort to popular culture and cartoon characters for making meaning. The bottom left meme is a typical example showcasing how Diba participants respond to mockery from independence supporters. By redefining the term

“*牆* (*qiang*, wall)” as a physical separation, Diba participants place themselves in a superior position, ridiculing the Taiwanese as frogs in a deep well. This redefinition allows Diba participants to sidestep any discussion of the mainland’s technical firewall, which prevents access to certain overseas websites or platforms, such as Facebook. At the same time, depicting Taiwanese as frogs in a well invokes an ancient fable from Daoism, which is often used to satirise those who are short-sighted and arrogant. This satire echoes earlier memes featuring tea eggs and may specifically target the DPP which is symbolised by the green colour. Although the bottom left meme appears to cohesively respond to independence supporters’ mockeries, it fundamentally twists the referential meaning of the Chinese character “*牆* (*qiang*, wall).” This practice suggests that Diba participants are extremely cautious in representing and expressing their views on the mainland’s virtual firewall and one-party system.

This caution is also evident in the bottom right meme, which pairs a simplified Chinese text with an image of Bobby Hill, a fictional American cartoon character. The text denies that Diba participants are technically prevented from accessing Facebook. This denial is further justified by pointing out that many Chinese students study overseas. Like the previous meme, Diba participants avoid directly acknowledging the existence of the mainland’s virtual firewall. Thus, the bottom right meme exemplifies Diba participants’ cautious approach to politically sensitive topics. From this perspective, it becomes clear that the cross-strait exchange of ideological memes did not lead to meaningful interactions or achieve Diba participants’ goal of educating pro-independence Taiwanese with socialist values.

## 5.7 Summary

This chapter sections examine notable memes which are produced and circulated during the 2016 expedition. It was found that these memes heavily rely on written text to convey pro-government opinions, while images are innovatively used for illustration and emotional mobilization. The examination discovered three primary findings: (1) Diba’s memes represent Taiwan and justify China’s territorial claim by referencing historical evidence and international voices, (2) they express participants' patriotic love and superiority, showcasing the mainland’s soft and military powers, and (3) they frame the 2016 expedition as a dedication to ideological education.

In terms of form, the heavy reliance on the mode of writing sometimes hampers the Diba participants in communicating the intended meanings with viewers who are not equipped with

the required language literacy, familiar with the highly contextualised narrative styles, or did not access the memes at a relatively early stage of online transmission. This impact is particularly significant when text-heavy memes rely on the Chinese language and tactics from East Asian subcultures to personify Taiwan and narrate cross-strait relationships since ancient times. Furthermore, being compressed on different digital platforms and diverse digital devices, this type of memes can become too blurred to be perceived when they reach Facebook as the destination of Diba participants' cross-platform activities. Despite this challenge, such memes may still emotionally mobilise in-group members who contributed to the meme transmission across platforms and were able to interpret the cultural references embedded in these text-heavy memes. This exclusive connection between in-group members and the layered semiotic meanings can realise self-satisfaction and reinforce the sense of belongingness.

In terms of content and stance, Diba's memes are both creative and superior in tone. They creatively appropriate online literature and anime characters to express support for the nation-state. However, this creativity may limit the memes' intended meanings to a narrower audience. Viewers who are unfamiliar with the relevant subcultures may partially understand the constructed meaning or even misinterpret it. Moreover, Diba's memes often position the mainland and Diba participants as superior, mocking Taiwan and independence supporters as ignorant and arrogant "frogs". Although Diba's memes frame this superiority as ideological education, they make limited efforts to elaborate the ideological differences across the Taiwan Strait. This feature is especially evident when Diba participants avoid engaging with sensitive political topics that are explicitly mentioned in pro-independence ideological memes. Rather than directly addressing ridicules of the mainland's political system and technical regulations, Diba's memes deviate the focus of meaning-making and respond through resources borrowed from ancient fables and popular culture.

## Chapter 6 The 2017 expedition to Hong Kong

On 8 September 2017, Diba participants united once again to express their pro-government opinions on Facebook. This round of expedition targeted the Facebook pages of the Student Union of the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUSU)<sup>12</sup> and Undergrad, H.K.U.S.U. Instant News. Although the expedition took place on Facebook, the root cause can be traced back to an offline conflict between several CUSU cadres and a mainland freshman.

### 6.1 Background of the expedition

The conflict occurred on 5 September, and it was initiated by the mainland student who tore down several pro-independence posters from the democracy wall. This wall is located on the CUHK campus, and it is mainly used by university students and staffs to publicly express personal opinions about school policies, social issues, or political topics. Democracy walls exist in most Hong Kong universities or colleges, but they originally stemmed from the democracy wall on Beijing's Xidan Street. Physically, this long brick wall in Beijing facilitated China's Democracy Wall Movement, where big character posters were displayed to protest specific political and social issues. Symbolically, this wall represented the mainland's struggle for democratic changes in the post-Mao era and a brief period of political liberation after the Cultural Revolution (Brodsgaard, 1981; Goldman, 1999; Paltemaa, 2007). By inheriting these symbolic meanings, Hong Kong's democracy walls serve more than just as bulletin boards. Instead, they act as instruments to raise students' awareness of public issues and manifest Hong Kong's core social value of the freedom of speech. In this broader context, the mainland student's behaviour of tearing off posters from the democracy wall was interpreted by the CUSU cadres not merely as a violation of campus regulations. It was inevitably seen as a suppression of other students' freedom of speech.

According to relevant news reports (Stand News, 2017; Yang, 2017), pro-independence banners and posters were disseminated on the CUHK campus at the beginning of September. The CUHK administrators clarified that the university did not support Hong Kong independence. Simultaneously, relevant banners and posters were immediately removed. Nevertheless, these materials reappeared on the democracy wall, and the CUSU managed to

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<sup>12</sup> On 7 October 2021, CUSU was disbanded after the university administration refused to collect fees for the union and demanded it to register through government agencies. Along with this disbandment, CUSU's Facebook page and all the posts become inaccessible at the same time.

keep the posters untouched until the conflict happened on 5 September. The offline conflict was captured by journalists<sup>13</sup> and soon went viral after being uploaded online.

As documented in the video, the mainland student initially expressed dissatisfaction when CUSU cadres approached her speaking Cantonese. Moreover, she criticised the cadres for representing all CUHK students in advocating for Hong Kong independence. In response to the mainland student's criticism, the CUSU cadres attempted, but failed, to communicate in Mandarin. Switching to English, the cadres explained that they were not owners of the pro-independence posters, but the CUSU was responsible for protecting the freedom to post any content on the democracy wall. The cadres suggested that the mainland student can express her counterviews by adding posters to the wall rather than silencing others' voices. Because the wall was almost covered by pro-independence posters, the mainland student asserted that the democratic rights of expressing opinions and removing them should coexist. Logically, this assertion is in obvious contrast to principles of freedom of speech and democracy. Despite this logical fallacy, the CUSU cadres did not respond with reasonable arguments. They only reiterated that the mainland student's behaviour was not allowed according to campus regulations, and the CUSU was within its rights to stop her.

When the journalists' video went viral online, the students' argument sparked diverse discussions in both Hong Kong and the mainland. People's focus ranged from the long-existing clashes between local and mainland students to criticisms of the university's regulations on students' freedom of speech. On mainland social media, nationalist users vehemently opposed Hong Kong independence while ridiculed the CUSU cadres' proficiency in Chinese and English. Amid the heated online discussions, a group of mainland students decided to counterattack the independence supporters and the CUSU by posting self-made materials on the democracy wall. This collective action escalated the offline altercation, with more pro-independence and pro-government individuals gathering on the CUHK campus.

To bolster pro-government voices, Diba participants launched a round of online expedition. Figure 6.1 illustrates the self-generated poster disseminated online for mobilisation and recruitment. In the background, image elements of red flags, a sword and war horses evoke an imagery of ancient battlefields. Only written texts are foregrounded in the poster. Red colour and Chinese calligraphy style feature Diba as the initiator, and date of the expedition is provided below. The poster's central area contains Chinese texts of “种花兔 (*zhonghua tu*,

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<sup>13</sup> In the video, one CUSU cadre explained to the mainland student that the individuals recording the argument were mass media staffs: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mIWshwGKKs4&t=1s>

rabbits who cultivate flowers)” and “港英蝗 (*gangying huang*, Hong Kong and British locusts)”. The abbreviated expression of “VS” separates these two Chinese texts and indicates an adversarial relationship. As explained in section 5.4.2, “种花兔 (*zhonghua tu*, rabbits who cultivate flowers)” originated from a Chinese anime series. The rabbit was initially employed as an anthropomorphic animal to represent China in storytelling, but it developed into a symbol of patriotism and national confidence after the anime series went viral. The pronunciation of “种花 (*zhonghua*, cultivate flowers)” resembles that of “中华 (*zhonghua*, China)”. Poster producers creatively utilise this resemblance to address some Hong Kongers and British people as locusts, because they attempt to damage flowers or China by supporting Hong Kong independence. The adjacent Chinese text further clarify the expedition’s goal of combating these locust-like adversaries and show Diba participants’ patriotic enthusiasm. Additionally, the poster’s bottom part provides the time of expedition and targeted Facebook page in simplified Chinese. These multimodal elements render an initial impression that Diba participants not merely opposed Hong Kong independence but also included the UK as an enemy in their online expedition.



(translation)

1. Diba Expedition
2. 8 September 2017
3. Flower-planting rabbits VS. Hong Kong and British locusts
4. As long as rabbits join the battle, no locusts can survive
5. Time of expedition: 19:30
6. Site of expedition: Facebook page of CUSU

*Figure 6.1. Poster recruiting participants for the 2017 expedition*

Recruited through the above poster, Diba participants armed themselves with pre-prepared memes on 8 September 2017. They flooded the Facebook pages of CUSU and Undergrad, H.K.U.S.U. Instant News, marking the commencement of the 2017 Diba Expedition. However, due to page administrators of Undergrad, H.K.U.S.U. Instant News cleaning up the comment areas of involved posts, all meme data were collected from one of CUSU's Facebook posts. Thus, all findings and analysis in this chapter are based on the 2017 sub-corpus where 140 representative memes are stored.

## 6.2 English iterations of territorial integrity

In all textual extractions, China (n=58) and Hong Kong (n=35) are frequently mentioned. When China is mentioned, simplified Chinese (n=22) is more frequently used, followed by traditional Chinese (n=20) and English (n=16). Conversely, when Hong Kong is mentioned, traditional Chinese (n=12) and English (n=12) are preferred.

It was found that Diba's memes do not make many efforts to explain or justify Hong Kong's political status. However, the use of English to iterate China's territorial integrity is particularly notable in the corpus. As shown in Table 6.1, among the 16 instances of the English "China", 12 are used to highlight the idea that "China is an inalienable part of China".

			<b>Number</b>
Is part of	China		5
The international call for	China	Hong Kong	5
HONG KONG BELONGS TO	CHINA		1
Hong Kong is an inalienable part of	China		1
			<b>12</b>

*Table 6.1 English texts including "China" and highlighting China's territorial integrity*



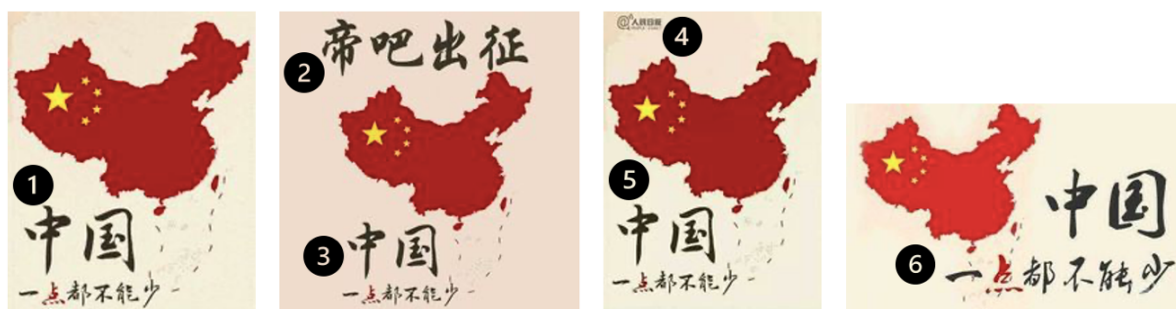
			Number
	Hong Kong	is not a country	5
The international call for China	Hong Kong		5
	HONG KONG	BELONGS TO CHINA	1
	HONG KONG	BELONGS TO MY COUNTRY	1
			<b>12</b>

Table 6.2. English texts including “Hong Kong”

Excluding overlapping sentences, Table 6.2 shows that all instances of the English “Hong Kong” are used to repeat territorial claims. Although these English texts are not significant in terms of occurrence frequency, they offer an initial impression of Diba’s memes. That is, despite claiming to combat “*港英蝗 (gangying huang, Hong Kong and British locusts)*” in their recruiting poster, Diba participants did not rely much on English as a tool to communicate with potential British viewers.

### 6.3 Hong Kong on maps of China

In terms of image elements, 18 flags of China and 10 maps of China were detected. Among the maps of China scattered in ten different memes, four of them are integrated with the Chinese flag. The relevant memes exemplify interconnected variants generated from a similar template. Figure 6.2 lines up four examples to facilitate comparison. These memes share an identical image component that combines the Chinese flag and map. In addition, they include similar textual components utilising simplified Chinese to show territory claims. The noticeable differences between these four memes arise from varied meme shapes as well as textual components indicating the possible origins of these memes.



(translation)

1. China shall not loss any territories
2. Diba goes to expedition
3. China shall not loss any territories
4. *People's Daily*
5. China shall not loss any territories
6. China shall not loss any territories

Figure 6.2. Diba's memes integrating the flag and map of China

Meme producers creatively configure the shape of the Chinese flag to conform to the outline of China's administrative map. Curved lines function as a rhetorical tool (Harley, 1989), assisting Diba participants in constructing their linguistic argument. Specifically, these four memes depict borderlines to mirror China's natural geographical boundaries. They also employ the curved lines to project Diba participants' normalised knowledge of China's juridical territories. This projection is reinforced by the adjacent Chinese text, asserting that China shall not loss any territories. As shown in Figure 6.2, this written assertion is consistently present in all meme samples. Mimicking Chinese calligraphy, the script typeface not only manifests China's traditional culture but also implies that the visually depicted territories have belonged to China since ancient times. Moreover, the Chinese character “点 (*dian*, dot)” is highlighted in red. Within the situational context of the 2017 expedition, it specifically refers to Hong Kong which constitutes a tiny portion of the Chinese map.

In addition to these similar content and formal features, each meme in Figure 6.2 possesses a distinct shape. This formal feature does not necessarily alter the memes' core meanings, but it allows for adjustments of meme components' spatial positions and individual sizes. Memes in Figure 6.2 are benefited from such adjustments in various ways, such as highlighting Diba participants' knowledge of China's juridical territories through the map, underlining China's territorial integrity through the written text of “一点都不能少 (*yidian dou buneng shao*, shall not loss any territories)”, or emphasising China's subjectivity through the word “中国 (*zhongguo*, China)”. Maintaining a balance between these three meanings can also be realised, as demonstrated by the last sample in Figure 6.2. Another notable difference among the illustrated memes is the inclusion of elements adding specific information about these memes' intertextual relations with 人民日报 (*renmin ribao*, People's Daily) as a source of semiotic resources. In Figure 6.2, the second and third memes respectively display two different written

texts in their upper areas. One uses the visual style of Chinese calligraphy to feature Diba as the online initiator of the pro-government activity. The other is more like a formally designed logo representing *People's Daily*, the CCP's official newspaper, as a driving force who played a part in transmitting the meme as an influential mediator or possibly designed the meme as the original producer. Apart from the above similarities and differences, it is important to note that the territorial claims presented in Figure 6.2 are general and broad enough to be applicable to any political conflicts concerning China's territory integrity. The Chinese character “点 (*dian*, dot)” can refer to any geographical areas other than Hong Kong, yet the emphasis on China's sovereignty remains consistent. In this sense, Figure 6.2 showcases variants of a similar template that can be easily adapted for other Diba expeditions, such as the one in 2016.

The multimodal claims' replicability and the consistent focus on China as a nation-state can also be observed in other memes. The first meme in Figure 6.3 is a typical example, in which bilingual assertions are combined with an image element of the Chinese map. However, the map featured in this meme is different from the one repeatedly shown in Figure 6.2, because it clarifies the written assertions by appealing to the Chinese cultural identity.



(translation)

1. Hong Kong belongs to my country
2. Hong Kong is an inalienable part of China
3. Taiwan belongs to my country
4. Taiwan is an inalienable part of China

*Figure 6.3. Variants of meme templates reused in the 2016 (right) and 2017 (left) expeditions*

As pointed out earlier, the territorial claims in Figure 6.2 are so general that they can serve as reusable templates in any political disputes concerning China's territorial integrity. This

generality mainly results from the multimodal components, which do not linguistically specify or visually mark the claimed territory. The first meme in Figure 6.3 presents a template that had already been transmitted in the 2016 expedition to stress China's ownership over Taiwan (see section 5.2 for further elaboration). By replacing the bilingual expressions of Taiwan with counterparts of Hong Kong, meme producers recontextualise the territorial claim in the 2017 expedition and establish intertextual relations between the relevant memes. They continue to justify China's ownership over Hong Kong by indicating Hong Kongers' Chinese cultural identity. Given this meme template's reoccurrence in different situational contexts and the Diba Expedition's political attributes, it is arguable that the first meme in Figure 6.3 not simply represent a territorial claim. Its primary purpose is to erase the distinctions between China as a cultural community and China as a political entity. The sharedness of a Chinese cultural identity is strategically converted into identification with a Chinese political identity. The illustrated memes, therefore, showcase a multimodal template which are intertextually recontextualised in different contexts of the 2016 and 2017 expeditions. They also demonstrate Diba participants' consistent interpretation of the relationship between cultural and political identities.

Figure 6.4 exemplifies another two memes, where the territorial claim can be applied to any geographical areas and the primary focus is placed on China as a nation-state. Unlike the instances provided in Figure 6.3, these two memes present the Chinese map in a rather different style. They distinguish China's domestic territories from the foreign counterparts via curved borderlines and/or distinct colours.



(translation)

1. China's administrative map
2. My chicken shall not loss one single feather

*Figure 6.4. Diba's memes representing boundaries between domestic and foreign territories*

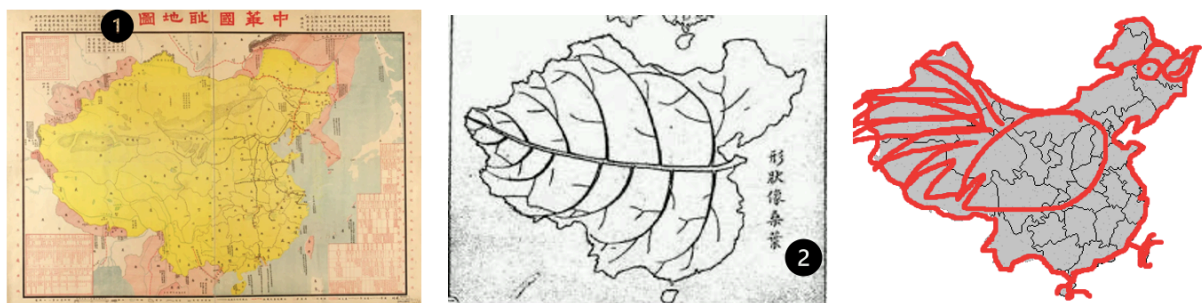
The first map in Figure 6.4 should originally function to demonstrate the geospatial information about China and its administrative regions. After being intertextually recontextualised into the 2017 expedition, the cartographic design serves more to fulfil Diba participants' rhetorical purpose and present their territorial claim as an acknowledged fact. The geospatial information helps to put China into the global context and represent it as a part of the international society. The bold borderlines not only differentiate domestic territories from the foreign ones but also delineate each administrative region. Through the distinct colours and curved borderlines, this meme effectively separates China as the self from external regions as the other. The visual separation can imply that China is a self-governing state who has the supreme power to govern all the territories highlighted in colours other than blue and grey. However, like memes illustrated in Figure 6.2 and Figure 6.3, this meme presents a territorial claim without explicitly marking which geographical area is specifically claimed. The lack of clarification is also evident within the second meme in Figure 6.4. A cartoon panda man points at the Chinese map in the background. The adjacent written text compares China to a "chicken", and it further warns that this "chicken shall not loss one single feather". The Chinese word "毛" (*mao*, feather)" metaphorically refers to a juridical territory. Nevertheless, without a visual marker to establish a cohesive relationship between these multimodal components, it remains unclear which part of the represented map is metaphorically compared to a "feather".

Based on the memes and analysis presented above, it can be argued that the Chinese map mainly facilitates Diba participants to highlight China as a unified nation-state rather than to defend the territorial claim over Hong Kong. This scenario contrasts with what had been observed in the 2016 expedition, where Diba's memes creatively justify the territorial claim by depicting Taiwan's geographical distance from the mainland and comparing the island into a slice of *angelica sinensis* (see section 5.3.1 for further elaboration). One possible reason for this contrast is Hong Kong's land area, which is too small to be visually marked on a national map or too unfamiliar to be recognised by most meme viewers. Additionally, this contrast may be caused by Diba participants' different focuses of meaning-making.

For the 2016 expedition, Diba's memes make great efforts to convince that Taiwan belongs to China, drawing on various aspects such as geographical, historical, administrative, and linguistic relationships (see Chapter 5 for details). However, regarding Hong Kong affairs, territorial ownership is no longer a central issue after the 1997 handover. Conflicts between collective and regional identities are more commonly seen in contemporary mainland-Hong

Kong relations. Thus, it is reasonable that Diba participants tend to draw viewers' attention to China as a sovereignty nation while avoiding representing Hong Kong separately. This coherent strategy is reflected by memes presented in Figure 6.2 and Figure 6.3. They underline national identity either through the Chinese flag or via the shared cultural identity. Thus, it is necessary to further contemplate that does the second meme in Figure 6.4 emphasises China's sovereignty merely through the part-whole relationship in the chicken-feather metaphor? As explained below, visual analogies involving the Chinese map have evolved historically and are commonly accepted in narratives concerning China's national humiliation and rejuvenation. This contextual information can be helpful in interpreting Diba participants' comparison between China's map and a chicken or rooster.

According to Wang (2016), the visual analogy between a mulberry leaf and China's humiliation map represents the first attempt to self-craft a national image and construct a collective identity. Amid foreign invasion and domestic corruption, the humiliation map was produced as a symbol mourning the loss of territories and warning the decline of national strength. As shown by the first image in Figure 6.5, producers shaded the lost territories in red, and red written texts are inserted to provide brief explanations. This cartographical design presents and records a previously vast empire as well as a diminishing country. As seen from the second image in Figure 6.5, China's map during that period was visually compared to a mulberry leaf. This comparison innovatively visualises the remaining territories in a more memorable way. It was widely used as a sign vehicle to define Sino-Japanese wars and motivate Chinese people's patriotic sentiments. The weakened China was metaphorically represented as a mulberry leaf. As Wang (2016) found in a cartoonish illustration of China's map, textbooks, and novels, this symbolic representation was accompanied by metaphorical expressions that compare Japan to a worm and its invasion of northeast China to the act of eating leaves.



(translation)

1. Map of China's National Humiliation
2. Its shape looks like a mulberry leaf

Figure 6.5. Visual analogies comparing China's humiliation map (left) into a mulberry leaf (middle) while depicting China's modern map as a rooster (right)

Moving from the leaf-shaped humiliation map to the rooster-shaped map, we intrinsically witness an evolved China surviving from the humiliation history and stepping into its modern era. As illustrated by the last image in Figure 6.5, the rooster-shaped map metaphorically represents geographical areas as the rooster's body parts. The depicted regions are therefore justified as integral parts of modern China. Nevertheless, what should be noted here is the national image and collective identity that this rooster-shaped map intends to propagate.

According to Wang's (2016), the comparison between a rooster and Chinese territory's outline was popularised in 1950 through Mao's verse “一唱雄鸡天下白 (*yichang xiongji tianxia bai*, the rooster has crowed and all under heaven turns bright)”. The verse deploys the rooster to symbolise that the CCP-led revolution can help China and the Chinese people to recover from the shadow of foreign invasions. In the aftermath of the second Sino-Japanese war, the visual analogy represented an intentional redefinition of China's national image. On the one hand, it reversed China and Japan's positions. China, being represented as a rooster, became capable to defeat Japan which was metaphorically compared to a leaf-eating worm during and after the war. On the other hand, comparing China to an active animal effectively changed the previous national image portraying the powerless China as a passive plant. In modern China, folklores and official discourses often recontextualise these symbolic meanings and narratives to propagate a renewed collective identity (Wang, 2016). This renewed identity reflects changes in Chinese people's self-perception and continuously accumulates patriotic or nationalist emotions. More importantly, it marks the transition from humiliation to rejuvenation as well as the transformation from passiveness to activity. In this sense, the second meme in Figure 6.4 carries a more profound meaning. The knife held by the panda man not only represents Diba participants' defence of China's territorial claims but also manifests Chinese people's collective subconsciousness that China shall not regress to the humiliated, passive, and powerless status.

#### 6.4 Hong Kong as an administrative region

Among the 23 Chinese words of “Hong Kong”, six of them is used to highlight Hong Kong's position as an administrative region of China. The iconic scene of Hong Kong's handover ceremony was also found in one meme.

In terms of time sequence, the CUHK conflict and the 2017 expedition happened in the aftermath of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Hong Kong's handover. Figure 6.6 illustrates two memes presenting traditional Chinese texts that advertise and promote the handover anniversary. These written texts are not originally produced as meme components. According to the represented circumstance, they are political slogan displayed outside Hong Kong's Tsim Sha Tsui Centre and on the CUHK's democracy wall. The red billboard in the first meme is originally a public sign, advertising the CCP's successful reclamation of sovereignty over Hong Kong in 1997. The red banner in the second meme should be deliberately placed by pro-government students or other individuals. Unlike the political billboard, the banner explicitly targets independence supporters who study or gather on the CUHK campus. Thus, its ultimate communicative purpose is not only to attack the pro-independence stance but also to educate that Hong Kong is under the governance of the mainland rather than any foreign colonists.



(translation)

1. Warmly celebrate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Hong Kong handover
2. Democracy wall of the CUHK
3. Celebrate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Hong Kong handover

*Figure 6.6. Diba's memes celebrating the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Hong Kong handover*

When displayed in different circumstances, the identical meaning of celebrating the historic handover can be associated with distinct sentiments. When recontextualised in the 2017 expedition, the communicative purposes of the red billboard and banner are further altered. Specifically, the targeted audience is no longer limited to the passengers outside the Tsim Sha Tsui Centre and the independence supporters on the CUHK campus. The celebration became visible for all the potential viewers who can read traditional Chinese and were involved in the 2017 expedition. Accordingly, the billboard in Figure 6.6 does not function to advertise the anniversary. It instead facilitates Diba participants in illustrating that the public celebrated Hong Kong's historical unification with the mainland rather than embracing the pro-independence stance. As for the banner in Figure 6.6, its role also changes after being situated



in the online expedition. It acts as visual evidence proving that pro-government individuals declared their political alignment and confronted independence supporters. Moreover, Xi made his first visit to Hong Kong right before the 2017 expedition. At the same time, the inauguration of Hong Kong’s 4<sup>th</sup> Chief Executive was hosted on 1 July, and the pro-Beijing politician, Carrie Lam, was appointed by the Chinese State Council. Against this background, the recontextualised billboard and banner work as political symbols in the online expedition. They remind the potential viewers of the state power over Hong Kong as an administrative unit.

This reminder is also constructed by representing the UK’s historical role in mainland-Hong Kong relations. In the 2017 sub-corpus, the national flag of the UK appears twice. This occurrence frequency is relatively low. Nevertheless, as explained below, the relevant two memes indicate Diba participants’ attitude towards the UK’s involvement in Hong Kong’s colonial history. As illustrated in Figure 6.7, one of these memes intertextually recontextualises an iconic photo representing the handover ceremony in 1997, while the other integrates the Union Jack with the Chinese character “屎(*shi*, shit)”.



(translation)

1. Check for the full image
2. 6 June, 19:53. From Qzone. Forwarded (39324)

Figure 6.7. Diba’s memes involving flags of China, Hong Kong, and the UK

Specifically, the first meme in Figure 6.7 recontextualises an iconic photo depicting the handover ceremony on 1 July 1997. The long shot frames the ceremony’s solemn atmosphere and the symbolic moment of raising the Chinese flag. In the foreground, Chinese and Hong Kong government leaders stand under the flags of China and Hong Kong, symbolising a reunion of Hong Kong and the mainland. In the background, the Chinese and British flags are lined side by side. The depicted individuals and objects constitute a dynamic scene in which

Hong Kong was transferred into a legitimate part of China. As a comparison, the Chinese and British flags in the background are featured with a softer focus. This comparison highlights the core idea that the authority over Hong Kong was transferred from the UK to China, and the PRC had an equal bargaining position in the Sino-British negotiation. By recontextualising this iconic photo, Diba participants intertextually connect the collective expedition to the historic moment and directly appropriate the classic photographic composition to remind independence supporters of the 1997 handover. In this case, the historic moment functions as a symbol implying China's sovereignty over Hong Kong as well as the PRC's capability of terminating British colonisation in Hong Kong.

The second meme in Figure 6.7 only contains an image element representing the British flag. The flag is collocated with a Chinese character “尸(*shi*, corpse)”. In the situational context of the 2017 expedition, this collocation can indicate that the British colonial rule of Hong Kong was terminated long ago. Literally, it also presents a curse upon British colonialism. In addition to this multimodal collocation, it is worth noting that the Union Jack flag can integrate with the Chinese character to form another Chinese character, “屎(*shi*, shit)”. The Union Jack's shape constitutes the dependent strokes, and the resulting Chinese character can be deployed to condemn the UK who previously colonised Hong Kong for 156 years. The simplified Chinese text in the bottom area clarifies that the second meme in Figure 6.7 originated from Qzone, one of China's social networking websites. The written text elaborates that the meme had already been forwarded more than thirty thousand times on Qzone. The 2017 expedition only constitutes one stage of this meme's cross-platform transmission. This meme does not represent Hong Kong in any format. However, Diba participants recontextualise it to blame the UK, whose colonial rule had influenced the Hong Kong society in several aspects. As elaborated below, it impacted the negotiation of the local identity (Fung, 2004; Wang, 2019) as well as the developments of Hong Kong's educational (Bray and Koo, 2004; Morris and Adamson, 2010), legal (Lo, Cheng and Chui, 2019), and civil service systems (Chan, 2003; Wong, 2012).

According to Purbrick (2020), Hong Kong in the post-colonial era is often described as a “torn city”. The hybridisation of Western capitalism and Chinese communism/socialism was initially employed to manage the handover of Hong Kong. Since 1997, the ongoing contest between the two systems has presented challenges for Hong Kongers striving to establish a distinct local identity. Despite Hong Kong's role as a cosmopolitan hub connecting the mainland to the global market, the mainland-Hong Kong identity boundary is deeply embedded

in many Hong Kongers' attitudes toward the mainland. Mainland immigrants and the China model are frequently perceived as outsiders within Hong Kong's socio-political systems (Law and Lee, 2006; C. K. Chan, 2014; Ip, 2015; Lowe and Tsang, 2017). This resistance becomes pronounced when Hong Kongers contend for limited local resources, distance themselves from the political China, and refrain from aligning with the communist regime.

Before the 2017 CUHK conflict, resistance to accepting the national identity heightened amid certain controversies. Under the administration of Hong Kong's 3<sup>rd</sup> Chief Executive, Leung Chun-ying, the anti-Moral and National Education protest took place in 2012, rejecting a compulsory school curriculum aimed at strengthening national education and students' identification with the PRC (Chong, 2013; Morris and Vickers, 2015; Lam, 2016). In addition, the Umbrella Movement broke out in 2014, opposing the central government's decision to impose limitations on the 2017 Chief Executive elections (J. Chan, 2014; Ortmann, 2015; Lee and Chan, 2018). While the decision allowed universal suffrage, it highlighted that “爱国爱港 (*aiguo aigang*, loves the country and loves Hong Kong)” is a crucial criterion for assessing candidates' eligibility (Xinhua News Agency, 2014). Hong Kong's pro-democracy camp criticised this condition, arguing that it could exclude dissidents who do not identify with the political China (BBC News, 2014). More importantly, this decision contradicts the agreements outlined in the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration. In the declaration, the Chinese central government (1984) had pledged Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy after the handover. Hong Kong's regional government would be comprised of local inhabitants, and the central government should appoint the Chief Executive based on local elections or consultations. Also, it had been assured that these agreements would remain unchanged for the following 50 years. According to a UK Parliament research briefing (Brooke-Holland, 2019)<sup>14</sup>, Chinese Foreign Ministry officials in 2017 described the Joint Declaration as history. By referring to Hong Kong affairs as China's internal affairs, they objected to British involvement and supervision.

When considering Diba's memes in this broader context, representing the UK through its flag not only enables Diba participants to condemn British colonisation in Hong Kong but also suggests that Diba participants may consider the UK as a barrier hindering the PRC's modern governance over Hong Kong. From this perspective, the two memes in Figure 6.7 position China either as a victim of British colonialism or as the UK's political opponent in Hong Kong affairs. The handover of Hong Kong did symbolise China's growth in national power, allowing

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<sup>14</sup> The Chinese record on the website of Chinese Foreign Ministry was deleted, so the British record is referred here as the source.

it to negotiate with the UK as a developed country. Simultaneously, this symbolic meaning invokes the collective memory of China being invaded by foreign imperialists and ceding territories for peace. As China's postmemory generation (Hirsch, 2008), young Diba participants may not obtain this historical memory through personal experience. However, some inherit the transgenerational trauma (Gao, 2015; To, 2015) through patriotic education and national propaganda, where the history of foreign invasion is often framed as national humiliation (Callahan, 2004, 2006; Wang, 2008, 2014). Typically, the Opium War and the British navy's invasion are considered as the starting point of China's *百年国耻* (*bainian guochi*, century of national humiliation) (Callahan, 2004, 2006). The humiliation discourse originated in 1915 to protest Japan compromising the Chinese sovereignty through the Twenty-one Demands. The 2001 agreement to establish the National Humiliation Day institutionalised this discourse, instrumentally shaping modern Chinese subjectivity in the mainland society. Both Callahan (2004) and Wang (2008) argued that the humiliation discourse and its institutionalisation profoundly influenced Chinese youth's interpretation and attitude toward foreign countries.

In the process of identity construction and nation-building, collective memory plays an integral role (Smith, 1996; Podeh, 2000). In terms of identity construction, Callahan (2004) asserted that China's humiliation discourse draws boundaries between self and other. In terms of nation-building, he pointed out that victimisation underlies the evolving discourse of national salvation, recovery, and rejuvenation. From this perspective, Diba's memes deploy elements of the British flag to symbolically imply China's national identity during and after the century of humiliation. On the one hand, this implication constructs a group identity by categorising the mainland and Hong Kong as victims of British colonialisation. On the other hand, it legitimises a modern envision in which Hong Kong should unite with the mainland to pursue *民族复兴* (*minzu fuxing*, national rejuvenation), a national goal initially proposed in 2002 under the Jiang administration (People's Daily, 2002) and further framed in 2012 under the Xi administration (Xinhua News Agency, 2012). As mentioned earlier, Hong Kongers have consistently strived to establish and fortify a distinct local identity. In Diba participants' points of view, supporters of Hong Kong's localism and independence overtly present a rejection of national identity and group unity. Unlike pro-Beijing individuals, localists and independence supporters specifically reject inheriting the transgenerational trauma and hostility toward the UK as China's historical enemy.

Therefore, interpretation of Diba's memes in Figure 6.6 and Figure 6.7 should go beyond the situational context of the handover's 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary. These memes can purposefully represent the handover to remind independence supporters of the officially chosen trauma and glory (Volkan, 2001). China's national memory of historical humiliation is highlighted, overlaying Hong Kong's group memory of local resistance in the post-colonial era. National rejuvenation supersedes local interests, fostering an alternative vision of a glorious future. Furthermore, the implied meaning reveals that Diba participants faithfully imitate the institutionalised method of identity construction and nation-building. Upon the emphasised national identity, Diba's memes also make a clear distinction between domestic and foreign. In this distinction, Hong Kong symbolises either China's historical weakness in the Opium War or modern strength in the Sino-British negotiation. Meanwhile, British involvements in Hong Kong affairs trigger Diba participants' personal or generational sense of protectiveness. The UK is, therefore, regarded as a foreign enemy who interferes in China's domestic affairs or undermines modern Chinese subjectivity.

Besides, it is worth reflecting on the fact that during the 2016 expedition, Diba's memes did not make equivalent efforts to condemn Japan's historical colonisation in Taiwan. As introduced earlier, the humiliation discourse was initially formed to protest against Japan's compromise of Chinese sovereignty and territorial integrity (Callahan, 2004, 2006). In the 2016 expedition, Diba participants briefly mentioned the Sino-Japanese wars in components of lengthy but visually blurred written texts (see section 5.3.2 for further elaboration). The relevant memes do not visually represent Japan or further elaborate its crucial role in China's century of national humiliation. Furthermore, Diba participants value Japanese subcultures as apt resources when expressing patriotic sentiments and mobilising in-group members (see section 5.4.2 for further elaboration). The distinct attitudes toward Japan and the UK do not necessarily indicate that Diba participants treat these two historical invaders differently in terms of the domestic-foreign contrast.

This uncovered distinction may be caused by Diba participants' personal preference for or active consumption of Japanese subcultures in China's online environment. Also, it can be seen as an intentional adjustment according to the different political statuses of Taiwan and Hong Kong. In the case of Taiwan, the 1943 Cairo Declaration stated that Japan shall restore Chinese territories to the Republic of China. Because the declaration did not specify requirements for Taiwan's post-colonial governance, the ensuing and ongoing disputes concentrate on diverse interpretations of the one-China concept (see analysis and discussion in section 5.2). Due to the clear statement in the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration, Chinese and British governments

are legally tied up in Hong Kong affairs for the mutually agreed 50 years. As explained earlier, the UK relies on this mutual agreement to consistently advocate for the maintenance of Hong Kong's autonomy, while Chinese Foreign Ministry officials and Diba participants tend to see the UK's advocacy as a threat to China's political subjectivity. My research purpose is neither to examine these historical treaties nor to compare Taiwan and Hong Kong's political statuses. Nevertheless, considering the above background information can obtain additional insights regarding what may account for Diba participants' different focuses of meaning making in the 2016 and 2017 expeditions.

### 6.5 Military governance over Hong Kong

In the 2017 sub-corpus, 15 image elements portray soldiers, while two memes were identified for linguistically referring to the Chinese People's Liberation Army Hong Kong Garrison. In the situation of confronting independence supports, Diba participants may use the relevant memes to highlight the central government's military governance over Hong Kong.



(translation)

1. Hong Kong Garrison, who is calling for independence?
2. Tiexue Community
3. Hu Jintao is reviewing the Chinese People's Liberation Army Hong Kong Garrison

Figure 6.8. Diba's memes representing the Hong Kong Garrison

Memos in Figure 6.8 exemplify the two memes linguistically referring to the Chinese People's Liberation Army Hong Kong Garrison. They both deploy the photographic visual style to depict military parades from different time periods. In the first meme, the golden number "20" in the bottom left corner indicates that the represented parade took place in the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Hong Kong's handover. As mentioned earlier, Xi made his first visit to Hong Kong to celebrate the anniversary. His inspection of the Hong Kong Garrison was

described as a symbolic activity emphasising modern China's sovereignty as well as demonstrating the central government's military strength in safeguarding the policy of One Country, Two System. (Xinhua News Agency, 2017). Despite this symbolic significance, Diba participants opt for a long shot to feature the large scale of the garrison's armed forces. This strategy conveys the garrison's military deterrence, and it facilitates the adjacent written text to warn independence supporters in a stern tone.

The second meme in Figure 6.8 similarly represents the Hong Kong Garrison, but it employs a medium shot to feature Hu Jintao, who served as the CCP's general secretary from 2002 to 2012. The written text in the bottom area, along with its design style, suggests that this meme may originate from a TV news report covering a military parade in Hong Kong. Additionally, the watermark in the top left corner indicates that this meme should have undergone a previous round of transmission on a Chinese military forum, *铁血社区* (*tiexue shequ*, *Tiexue Community*). This meme provides at least two pieces of information. First, it provides insights into the possible sources of the meme, involving both traditional media such as TV news and new media like online forums. Second, the selection of an image featuring Hu carries implications. In one of his speeches, Hu advocated the combination of economic and military developments, emphasising the importance of increasing people's awareness of national defence (Xinhua News Agency, 2007). In the 2017 expedition, Diba's memes may intentionally feature Hu to imply that while Hong Kong plays a significant role in China's economic development, it also plays a vital role in providing economic foundations for China's national defence construction and military effectiveness.

As previously mentioned, 15 image elements are utilised to depict soldiers. While the relevant memes do not directly refer to Hong Kong in any format, they may uncover additional meanings that Diba's memes tend to express regarding China's military strength. Figure 6.9 provides three typical examples. All of them involve the photographic visual style to represent Chinese soldiers who perform different actions.



(translation)

1. News Simulcast
2. You need to be refreshed by a communist bomb
3. China Military Online
4. Disdain coming from a J20 pilot

*Figure 6.9. Diba's memes using the photographic style to represent Chinese soldiers*

Soldiers in the first two memes respectively show a tank to someone or stretch a Chinese flag. Only through the accompanying written text can we learn that the soldier in the third meme stares at something outside the visual frame. In these memes' bottom areas, simplified Chinese texts are inserted to provide clarifications. The first meme originated from *新闻联播* (*Xinwen Lianbo*), a daily news programme produced by China Central Television (CCTV). The written text essentially serves as a subtitle showing that the soldier suggests refreshing someone through a communist bomb from the tank in the background. In this multimodal integration, what the soldier implicitly underlines should be the CCP, armed by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and its military deterrence against potential threats. The second meme employs a medium shot to feature the left soldier's action of stretching a Chinese flag. Since only the flag is depicted in full, this meme's focus of representation is to express the national confidence of China's modern military forces. The watermark in the right corner indicates the meme's previous transmission route which was mediated by *中国军网* (*zhongguo junwang*, China Military Online), the only news website featuring the PLA and officially acknowledged by the CMC.

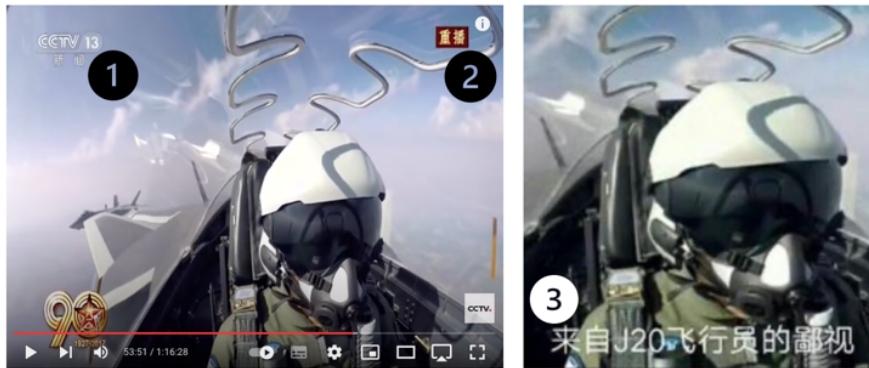
The last meme in Figure 6.9 involves a head shot. It does not present the soldier's action and facial expression. However, the accompanying written text clarifies that the depicted soldier is a Chinese pilot, and his/her disdainful look is concealed under the helmet. The written text also specifies that the pilot is operating the Chengdu J-20, a twinjet all-weather stealth fighter aircraft developed for the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF). According to a report (Wood and Stewart, 2019) from the China Aerospace Studies Institute, the J-20 displayed China's breakthroughs of developing engines independently and reducing reliance on foreign models. The J-20 officially entered service on 9 March 2017 (Guanca, 2017). To commemorate the PLA's 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary<sup>15</sup>, its combat capabilities were unveiled during a

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<sup>15</sup> Full episode of the military parade was uploaded on 31 July 2017 to CCTV's YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kx32c4iYKuY>



military parade organised on 30 July 2017. As illustrated in Figure 6.10, Diba participants borrowed a scene from the military parade broadcasted at the end of July and interdiscursively recontextualised it in the online expedition at the beginning of September to highlight China’s military strength.



(translation)

1. News
2. Replay
3. Disdain coming from a J20 pilot

*Figure 6.10. Screenshot (left) from video recording the military parade and Diba’s meme (right) recontextualising the similar scene*

In the original context of celebrating the PLA’s 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the J-20 symbolised China’s recent advancement in military development and modernisation. It enhanced the PLAAF’s combat capabilities and expanded China’s options to project its regional power. After recontextualised these symbolic meanings into the 2017 expedition, Diba’s meme justifies the sentiment of disdain from the following three perspectives.

Firstly, the disdain can arise from the pride of achieving technological breakthroughs and increasing national strength. In this case, the J-20 fighter jet and its proficient pilot symbolise China’s growing capacities to maintain military control over its territories, such as Hong Kong. They also imply China’s capacity to defend its national sovereignty and confront any perceived threats, such as the UK deeply involved in Hong Kong affairs. Secondly, the disdain can be related to the confidence generated during the progress towards the goal of Made in China (MIC) 2025. When Li Keiqiang proposed the MIC 2025 policy in 2015, its primary aim was to elevate the quality of goods manufactured in China and increase domestic content in manufacturing processes (State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2015). In the 2016 expedition to Taiwan, Diba’s memes explicitly utilised bilingual texts of “made in China” to highlight China’s capacity of producing consumer goods, such as tea eggs, and its current role

in global industrial chains (see section 5.4.1 for further elaboration). However, MIC 2025 focuses on a future envision in which China's high-tech industries will be advanced through domestic innovation. Aerospace equipment constitutes an important part in this quality and industrial upgrading. Although Diba's meme in Figure 6.10 does not explicitly state the aircraft's "Made in China" brand, the J-20 is likely deliberately presented to underline the glorious future of a stronger and technically independent China.

Thirdly, if connect the represented fighter jet to other lethal weapons depicted by the first meme in Figure 6.9, it can be argued that the disdain may also stem from Diba participants' sense of superiority fuelled by technical breakthroughs under the communist regime. Viewing these memes from this perspective makes it easier to interpret what “ 共产主义的炮弹 (*gongchanzhuyi de paodan*, communist bomb)” specifically refers to in the first meme. This linguistic expression targets supporters of Hong Kong independence, as the bomb's communist background starkly contrasts with Hong Kong's capitalist component. Additionally, the suggestion of its lethality serves as a warning to independence supporters that the mainland can strengthen military governance over Hong Kong if necessary. These underlying meanings are also applicable to audience who negatively comment on China's technical independence in high-tech manufacture, the communist regime, and the mainland's management of Hong Kong affairs. While meme viewers are unlikely to encounter representations of the Hong Kong Garrison and Chinese soldiers simultaneously or in a successive sequence, the above analysis and discussion reveal that Diba participants' primary intention is to demonstrate the PLA rather than the garrison of a smaller-scaled force. In name of expressing opinions on Hong Kong affairs, the relevant memes intrinsically concentrate on representing the PLA's military effectiveness and its continuous governance over any claimed territories.

## 6.6 Core Socialist Values

As analysed above, one of Diba's memes linguistically refers to communism as China's representative ideology. This reference contrasts China's ideological values with those of the UK and Hong Kong. In addition to this, Core Socialist Values, a set of official interpretation of Chinese socialism, are iterated in 10 memes. Only one presents these ideological values in traditional Chinese, while the remaining 9 memes utilise simplified Chinese. Numerous studies have discussed Marxian visions of communism and socialism (Engels, 1892; Ollman, 1977; Krygier, 1990; Bernstein, 1993) as well as their localisation in the Chinese context (Schwartz, 1968; Lin, 2006; Bell, 2010). However, this section does not dive into the relations or

differences between these ideologies. Instead, its primary focus is to examine how Diba’s memes express pro-government opinions via multimodally presenting Core Socialist Values, which was initially promoted by Hu in 2012. Another focus is discussing how these representations are connected to the 2017 expedition.

Four memes are provided in Figure 6.11 to showcase how written texts of Core Socialist Values are presented in Diba’s memes. Two memes in the upper row employ red and yellow colours to feature “社会主义核心价值观 (shehui zhuyi hexin jiazhi guan, Core Socialist Values)” as the title, with the 12 values as the main body. China’s national flag, the roof of the Great Hall of the People, doves, Tiananmen Square, and the Great Wall of China are visually illustrated as background. These image elements either symbolise pacifism or signify China’s political and cultural identities.



(translation)

1. Core Socialist Values
2. Prosperity, Democracy, Civility, Harmony  
Freedom, Equality, Justice, Rule of Law  
Patriotism, Dedication, Integrity, Friendship
3. Let’s recite the Core Socialist Values

Figure 6.11. Diba’s memes including Chinese texts of Core Socialist Values

Unlike the two memes in the upper row, memes in the lower row of Figure 6.11 do not include any image elements representing China. One of them collocates a cartoon character

with the 12 values, with a written text inviting potential viewers to recite the listed values. The cartoon character holds an opened book, and this action cohesively link it to the adjacent written text. The cohesive combination not only embodies Diba participants through the cartoon character reading out Core Socialist Values from a book but also invites viewers who can understand simplified Chinese to follow suit. Therefore, this meme demonstrates Diba participants' active advocacy of the listed values, and the written text serves more than just an invitation. It intrinsically asks the targeted viewers to endorse the ideological values underpinning socialism with Chinese characteristics. Moving to the bottom-right meme in Figure 6.11, it also does not visually represent China. Instead, it depicts Trump who won the US presidential election in 2017 and shows an opened file to other people. What needs to be noted in this meme is the traditional Chinese text placed upon the blank file. This written text is innovatively inserted into the recontextualised scene, facilitating Diba participants in claiming that Trump, as a former president of capitalist America, acknowledges China's Core Socialist Values.

At first glance, the memes in Figure 6.11 demonstrate that Diba's memes attempt to promote Core Socialist Values during the 2017 expedition. They creatively justify this promotion by referring to endorsement from a political figure in capitalist system. Considering the CUHK conflict that triggered the 2017 expedition, the 12 values in Diba's memes should be viewed as a reaction to the argument between the CUSU cadres and the mainland student. As introduced in section 6.1, Hong Kong's democracy walls generally function as a symbol signifying Hong Kong's core social value of the freedom of speech. This symbolic meaning stems from Beijing's Democracy Wall which witnessed the mainland's struggle for democratic changes in the post-Mao era. Moreover, it is also developed and localised in Hong Kong's modern socio-political context, where colonial experiences, socialist systems, capitalism practices, and locality are mashed together. In the offline argument between the CUSU cadres and the mainland student, concepts of democracy and the freedom of speech were both involved and interpreted differently. Cantonese and Mandarin spoken by these students not only indicate a linguistic separation but also draw a line between young Hong Kongers and mainland youths who are cultivated in distinct socio-political environments. Thus, arguments that occurred on the CUHK campus imply a confrontation between ideological values underpinning the students' different interpretations of democracy and freedom.

In this sense, it is arguable that Diba's memes regard ideological values as an essential cause of the CUHK conflict. Presenting the mainland's Core Socialist Values is more than an act of political promotion. Instead, it demonstrates Diba participants' collective support for the

mainland student and the socio-political environment that this student represents in the conflict. In addition, it should be noted that Core Socialist Values were initially proposed to address a moral crisis resulting from rapid economic development in post-reform China. Official discourses often attribute this crisis to the import of Western values. Mammonism, hedonism, and extreme individualism are criticised as consequences (Guo, 2014). Western views of universal values, such as democracy and freedom, are considered as foreign instruments challenging China's socialist ideology and influencing its domestic affairs (Liu, 2016; Gow, 2017; Miao, 2020). Due to its colonial history and important role in China's foreign business dealings, Hong Kong occupies a frontline position in international interactions. The co-existence of capitalism and socialism/communism is frequently mentioned when researchers discuss Hong Kongers' consistent struggles for local rights rather than emphasis on national identity (Smart, 1998; Ng, 2009; Lam and Cooper, 2018). Therefore, Diba participants draw on Chinese values not simply to oppose Hong Kong's core values. They fundamentally deploy relevant memes to deny Western countries' universal values. Diba participants' invitation to recite the 12 values shows that they believe ideological education or propaganda can address issues of Hong Kong independence as well as increase Hong Kongers' sense of national belongingness.

Both the CUHK conflict and Diba's memes reflect that the mainland and Hong Kong understand concepts of democracy and freedom differently. Nevertheless, only the CUHK students elaborated on how they respectively defined these two concepts or values. Unlike the offline arguments, Diba's memes only repeat the 12 socialist values without attaching any official or personal interpretations. This repetition can result from imitating how China's central government generally promotes Core Socialist Values offline. Apart from spreading the values through textbooks, stylised posters serve as another channel of public propaganda. Figure 6.12 gives a comparison between one of Diba's memes and a well-designed political poster. Both linguistically feature “*社会主义核心价值观* (*shehui zhuyi hexin jiazhi guan*, Core Socialist Values)” as a title with the 12 values as the main body. Similar types of image elements, such as Tiananmen Square and the Great Wall of China, are included to symbolise China's national identity.



(translation)

1. Core Socialist Values
2. Prosperity, Democracy, Civility, Harmony  
Freedom, Equality, Justice, Rule of Law  
Patriotism, Dedication, Integrity, Friendship
3. Propaganda Department of the CCP  
General Office, Central Commission for Guiding Cultural and Ethical Progress

*Figure 6.12. Core Socialist Values shown online in Diba's meme (left) and offline on a billboard (right)*

In the bottom-right area of Diba's meme, a simplified Chinese text clarifies that this meme is interdiscursively connected to materials produced by the CCP's propaganda department as a campaign advertisement. Since Diba participants recontextualised this pre-designed advertisement in the online expedition, its targeted audience was extended from mainland people to any viewers who were involved in the expedition and able to read simplified Chinese. This practice of interdiscursive recontextualisation also showcase Diba participants' incorporation of official propaganda materials in grassroots online activities. The right image in Figure 6.12 shows a political poster displayed on a public billboard. This kind of advertisement is often facilitated by provinces' local authorities or neighbourhood committees. According to the comparison in Figure 6.12, when Diba participants recontextualised offline campaign posters into the online expedition, they seldom made modifications in aspects of content and form. More importantly, no efforts were made to elaborate each value's definition or official interpretation, even though Diba participants were free to make innovative modifications to the borrowed materials. Typical examples for this feature are the two memes presented in the bottom line of Figure 6.11. Thus, the 12 values and stylised designs are recontextualised into the expedition as a highly symbolised slogan and representation. This recontextualisation may extend the scale of potential viewers, but it is intrinsically an imitation

of the mainland's offline propaganda. Ideological values are spread as a generalised national identity rather than as a set of concepts open to interpretation by different individuals.

Based on the above findings, it is evident that what Diba participants support in the CUHK conflict is not the mainland student's personal definition of democracy and freedom. They only support this student as a symbolic representation of the mainland's opposition to Hong Kong's social values and China's confrontation with Western views of universal values. Meanwhile, the repetition of Core Socialist Values does not signal any intention to specify how Diba participants understand the 12 values and how they interpret the differences between Chinese, Hong Kong, and Western values. All the relevant memes only demonstrate that Diba participants basically imitate the central government's political propaganda. This imitation allows them to promote a generalised national identity and educate supporters of Hong Kong independence.

### **6.7 Ridicules of independence supporters**

The above sections examined how Diba's memes represent Hong Kong as part of China and indicate its ideological alienation from the mainland. Relevant memes show how Diba participants interpret Hong Kong affairs by referencing mainland-Hong Kong and Sino-British relationships. They also reflect Diba participants' patriotic sentiment of protectiveness and a nationalist sentiment of superiority. In this section, the focus shifts to a few representative memes through which Diba participants present their anti-independence attitudes by ridiculing pro-independence posters (n=2) and Ernie Chow (n=6), the former president of the CUSU.

As explained earlier, the CUHK conflict began with an argument between CUSU cadres and a mainland student. One point of their argument was the appearance of pro-independence posters on the democracy wall, and another was the eligibility of cadres to represent all CUHK students in terms of political stance. The argument between Cantonese-speaking cadres and Mandarin-speaking students symbolised the long-standing discord in Hong Kong-mainland relations. Meanwhile, the conflict over displaying versus removing pro-independence posters embodied contradictory interpretations of Hong Kong's political status.

The first image in Figure 6.13 shows the pro-independence poster that initially sparked the CUHK conflict. This poster uses the photographic visual style to depict Hong Kong's Victoria Harbour, a symbolic site representing Hong Kong's commercial prosperity. The harbour's dusk and sunny sceneries are visually contrasted. This contrast is cohesively integrated with the traditional Chinese text to envision the potential future of Hong Kong, either decaying as part

of China or striving for independence. Additionally, two English sentences are placed at the centre calling for support of Hong Kong independence. During the conflict, this poster was distributed on the CUHK campus to promote the pro-independence stance. Its copies were also displayed on the democracy wall to resist the central government which manifested its power through Xi’s visit and the appointment of a new Chief Executive during the anniversary celebration of Hong Kong’s handover.



(translation)

1. Rejection to decay  
Can only be realised through independence
2. Rejection to independence
3. Rejection to one country, two systems  
Only support one country, one system

Figure 6.13. Pro-independence poster (left) and Diba participants’ appropriation (middle and right)

The other two images in Figure 6.13 were found in the 2017 sub-corpus. They can be considered as variants of the pro-independence poster. Image elements from the original poster are repurposed, with the Chinese text in the middle modified and the English text removed.

The central meme retains the traditional Chinese terms “*拒絕 (jujue, rejection to)*” and “*獨立 (duli, independence)*”. Unlike the original poster, Diba participants use these terms to form the statement of “*拒絕獨立 (jujue duli, rejection to independence)*” and demonstrate their anti-independence stance. The right meme maintains a similar composition. However, the written text in the centre shifts from traditional Chinese to simplified Chinese. It argues that the One Country, Two Systems policy is not an ideal method for managing Hong Kong while an “one country, one system” principle can bring true prosperity to the city. Intrinsically, the two memes in Figure 6.13 showcase how Diba participants ridicule independence supporters by converting their pro-independence posters into anti-independence advocacies. These memes



reflect the radical idea of mainland nationalist youths, revealing their tendency to simplify complex political issues into binary oppositions. The promotion of “one country, one system” underscores their confidence in the mainland system and their sense of superiority derived from its development achievements. Furthermore, this promotion challenges the official narrative of Hong Kong and expresses dissatisfaction with the government’s compromise policies.

Additionally, practices of ridiculing independence supporters are also found in another six memes depicting Ernie Chow, who served as the president of the CUSU during the 2017 expedition. Three examples are presented in Figure 6.14. All these three memes are based on a photograph of Chow shouting and pointing at a pro-independence banner or crowd in the background. Nevertheless, as discussed below, each meme features a distinct focus of meaning-making.



(translation)

1. Hong Kong independence
2. Look, these are pro-independence idiots
3. Here is Hong Kong, China  
If you don't want to be Chinese, then get out
4. Why is he more handsome than me?

*Figure 6.14 Diba's memes ridiculing Ernie Chow*

The left meme features a simplified Chinese text at the bottom and presents it as a commentary remark shouted by Chow. Given that Chow is depicted as pointing at a pro-independence banner or a crowd, this meme innovatively utilises this composition to ridicule Chow and mock the crowd as pro-independence “idiots”. The central meme includes a traditional Chinese text within a dialogue box which covers the crowd behind Chow. A red cross is placed over the pro-independence banner, signifying a rejection to Hong Kong independence. Since this meme primarily features Chow and the banner, its focus is related more closely to the political advocacies of independence supports. It serves to restate China’s territorial integrity, criticise independence supporters for rejecting national identity, and suggest that they should leave. The right meme covers the pro-independence banner with a

cartoonish character intertextually recontextualised from *銀魂* (*gintama*), a Japanese anime. Moreover, a simplified Chinese text is inserted and cohesively connected to Chow who shouts and question meme producer's preference for the bold character. This meme does not explicitly express political opinions, as its focus is to disparage Chow by attacking his appearance. The derogatory tone of this meme goes beyond political expression, reflecting Diba participants' cyberbullying of independence supporters.

### 6.8 Diba participants as panda men

Like the 2016 expedition (see section 5.5.1 for further elaboration), Diba participants continued to integrate cartoon characters and recontextualised faces of celebrities during the 2017 expedition. In the 2017 sub-corpus, 24 memes feature this templated integration, with 17 depicting the cartoonish panda man and incorporating the filtered face of *乌蝇* (*wuying*, Fly), a Hong Kong movie character played by Jacky Cheung. As illustrated by the left meme in Figure 6.15, this type of integration is commonly used for self-representation, portraying Diba participants in a playful manner and engaging with independence supporters.



- (translation)
1. Hey, wake up
  2. Don't be stupid

Figure 6.15 Diba's meme (left) including a panda man and Fly, a Hong Kong movie character (right)

According to previous studies on *biaoqingbao* (Jiang and Vásquez, 2019; Ying and Blommaert, 2020), the cartoonish panda man has been one of the most popular image elements in Chinese internet memes. Ying and Blommaert (2020) traced the origin of the panda man to an Egyptian television commercial for Panda Cheese. The commercial features a cute but menacing panda who appears and create chaos whenever someone refuses to eat Panda Cheese. While this commercial went viral on social media, the humorous slogan "Never say no to

Panda" became a catchphrase conveying warning messages. As for the filtered face of Fly, it enables the establishment of an intertextual relation between the meme and the movie in which Fly is portrayed as a rebellious young man involved in crime and street life. In the Chinese context, one of Fly's vulgar expressions, “呸屎啦你 (*jaak8 si2 laa1 nei5*, eat shit)”, has become popular online as a way to show strong disdain or insult during online communication. The accompanied facial expression (as show on the right side of Figure 6.15) is often used in Chinese internet meme for ridicule. Given the origins of the image elements and their symbolic meaning, Diba participants may deploy the relevant memes to embody their disdain towards independence supporters and highlight that they can never say no to mainland China.

However, it is important to note that integrating the cartoonish panda man with the filtered face of Fly is a templated practice commonly provided by Chinese meme generators as a default composition. Since these digital tools play a crucial role in meme production, Diba's memes can also be seen as technical products derived from pre-designed templates. Thus, the choice of the panda man and Fly's face may not necessarily be driven by their symbolic meaning originating from the Egyptian television commercial and Hong Kong movie. Instead, the repeated use of these two elements can result from their popularity in the Chinese context or the default recommendations of meme generators.

## 6.9 Summary

In summary, this chapter provided an analysis and discussion of how Diba participants utilised multimodal memes to demonstrate their pro-government stance during the 2017 expedition. Through examining representative instances from the 2017 sub-corpus, it was found that although Diba participants claimed to address the British colonial impacts on Hong Kong, they only communicate with international audiences through English iterations of territorial integrity. Diba participants show a marked preference for various semiotic resources in constructing their memes, including cartoonish maps, iconic photography, portrayals of soldiers by official media, cartoon characters, and templated integrations recommended by meme generators. These resources are innovatively appropriate and recontextualise to highlight Hong Kong's status as an administrative region under the governance of mainland China. By strategically referencing historical memories and Hong Kong's colonial past, Diba participants condemn independence supporters' rejection to national identity and China's ideological values. Moreover, Diba's memes convey a collective confidence in China's modern development and military strength. They also ridicule independence supporters by modifying

their political promotional materials and attack Ernie Chow, the former president of the CUSU, as a representative figure. Nevertheless, it was revealed that Diba participants' meaning-making practices are more deeply motivated by the long-standing tension between Hong Kong and the mainland, rather than by the initial conflict that happened on the CUHK campus. As a result, while a small number of memes mock and ridicule independence supporters, the primary focus of Diba's meaning-making practices is on broader themes related to national identity and sovereignty.

## Chapter 7 The 2018 expedition to Sweden

The 2018 expedition primarily targeted individuals and institutions in Sweden. The specific targets were Facebook pages of the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, SVT, and Jesper Rönndahl, an anchor at SVT.

### 7.1 Background of the expedition

The immediate motivation for the 2018 expedition was a comment that Jesper made about Chinese tourists on the TV satire show<sup>16</sup>, *Svenska Nyheter*. Nevertheless, the incident itself stemmed from a conflict between several Chinese tourists and a hotel in Stockholm. The tourists reported the conflict to the Chinese embassy in Sweden, accusing the Swedish police of malfeasance. The Chinese embassy brought this complaint to the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, but Swedish prosecutors determined that the police's actions did not constitute a criminal offence. After failing to secure an official apology from Sweden, the Chinese embassy issued an official notice warning Chinese citizens about police brutality in Sweden. Consequently, the original issue escalated into a diplomatic conflict between Sweden and China. Meanwhile, Jesper Rönndahl covered this conflict in his TV show, where he teased the Chinese tourist and played a short video. In this video, a female host welcomes Chinese tourists but describes them as “uncivilised” and “racist”. Jesper later stated that the content of his satire show was intended as a joke<sup>17</sup>, and his main goal was to highlight the cultural clash underlying the conflict. However, the Chinese embassy criticised Jesper's performance as an insolent and racist insult to the Chinese people. The relevant discussion on Chinese social media reached a peak after this criticism, which ultimately triggered the 2018 Diba Expedition.

As shown in Figure 7.1, it was found that two posters were used to promote the 2018 expedition on social media and recruit participants.

The first poster portrays a group of soldiers who salute to a red flag. On the flag, a simplified Chinese text states a metaphorical analogy which was previously used in the 2017 expedition (see section 6.3 for further elaboration). In this analogy, China is compared to a chicken while its territories are described as feathers that cannot be seized by others. At the top of this poster, Diba's group slogan is added to show collective determination and clarify that the depicted

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<sup>16</sup> The clip of this TV show was uploaded to the YouTube channel of *SVT Humor* on 22 September 2018: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DeU13fWzp1Y&t=166s>. In this chapter, all citations of Jesper's words come from the English subtitle available on YouTube.

<sup>17</sup> Jesper Rönndahl's response to the Diba Expedition and other criticisms was uploaded to the YouTube channel of *SVT Humor* on 30 September 2018: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D21TSbDqm2s>

soldiers represent the fully prepared Diba participants. In the corner of this poster, Diba's official seal is attached to indicate authorship. Below this image elements, timing and targets of the expedition are specified. It is notable that targeted Facebook pages are addressed as “战场 (zhanchang, battlefield), generating a sense of heroism and motivating participants through a strong sentiment of patriotism.



(translation)

1. Diba goes on the expedition, no one can survive!
2. My chicken shall not loss one single feather!
3. 24 September 2018
4. Official seal of Diba Central Theatre Command Amy  
Official seal of Diba Central Theatre Command Amy
5. Time: 20.00  
Target: main battlefield: the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs  
<http://m.facebook.com/SwiMFA/>  
Secondary battlefield 1: svt  
<http://m.facebook.com/svt/>  
Secondary battlefield 2: anchor, Jesper Rönndahl  
<http://m/facebook.com/profile.php?id=662620687>



(translation)

1. There is a country named Sweden, priding itself on being a nation of civilization and freedom. In this country, there is a media outlet called SVT. This media outlet, disregarding the Sino-Swedish friendship, has insulted the Chinese people. How can this behaviour be called as civilised and free? It is nothing but a laughingstock, exposing the nature of bandits. If this can be tolerated, what cannot be? There is a saying: “When Diba goes on the expedition, no one can survive”. Therefore, all righteous individuals of the world are called upon to join in this great expedition to punish the bandits on the Mid-Autumn Festival (24 September 2018, 20:00).
2. Official seal of Diba Central Theatre Command Amy  
Official seal of Diba Central Theatre Command Amy
3. We invite all righteous individuals to join us in the QQ groups of Diba Central Theatre Command Amy and Diba stronghold  
Diba Central Theatre Command Amy 1: 00000  
Diba Central Theatre Command Amy 2: 00000  
Stronghold on Facebook: Diba Central Theatre Command Amy

Figure 7.1 Recruiting posters attracting and mobilising participation for the 2018 expedition <sup>18</sup>

The second poster looks more like an invitation which is decorated with golden edging. In an archaic tone, the body text introduces that the 2018 expedition is prompted by SVT who had offended the Chinese people. Moreover, the poster addresses potential participants as “义士 (yishi, righteous individuals) in an ancient literary style. This term not only exhibits Chinese ancient culture but also presents the expedition as a righteous activity. Unlike the first poster,

<sup>18</sup> To address privacy concerns, the QQ group IDs shown in the second poster have been blurred and replaced by “00000”.

the second one only introduces methods of obtaining additional information about the expedition in QQ groups.

During the expedition, the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs and SVT disabled the comment function on their Facebook pages. As a result, Diba participants strategically shifted their focus to other targeted Facebook pages. They directed all the multimodal memes towards Jesper, who kept his comment function enabled. Therefore, the findings presented in this chapter are only relevant to the 81 representative memes collected from Jesper's Facebook post. However, the analysis contextualises these findings within the communicative situation of the 2018 expedition, in which the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs and SVT played significant roles.

## **7.2 Strategic representations of Sweden**

In the 2018 sub-corpus, it was found that Sweden and China are represented through two types of image elements. National flags (n=16) represent these two countries in the political aspect, while maps (n=4) represent them in the geographical aspect. Additionally, the representation of Sweden is further specified into white people (n=15), individual white man (n=7), individual white woman (n=1), and the Swedish king (n=1) in the ethnic and monarchical aspects.

### **7.2.1 Represent and evaluate Sweden through its national flag**

As a political symbol, the national flag can be easily recognised by diverse viewers. Given this characteristic, it is logical that greater emphasis is placed on representing Sweden through its national flag (n=14) rather than its geographical map (n=2). The 14 identified flags of Sweden function within the relevant memes to (1) denote Sweden and (2) emphasise national identities of objects or locations of places. These functions are achieved either by depicting the flag in its conventional form or by modifying its iconographic design. In the case of modifying the flag's iconographic design, two formats were identified. Both present the Swedish flag in a cartoonish visual style while adhering to the flag's fundamental design pattern.





Figure 7.2 The first format of modifying the Swedish flag's iconographic design

As it is illustrated in Figure 7.2, the first format relies on the interaction between elements of image and writing. Specifically, lexical elements are integrated into the flag as an essential part of representation. Without the English words “welcome” and “SWEDEN”, the meme will consist solely of a yellow cross, effectively eliminating its association with Sweden. In this case, the depiction of the flag and the construction of Sweden’s identity rely on the yellow cross and the surrounding blue words simultaneously. The capitalised word “SWEDEN” also contributes to represent the country. This principle applies similarly to the second example in Figure 7.2, although the Chinese character “屎 (*shi*, shit)” serves more to convey a negative evaluation of Sweden. By maintaining the symbolic colour of yellow, the “十” in the character “屎 (*shi*, shit)” forms the yellow cross. Removing this character will entirely disrupt the representation of Sweden through its national flag. Moreover, the character of “屎 (*shi*, shit)” is rendered in the handwritten style, collaborating with the yellow colour and creating the impression of smearing excrement on the Swedish flag.

By creatively combining the Chinese character “屎 (*shi*, shit)” with the Swedish flag, this meme not only conveys a negative evaluation of Sweden but also acts as a direct response to Jesper’s comments regarding Chinese tourists. In his TV show, Jesper mentioned that some Chinese citizens had been blacklisted for defecating in tourist resorts. During the broadcast, while quoting an interview with the former Chinese Ambassador to Malawi, Wang Shiting, he drew attention to the phonetic similarity between the ambassador’s name “Shiting” and the English word “shitting”. Moreover, the word “shit” appeared for multiple times in the short video that Jesper played afterwards. In this video, a female host advised Chinese tourists not to defecate in resorts and claimed that Chinese people defecate while sitting at dining tables. At the end of the video, the host stressed that if Chinese tourists misbehave, Swedish people will “kick the shit out of them”. The repeated use of the word “shit” in the TV show was primarily intended to depict Chinese people as uncivilised and vulgar. As explained earlier in section 7.1, this portray was criticised as an offensively racist act. Within this context, the integration of the character “屎 (*shi*, shit)” into the Swedish flag clearly indicates that Diba participants recognised the frequent use of “shit” in Jesper’s report. They strategically combine the Chinese

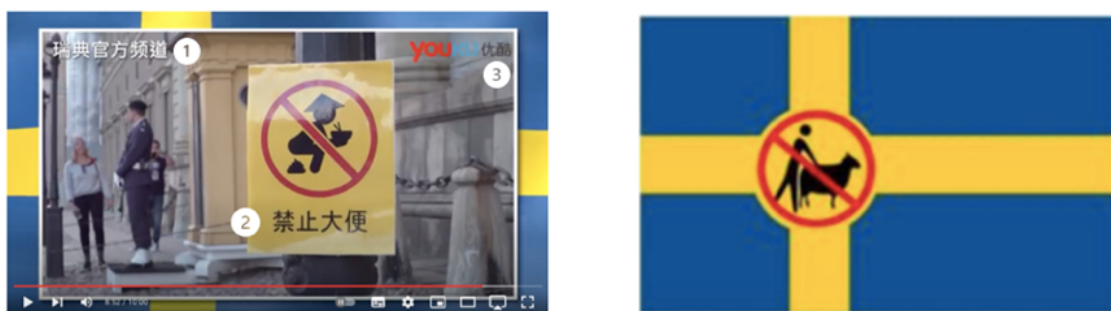
character with the Swedish flag to manifest their stance and response. More specifically, the modifications to the flag’s iconographic design are intended to depict Sweden as a disrespectful country. However, this representational meaning may not be readily apparent to Jesper and the female host. Instead, it is more likely understood by viewers who are familiar with Chinese.



Figure 7.3 The second format of modifying the Swedish flag’s iconographic design

As it is illustrated in Figure 7.3, the second format of modifying the Swedish flag’s iconographic design relies on the flag’s fundamental structure, augmented by additional image elements. Like the first format explained above, it also conveys the meaning of “Sweden” through the yellow cross and the blue surroundings. However, in this case, the modifications pertain exclusively to the yellow cross.

In the first example in Figure 7.3, the basic composition of the flag remains intact. The modification involves the insertion of a pictogram at the centre of the yellow cross. This symbol conveys the meaning of “no bestiality”. When integrated with the Swedish flag, the representational meaning is specified into “no bestiality in Sweden”.



- (translation)
1. Swedish official channel
  2. No shitting
  3. Youku

Figure 7.4 Diba’s meme (right) imitating a symbol appeared in Jesper’s video (left)

The inserted symbol responds to a scene in Jesper’s short video by referring to Sweden’s bestiality ban. In the final part of Jesper’s TV show, he played the short video, which was also uploaded to one of China’s online video sharing platforms, 优酷 (Youku). As shown through the left screenshot in Figure 7.4, one scene from this video features a pictogram symbol prohibiting defecation. In this symbol, the human figure is specifically depicted wearing an Asian conical hat and using chopsticks. This type of hat, commonly used throughout Asian for sun and rain protection, is often associated with manual labours in Chinese socio-cultural contexts, such as farmers. Additionally, certain variants of this hat were worn exclusively by officials during China’s Qing dynasty (as compared below in Figure 7.5). Therefore, the visual design of the “no shitting” symbol not only portrays Chinese people as uncivilised but also offensively draws on elements of China’s historical culture. Given this context, it is likely that the pictogram symbol inserted in Diba’s memes similarly references Sweden’s historical culture as a form of counterattack.



*Figure 7.5 Different representations of the Asian conical hat*

As it was mentioned earlier, the inserted pictogram symbol in Diba’s memes conveys the representational meaning of “no bestiality”. Although Sweden officially banned bestiality in 2014, it is often associated with pre-modern rural society. Cases of bestiality sparked controversial legal discussions and led to a moral panic concerning animal rights in Sweden (Liliequist, 1991; Rydström, 2000; 2003). By referencing this phenomenon, Diba’s memes explicitly highlight the perceived immorality in Sweden’s sexual history. Through this symbolism, Diba participants imitatively portray Swedish people as uncivilised. This reference to Swedish historical culture serves as a mimetic act of ridicule, directly retaliating against the headwear design in the “no shitting” symbol. Furthermore, the inserted symbol in Diba’s memes adopts the composition of a red circle-backslash symbol, black characters, and a yellow background, mirroring the design elements in Jesper’s video. This deliberate replication

emphasises the purposeful comparison between the “no shitting” symbol in Jesper’s video and the “no bestiality” symbol in Diba’s mems.

In the second example in Figure 7.3, the yellow cross on the Swedish flag is transformed into genitals and a pair of hands. One of the genitals is marked with a crescent moon and star which are commonly associated with Islam (Cooper, 1978; Lee, 1987; Kaplan and Salesin, 2004; Sharma et al., 2019). Through this altered yellow cross, this meme draws a metaphorical analogy between Sweden’s acceptance of Muslim immigrants and a person experiencing the penetrative sex. To understand why Diba participants construct this analogy, it is necessary to revisit Jesper’s TV show for contextual information. At the outset of his show, Jesper stated that Swedish society opposes any racial discriminations against Sámi<sup>19</sup>, Arabs, or Africans. Nevertheless, he added that this principle does not extend to the Chinese. The female host reiterated this statement in the short video. While Jesper’s report mentioned several ethnic groups that constitute part of Sweden’s population, analogy in Diba’s memes specifically involves the Muslim symbol. Other than Arab-Muslims, none of the other mentioned ethnic groups are represented in the 2018 sub-corpus, either through images or written texts. This indicates that Diba’s memes focus more on depicting the Arab-Muslim communities, particularly their roles as refugee immigrants in Swedish society.

According to a report published by the Pew Research Centre (2017), Europe has been experiencing a growing influx of Muslim immigrants. Some of these immigrants were asylum seekers. Based on the centre’s projections, Sweden is one of the European countries expected to be significantly impacted, with its Muslim population potentially increasing to 31% by 2050 in a high-immigration scenario.

Although China has been a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1976 Protocol, refugee-related issues have not been addressed systematically in China’s official policies (Song, 2014; 2018; Wang, 2020). These topics are also rarely discussed in China’s domestic discourses. Nevertheless, Chinese media coverage of Europe’s refugee crisis can influence public attitudes and opinions. Also, news reports on the development of the refugee crisis sparked occasional discussions in Sinophone cyberspaces. As Jiang and her colleagues (2022) uncovered, Chinese news media often portray refugee immigration from the political perspective, depicting Europe as suffering from the refugee crisis. In such context, resentment against international migrants has noticeably increased on Chinese social media. A notable example is the 2017 anti-refugee controversy that escalated on Weibo (Wang, 2020; Gan, 2020).

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<sup>19</sup> The indigenous Sámi are one of Sweden’s five national minorities.

On the World Refugee Day in 2017, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) organised online and offline campaigns in China to raise awareness of refugee issues. During these campaigns, Weibo users' fury and panic were triggered by rumours that the UNHCR was pressuring China to accept Muslim and African refugees. According to Gan (2020), Weibo users' hostile towards European refugees is a mix of joy and fear. The joy stems from seeing Europe which once held a position of superiority during China's colonial history (Cohen, 2002; Wang, 2012) but now is struggling with the refugee crisis. The fear arises from concerns that a suffering Europe may hinder China's ambition in the global market.

Viewing Diba's memes with this global context makes it easier to understand the visual analogy in Figure 7.3, which compare Sweden to someone experiencing sexual assault. This comparison can be interpreted as a reflection of the "joy" described by Gan (2020), metaphorically portraying or mocking Sweden as weak and passive in face of the refugee crisis. Moreover, this visual analogy draws on Sweden's history of bestiality cases. As previously mentioned, legal cases of bestiality caused a moral panic over animal rights in Sweden and ignited broader discussions about the representational subjectivity of human exceptionalism (Brown and Rasmussen, 2010; Boggs, 2010; 2013; Bourke, 2020). As Boggs (2010) pointed out, bestiality provides a framework for considering a form of violence where the non-subjectivity and otherness of animality are emphasised. If connect the two meme examples in Figure 7.3 together, Diba's visual analogy becomes more elaborate. The analogy does not merely represent Sweden as a victim of sexual assault. Instead, it specifically compares Sweden to animals subjected to sexual abuses. In this sense, Diba participants not only mock Sweden's perceived weakness and passivity in the refugee crisis but also ridicule Sweden's loss of subjectivity due to the increasing influx of refugee immigrants.

As previously clarified, Jesper mentioned several ethnic groups in his TV show. However, only Muslims are visually represented in Diba's memes. According to a recent report published by the Pew Research Centre (2023), there are approximately 17 million Muslim adults in China, accounting for 1.61% of the adult population. In China's domestic discourses, Muslims are connected not only to Europe as immigrants but also to ten officially recognised ethnic minority groups. Among these groups, the 回族 (*huizu*, Hui) and 维吾尔族 (*weiwuerzu*, Uyghur) are the largest, with most members of these communities having a long history of habitation in China's northwestern region. Academic research and domestic discourses in China have consistently focused on official policies related to the Hui and Uyghur populations, such as minority rights laws (Heberer, 1989; Wu, 1990; Sautman, 1998; 1999; 2010; 2014) and

minority language policies (Zhou, 1949; 2000; Wang and Phillion, 2009). Meanwhile, the international community has become increasingly concerned with the controversies surrounding Islamophobia against the Uyghur Muslims in the Xinjiang region (Clarke, 2010; 2015; Luqui and Yang, 2018; 2020; Greitens et al., 2020; Robert, 2020).

In section 4.1 concerning data collection, it was noted that the descriptive observation of the Diba Expedition began from the 2017 expedition. This observation revealed that Diba participants organised an expedition on 10 April 2019, targeting the Facebook pages of two Uyghur-related institutions: Talk to East Turkestan<sup>20</sup> and the World Uyghur Congress. However, the comment sections of the involved Facebook posts were quickly cleaned up following the expedition. Only Talk to East Turkestan acknowledged that expedition's existence through a subsequent post<sup>21</sup> on 10 April 2019. Consequently, Diba's meme comments and this expedition are not included in this research. It is now impossible to examine how Diba participants deployed their self-generated memes to express opinions on Uyghur Muslims-related issues. Nevertheless, the expedition on 10 April 2019 suggests that Diba participants were likely familiar with the relevant topics when they organised the 2018 expedition targeting Sweden. In the annotated memes, only three memes feature visual representations of Muslim symbols or people. Importantly, all these Muslim elements appear alongside Sweden's national flag. Thus, rather than depicting Chinese Muslims in any format, Diba's memes reflect a racist interpretation of the relationship between Muslims and Sweden as refugee immigrants.

In sum, the 14 Swedish flags found in the sub-corpus not only function to represent Sweden in a general sense but also play a crucial role in enabling Diba participants to construct their negative evaluation of the country. In terms of form, the fundamental composition of a yellow cross and blue surroundings is valued for its symbolic association with Sweden. The two formats of modification utilise the flag's iconographic design, allowing for creative meaning-making practices through colours and shapes. In terms of content, the modified flags assist Diba participants in delivering imitative responses to specific elements from Jesper's TV show. Moreover, these responses are grounded in Sweden's historical culture and other concepts expressed in Diba's memes. By leveraging various representations of Sweden's national flag, Diba participants strategically portray Sweden and Swedish people as uncivilised, disrespectful, and weak.

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<sup>20</sup> The name of this Facebook page had been changed into "Talk East Turkestan".

<sup>21</sup> This post was published on the Facebook page of Talk to East Turkestan right after the expedition on 10 April 2019. And it shared a short video briefly presenting Diba's meme comments: <https://fb.watch/ob2-OHRdQ5/>

### **7.2.2 Representations of Swedish people through templated images**

As mentioned earlier, the representation of Sweden in Diba's memes is further specified through image elements featuring white people (n=15), individual white man (n=7), individual white woman (n=1), and the Swedish king (n=1) in the ethnic and monarchical aspects. Among the relevant memes, only one includes both white individuals and Sweden's national flag. This suggests that the visual depiction of white individuals (including the Swedish king) serves to symbolise Sweden, relying on the part-whole semantic relation between white individuals as citizens and Sweden as a nation. Moreover, the absence of other racial groups may stem from Diba participants' perception of Europe's ethnic minorities as primarily immigrants and from their limited capacity for multicultural imagination (Wang, 2020).

A close examination of the Swedish individuals visually represented in Diba's memes revealed that these depictions primarily utilise the photographic visual style. Most of these elements employ shot types that prominently feature subjects within the frame while keeping their surroundings or gestures visible. The full shot (n=19) is most commonly used, capturing the Swedish people from head to toe. This approach provides viewers with clear information about the actions or gestures being depicted. Furthermore, the full shot offers a visual context of the circumstances in which the Swedish individuals are situated and their actions take place. Other shot types, such as three-quarter (n=3), head (n=1), and medium shots (n=1), are also deployed to depict the Swedish people. Although these shot types omit certain parts of the body, they still effectively highlight the actions or gestures of hands.

It is evident that the depicted Swedish people are primarily collocated with actions such as defecation (n=17), making damages (n=6), and offending passengers (n=1). The represented circumstances are confined to public space (n=13) and tourist resorts (n=10), with one exception that solely feature the participant. These collocations indicate that the relevant 24 memes aim to portray negative behaviours of Swedish people in public space and certain tourist resorts. Specifically, they emphasise the vulgarity and rudeness by elaborating these behaviours as acts of public defecation and damaging landmarks.

This emphasis is further reinforced by the deliberate choice of the photographic visual style. Three typical examples are given in Figure 7.6. Through detailed and vivid depictions, Diba's memes illustrate the vulgar scenes of public defecation and vandalism, evoking feelings of disgust and offense.



(translation)

1. yo, civilised Swedish people 2. yo, civilised?

*Figure 7.6 Templated visual representations of Swedish people*

As it was explained earlier in section 7.2.1, Jesper began his TV show by mocking some Chinese tourists who defecated outside tourist resorts. The short video in his report also visually and vocally reinforced the stereotype that Chinese people engage in public defecation. Previous studies uncovered that the behaviour of open defecation is often linked to social and public health issues, such as the spread of infectious diseases, poor sanitation facilities (Coffey et al., 2014), inadequate government construction of latrine (Mara, 2017; Yulyani et al., 2021), the risk of sexual exploitation, and threats to privacy and dignity (Saleem et al., 2019; Abdul, 2019). Thus, the negative portrayal in Jesper’s report not only characterises Chinese people as uncivilised but also ridicules more profound issues. Specifically, this ridicule implies incompetence on the part of the Chinese government regarding infrastructure development and sanitation regulation.

As a counterattack, Diba’s memes reapply the same depiction and implication to Sweden and its citizens in a more explicit manner. The visual representations of white people and their negative behaviours are utilised as an imitative response to Jesper’s report. Like the “no shitting” symbol examined in section 7.2.1, the photographic elements depicting white people are selected based on the content of Jesper’s report. However, the photographic and cartoonish visual styles contribute differently to the construction of meanings. The abstract nature of the cartoonish symbol allows for greater flexible in self-generated modifications and enables various interpretations. In contrast, the detailed and photographic depictions of white people constrain viewers’ interpretations to self-evident and straightforward representations. Also, this approach limits Diba participants to rely primarily on the choice of shot types when highlighting the intended meanings.

In the 24 image elements depicting individual participants, eight of them feature Swedish males while only one focuses on Swedish females. However, this numerical difference does



not support the idea that individuals of different genders are depicted for distinct purposes. This is primarily because both the depicted males and females are collocated with similar actions and circumstance., conveying identical representational meanings. Additionally, the Swedish king is represented for one time, where he is depicted engaging in the act of defecation. Unlike the other participants, this negative portrayal of the Swedish king functions as a deliberate insult to the monarchy, reflecting a strategic attempt of offending Sweden by embarrassing its head of state.

In short, the 24 image elements depicting white people are employed to represent and negatively evaluate the Swedish population. This representation is mainly achieved through templated collocations, specific visual styles, and distinct shot types. In terms of collocation, participants of white individuals are frequently collocated with negative behaviours and public settings. The exclusion of other racial groups reflects the limited multicultural imagination within Chinese society. The emphasis on behaviours such as public defecation and vandalising tourist sites indicates Diba participants' efforts of coherently responding to Jesper's negative depiction of Chinese people. In addition to highlighting the represented elements through different shot types, Diba's memes deploy the photographic visual style to accentuate the vulgarity of the depicted behaviours, creating an impression of disgust and offense. Through these purposefully selected elements, Diba's memes not only portray the Swedish people as uncivilised and rude but also ridicule the Swedish government's incompetence of developing public infrastructure and regulating sanitation.

### 7.2.3 Comparison between Sweden and China as global players

It was mentioned that Diba's memes also represent Sweden through its geographical map (n=2). Although the number is small, China is similarly depicted through its national flag (n=2) and geographical map (n=2). Notably, the Chinese flag consistently appears alongside the Swedish flag to facilitate comparisons between these two countries. The two memes in Figure 7.7 illustrate these representations and comparisons.



*Figure 7.7 Comparing Sweden with China through their national flags and maps*

Like national flags, geographical maps are commonly used in political discourses for their symbolic representation. As Blocker (1979) said, maps can reflect the ways in which human perceive the world. In Harley (1989)'s opinion, maps work as rhetorical discourses, persuasively framing and communicating specific arguments about the world through elements such as colours, typography, decorations, or written justifications. Thus, through a deconstructive or rhetorical reading (Derrida, 1994, 1997) of cartography, it becomes evident that maps often serve to subjective human purposes rather than strictly delineating the natural landscape with geometric accuracy. The construction of maps can be purposeful, ranging from justifying colonisation (Stone, 1988; Huggan, 1989; Akerman, 2009; 2017) to mediating the geopolitical tensions over modern territories (Polelle, 1999; Culcasi, 2006; Boria, 2008; Strandsbjerg, 2012; Vujaković, 2014). Drawing on Foucault's (1971) definition of discourses as systems of knowledge construction, Harley (1989) also considered maps as cartographic representations of normalising rules and orders. These rules and orders are not only defined in terms of the scientific epistemology but also project a set of values. Therefore, maps do not simply measure the phenomenal world through a conventional sign system. Instead, they should be seen as cultural texts, to which certain social relations and rules are imposed by those of strength or power. In the political context, this imposition turns the natural world into juridical territories. The process of mapping is thus intertwined with the power to create and normalise realities as defined by different parties.

In Diba's memes, cartographic representation is highly valued as a tool for asserting and defining China's juridical territories. In Jesper's TV show, he briefly introduced China's large population by mentioning the cities of Shenzhen and Chongqing as examples. To illustrate the geographic locations of these two cities, a map was provided (as shown below in Figure 7.8). However, when compared with China's official administrative map, it becomes evident that Taiwan and the islands in the South China Sea are omitted. Also, parts of the southwestern region are missing. The Chinese embassy criticised and protested this omission, arguing that Jesper used an incorrect map which constituted a serious violation of China's sovereignty and territorial integrity. In this context, the focus shifted away from the map's function of illustrating the two cities' geographical locations to its role of representing juridical territories through the curved shape and borderlines. As depicted by the right memes in Figure 7.8, Diba

participants do not merely include China's administrative map. Instead, it mimics the map presented in Jesper's show by reapplying the cartoonish visual style.



Figure 7.8 Diba's meme (right) responding to the Chinese map used in Jesper's show (left)

Furthermore, the right meme in Figure 7.8 does not employ any written texts for elaboration. the comparison between China and Sweden is mainly realised through shapes and sizes of their maps. The national flags of these two countries play an important role in elaborating the territorial ownership. This comparison not only present China as a country being able to accommodate a larger population but also belittles Sweden who possesses smaller territory and less resources. In other words, this meme intends to create a visual impression that China is stronger and more powerful than Sweden.

Similarly, the second meme in Figure 7.7 also makes a comparison between China and Sweden. Nevertheless, this comparison is constructed by personifying specific countries, and the national flags act more as a tool of clarifying identities. Specifically, this meme depicts Sweden as America's dog who barks at and shows hostility towards China. Inside the whole conflict that motivated the 2018 expedition, the US did not directly play a part. Thus, to understand what message is intentionally conveyed by this meme, it is necessary to embed it into the larger context of international environment. At the time of the 2018 expedition, China was deeply involved in (1) the trade war with the Trump administration in the US, (2) the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the Europe, (3) the management of a more balanced cross-strait tie with Taiwan, and (4) the growing condemnations of human rights abuses. Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 have demonstrated how Diba's memes show support for the one-China standpoint in Taiwan- and Hong Kong-related issues. These tensions developed before the 2018 expedition can also offer additional information to understand the depiction of Sweden as a barking and chained dog.

Upon the comparison between China and Sweden, the second meme in Figure 7.7 present the confrontation between China and the US. Before the expedition in 2018, the DPP's victory in the 2016 Taiwanese presidential election alerted the mainland to put further efforts in accusing the DPP's advocacy of Taiwanese nationalism and opposition to the one-China principle. At the same time, the rising localism also fuelled the independence conflict between Hong Kong and the mainland in 2017. Against such a background, the US's Trump administration questioned but agreed to honour the One-China policy after it's victory in the 2016 presidential election (Reuters, 2017). According to the White House website (2021) archived in the US's Presidential Libraries system, China and the US also made several moves in 2017 to develop in-depth conversations about macroeconomic policies as well as the regional security in the East and South China Sea. However, the Trump administration accused China of the intellectual property theft, and it ordered sweeping tariffs on the Chinese imports in March 2018. The US's announcement encountered China's tariff retaliation later in the same year, marking Trump's hardening approach to China (Liu and Woo, 2018; Chong and Li, 2019; Kwan, 2020). The economic tension between these two countries were soon escalated into a trade war, which caused noticeable impact on the global market (Li et al., 2018; Steinbock, 2018; Itakura, 2020). A typical representative was the European Union (EU) who was receiving financial investments from China under the BRI.

According to China's BRI website and Nedopil (2023), Sweden did not officially sign any cooperation agreements on BRI. Nevertheless, it is one of the main European recipients that obtain foreign investments from China (Poggetti, 2021). While the EU tried to reduce the impact from and seek opportunities within the US-China trade war (Goulard, 2020, Larres, 2020), the Sino-Swedish relation was darkened by Sweden's criticism of China's human rights policy. The major cause stemmed from the detention of 桂民海 (Gui Minhai) in 2015. Working as a Hong Kong-Swedish bookseller, Gui authored several books related to Chinese politics. After being released in 2017, Gui was prisoned again in mainland China in 2018 (The Guardian, 2018a). Due to the difficulty of accessing Gui, Swedish diplomats questioned China's human rights policy and accused China of violating the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations (The Guardian, 2018b).

Based on the above contextual information, it is evident that China was facing several challenges within the international society around 2018. Going back to the second meme in Figure 7.7, it now becomes clearer that this meme deploys the comparison between China and Sweden to represent their positions in the complicated global environment of 2018. The

comparison is embedded in the US-China confrontation, indicating the trade war's global impact as well as the US's close relations with the EU and Taiwan. By metaphorically representing Sweden as a barking dog, this meme depicts Sweden's criticism of China's human rights policy as a hostile act. Furthermore, the dog chain connects Sweden as a subordinator with the US as the dominator. Apart from announcing tariffs on the Chinese products, the Trump administration also saw the EU as a target of sanctions in 2018 (European Parliament, 2018). At the same time, the US intended to group European countries as allies while banning China's Huawei equipment for national security (Cerulus, 2018). Facing this tough situation, the EU was pressured to pick a side within the US-China conflict. This pressure is reflected in Diba's memes through the representation of Sweden as a chained and subordinate dog. Thus, the second meme in Figure 7.7 not only constructs a comparison between Sweden and China as diplomatic opponents in 2018 but also reflect the global situation at the communicative moment of the 2018 expedition.

In summary, Diba's memes creatively compare Sweden and China through image elements depicting their national flags and maps. On the one hand, the comparison is formed as a response to the Chinese map that was used in Jesper's TV show. The cartoonish visual style was selected to mimic the visual style of Jesper's map, while sizes of the maps are utilised to mock Sweden as a small country possessing limited natural resources. On the other hand, the comparison between China and Sweden is realised by depicting their positions in the international society. To specify this depiction, other global players, such as the US, are represented in Diba's memes. By doing so, the comparison is constructed more than demonstrating diplomatic disputes between China and Sweden. It also reflects Diba participants' interpretation of the global situation around 2018, in which the cross-strait geopolitical tension and the US-China trade conflict were escalating.

### **7.3 Multimodal variants of “shit”**

Section 7.2.1 elaborated that Jesper's TV show frequently used the English word “shit” and the act of “shitting” to portray Chinese people. In response to this disrespectful depiction, Diba's memes strategically integrate the Chinese character of “屎 (*shi*, shit)” with Sweden's national flag. They also depict Swedish people as uncivilised and vulgar by representing white people's act of public defecation. In these representations, the meaning of “shit” is expressed either through the embedded Chinese character or via specific actions. In the 2018 sub-corpus, it was found that the similar meaning is also conveyed in a blunter manner. For instance, using

photographic elements of excrement (n=12) or written texts (n=3) including multilingual expressions of “shit”.

The close-up shot is primarily used to depict the 12 excrements. Most of these depictions are presented in the photographic visual style, collocated with image elements that represent Jesper (n=5), the Swedish flag (n=4) and the female host (n=1) appearing in Jesper’s short video. Section 7.2 discussed that the collocation of excrement and the Swedish flag is employed to negatively evaluate Sweden as a disrespectful country. This evaluation is applicable to understand why Diba participants combine elements of excrement with those representing Jesper and the female host. Specifically, the relevant memes enable Diba participants to vent their dissatisfaction. The photographic visual style enhances the sense of disgust and vulgarity. Additionally, two image elements depict excrements by using the cartoonish visual style. One of them is collocated with the Swedish map, while the other cooccurs with a cartoon panda man.

Apart from image elements illustrating excrement, Diba’s memes also used multilingual expressions of “shit” in written texts. Table 7.1 lists three English texts including the word “shit” as a noun or verb. Working as a noun, the word “shit” is used to negatively evaluate a man who is visually elaborated as Jesper. Acting as a verb, the word clarifies the Swedish king’s action as defecation. As it was explained earlier in section 7.2.2, associating the Swedish king with the vulgar action of defecation enables Diba participants to offend Sweden and embarrass its head of state. Moreover, the English word “shit” is innovatively integrated with the Swedish word of “Sverige (Sweden)” to coin a new term. As the two words share a similar initial letter of “s”, it becomes rather natural to combine them together while emphasising the English word “shit” through capitalisation. Through this creative practice, the coined term of “SHITverige” expresses Diba participants’ anger and constitutes an insult against Sweden. However, this offensive message was not necessarily accessible to most of the potential audience, because it specifically targets viewers who can understand Swedish and English, such as Jesper and the female host in his short video.

	<b>Number</b>
shit man	1
This is my SHITverige	1
The king of Sweden was shitting	1
	<b>3</b>

*Table 7.1 English word “shit” involved in different written texts*

Section 7.2.1 exemplified how Diba participants modify the Swedish flag’s iconographic design and integrate it with the Chinese character “屎 (*shi*, shit)”. In the 2018 sub-corpus, it was also found that the Chinese character “屎 (*shi* shit)” functions as a noun or verb in different written texts. As listed in Table 7.2, these written texts primarily function as a counterattack in response to Jesper’s TV show. On the one hand, the Chinese character “屎 (*shi*, shit)” appears in an equation to insult the Swedish people. On the other hand, this character is deployed to react to remarks in Jesper’s short video, in which the female host mocked Chinese people and asserted that they often shit while eating food. Seeing this description as intolerant humiliation, Diba’s memes reply it by saying that “瑞典人边吃饭边拉屎 (*ruidian ren bian chifan bian lashi*, Swedish people eat food while shit)” and offensively categorising Jesper as someone who “屎吃多了 (*shi chiduo le*, eat too much shit)”.

		<b>Number</b>
	屎 (shit)	1
一些瑞典人= (some Swedish people=)	屎 (shit)	1
我们爱吃 (we love eating)	屎 (shit)	1
我在吃 (I am eating)	屎 (shit) , 美味 (delicious)	1
听说你们瑞典人边吃饭边拉 (Rumour has it that Swedish people eat food while	屎 (shit) ?	1
	屎 (shit) 吃多了 (eat too much shit)	1
		<b>6</b>

Table 7.2 Chinese character “屎 (*shi*, shit)” involved in different written texts

In general, the meaning of “shit” is linguistically and visually expressed in a very offensive manner. Depicted through image elements, excrements of different visual styles are collocated with different image elements. These collocations enable Diba participants to vent their dissatisfaction by insulting Jesper, the Swedish king, and Sweden. Being used as a noun or verb, the English word “shit” appears in different written texts or is combined with the Swedish word “Sverige (Sweden)”. Consequently, Diba participants not only show their reaction to Jesper’s offensive depiction of the Chinese people but also ridicule his primary motivation.

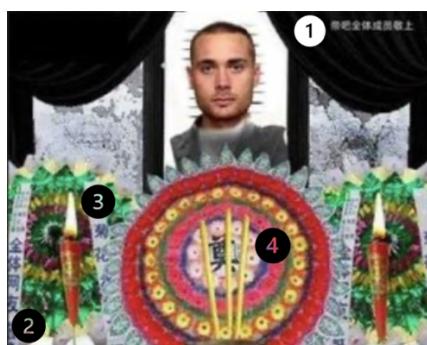
## 7.4 Ridicule of Jesper Rönndahl

Nine image elements were found for portraying Jesper in different ways through the photographic visual style. According to Table 7.3, medium and head shots are most frequently used to depict Jesper. These types of shot can demonstrate the actions or status of Jesper’s upper body as well as circumstances. The most common representation is Jesper speaking in the TV studio, and this scene is captured through the medium shot. Additionally, Jesper is depicted within specific circumstance that usually symbolises death, such as the mourning hall.

Action/circumstance	Shot type	Number
speak/TV studio	medium	5
	close-up	1
speak/point at audience/TV studio	medium	1
smile	head	1
mourning hall		1
		<b>9</b>

Table 7.3 Different ways and shot types involved in visual representations of Jesper

Figure 7.9 illustrates the meme that represents Jesper as a participant and the Chinese-style mourning hall as the circumstance.



(translation)

1. Truly yours, all Diba participants
2. All netizens (or internet users)
3. Chrysanthemum
4. Commemoration

Figure 7.9 Diba’s meme collocating image elements depicting Jesper and Chinese-style mourning hall

The red candles, incense sticks, and floral wreaths feature the typical view that people can encounter in China’s funeral rites or mourning halls. The floral wreaths are decorated with “**全体网友** (*quanti wangyou*, all netizen or internet users)” to include all Chinese internet users as mourners. Additionally, in the meme’s upper right corner, the Chinese written text elaborates



Diba participants as mourners who pay sincere respects to Jesper as the descendant. Putting this meme into the context of the 2018 expedition, depicting Jesper as a dead man constitutes an extremely offensive curse. This unkind representation not only implies Diba participants' fury but also shows the explicit sentiment of ridicule.

By representing Jesper as a dead man, this meme also demonstrates Diba participants' attitude towards the initial cause of the Sino-Swedish conflict. As explained in section 7.1, the motivation of the 2018 expedition should be traced back to the clash between several Chinese tourists and a hotel in Stockholm. The local police intervened afterwards, but they were accused of malfeasance. According to a news report (Lockie, 2018) published by *Business Insider*, the Swedish police was blamed of dropping off the Chinese tourists in a graveyard. Later, the police explained that they left the Chinese tourists at a train station, which is close to and named after a local cemetery, Skogskyrkogården. From the cultural perspective, the accusation of malfeasance stems from Chinese and Swedish people's different perceptions of graveyards. China's graveyards are usually placed in the rural area or the outskirts of the city. Regarding graveyards as symbolic sites of death and the underworld, the Chinese tourists inevitably believed that they were treated by the local police in an unkind and disrespectful way. Against this background, Diba participants coherently depict the mourning hall to show support for the Chinese tourist as well as emphasise their unpleasant experience.

The last noteworthy finding about the representations of Jesper relates to instances of intertextually recontextualising specific moments of Jesper's TV show and his workplace. Figure 7.10 presents three representative examples. These three memes share certain similarities in terms of content and form. All of them deploy the medium shot and the photographic visual style to feature Jesper who speaks in the TV studio. The image elements representing Jesper are originally taken from the video of his TV show. Each of these elements deliberately captures a very precise moment to make meaning.



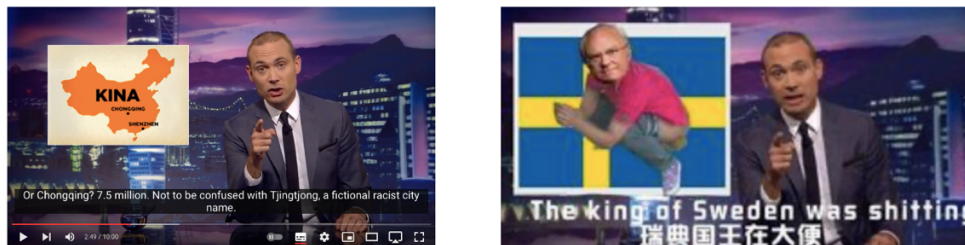
(translation)

1. I am Swedish, we love eating shit
2. Delicious
3. The king of Sweden was shitting

*Figure 7.10 Recontextualised scenes of Jesper speaking in the TV studio*

Specifically, the first two memes tend to transform Jesper’s original action of speaking into that of opening his mouth to eat something. This transformation can only be effective and meaningful after it is intergrated with the written texts and the image elements presenting excrement. Thus, the main function of the recontextualised scene is to capture the moment when Jepses looks happy and opens his mouth widely. Both the facial expression and action form cohesive relations with the adjacent written texts and image elements. The linguistically expressed meanings of “爱吃屎 (*ai chishi*, love eating shit)” and “美味 (*meiwei*, delicious)” are visually justified.

Different from the first two memes, the last example in Figure 7.10 utilises the recontextualised scene to imitate Jesper’s TV show and workplace. To illustrate this purposeful imitation, Figure 7.11 compares a screenshot of Jesper’s TV show and Diba’s meme. It is evident that Diba’s meme maintains the basic visual format of Jesper’s show.



*Figure 7.11 Diba’s meme (right) imitating the format of Jesper’s TV show and workplace (left)*

The photographic visual style and the medium shot are kept to copy the TV show’s visual impression. The multilingual written texts imitate the original subtitle, as they are deliberately put at the bottom. Additionally, the integration of the Swedish flag and king is placed on the left side to illustrate the reported content. All elements’ spatial positions were carefully arranged to construct a mimetic view. It looks like that Jesper is reporting the Swedish king’s uncivilised act of public defecation and pointing at audience to draw their attention. This meme offends the Swedish king and mock Jesper’s show at the same time.

In brief, nine image elements were found to depict Jesper in a relatively templated way. These representations are constructed upon the cohesive relations between the multimodal elements which depict Jesper as the participant and the mourning hall or TV studio as circumstances. More importantly, the depicted circumstances were coherently selected according to the initial conflict triggering the 2018 expedition. The mourning hall is utilised in Diba’s memes to form a death curse against Jesper and to support the Chinese tourists’ accusation against the Swedish police. The repetitive scenes of Jesper reporting in a TV studio is purposefully captured and recontextualised for mocking Jesper and humiliating the Swedish king.

### 7.5 Playful and aggressive self-representation

As presented in Table 7.4, Diba participants used 26 image elements for self-representation. Most of the representations are realised through cartoonish image elements (n=19). However, photographic elements (n=7) are featured by a salient diversity.

	Visual style	Number
panda man	cartoonish	10
cartoon character		9
TV character	photographic	4
Asian people		2
Mao Zedong		1
		<b>26</b>

*Table 7.4 Image elements representing Diba participants in different visual styles*

The practice of collocating a cartoonish panda man and a filter face is reused during the 2018 expedition. As shown above in Table 7.4, Diba participants deployed 10 image elements of panda man for self-representation. Eight of them perform specific actions or gestures, including pointing at someone (n=3), showing middle finger (n=2), holding a sword and pointing at someone (n=1), knocking desk (n=1), and holding a piece of excrement (n=1).

In addition to the identified panda men, there are 9 cartoon characters depicted by head (n=3), medium (n=3), and full (n=3) shots. All these shot types can effectively show actions performed by hands or other body parts. Most of these cartoon characters involve the actions of pointing at someone (n=3) and hitting someone (n=3). The remaining three characters are featured by actions of holding a gun, speaking something, or waving hands.

Figure 7.12 illustrates the three cartoon characters who point at someone. These characters are dressed up with different outfits and collocated with the similar face of a Hong Kong movie character. Through the collocation of the templated participants and actions, a sense of connectivity is formed between these three memes. They allow for representing Diba participants as different individuals sharing specific similarity. The difference is reflected through diverse outfits while the similarity is partially demonstrated via the identical face and action.



(translation)

1. If comment in Xinhua dialect, you are an idiot
2. If comment in Dongbei dialect, you are an idiot
3. If comment in Wenzhou dialect, you are an idiot

*Figure 7.12 Cartoon characters involving the templated action and utterance*

If take the adjacent written texts into consideration, the connectivity is similarly evident in the similar sentence pattern. Literally, the Chinese texts insult someone and use different dialects to call him or her as an idiot. On the one hand, these written texts clarify that the depicted cartoon characters specifically point at Jesper or the female host in Jesper's short video. On the other hand, these written texts elaborate the cartoon characters' identities, representing Diba participants who come from different regions of China.

Through the templated composition, these three memes not only depict Diba participants as a united group but also emphasise the diversity of China's local and language cultures. When Jesper introduced the conflict between the Chinese tourists and the Swedish police, he teased the Chinese tourists' English pronunciation. In previous studies, researchers had discovered that Chinese learners' mother tongue can interfere certain parts of their English pronunciation, such as use of epenthetic vowels (Deterding, 2006) and difficulties of producing connected speech (Liang, 2015). Dialect accents can make this interference more diverse and trickier (Chan and Li, 2000; Ao and Low, 2012; Li and Sewell, 2012). For some researchers, the Chinese-style English can be considered as a pidgin (Hall, 1944; Baker, 1987; Shi, 1991), an

interlanguage (Chen, 1990; Bayley, 1994; Green et al., 2000), or a developing world variety (Pang, 2003; Bolton, 2006; Leimgruber, 2013). The term of Chinglish has been coined to address problems in the Chinese-style English (Jiang, 2008; Eaves, 2011). However, as Li (2016) suggested, Chinglish can demonstrate how China's English learners cope with the post-multilingualism challenges in communicative, social, and political settings. Also, attentions had been called for to examine Chinglish as a reflection of China's nationalism and modernisation in the global environment (Henry, 2010; Li, 2016; Lin, 2019; Zhu, 2020). From this perspective, Diba participants may interpret Jesper's mockery as a humiliation of the Chinglish pronunciation and the tourists' dialect accent. Driven by this interpretation, Diba's memes articulate the similar cursing word in different Chinese dialects, showing self-confidence of China's language diversity and presenting a collective fury.

Nevertheless, this language diversity and collectivism only feature the Han Chinese, because no ethnic minority dialects were found in Diba's memes. As it was briefly mentioned in section 7.2.1, Han people is the largest ethnic group native to China, but there exists other 55 ethnic groups constituting part of China's overall population. In Jesper's TV show, he highlighted that Swedish society values cultural diversity by coexisting with other minority groups. The inclusion of different local dialects reflects that Diba participants intend to show the cultural diversity of Chinese society. Nevertheless, the exclusion of other ethnic minority groups uncovers their inclination of Han-centrism (Leibold, 2010; Friend and Thayer, 2017; 2018). This feature underscores Diba participants' Han-nationalist ideology. Moreover, it exhibits their limited multicultural imagination (Wang, 2020).

As mentioned earlier, three cartoon characters are portrayed as hitting someone. Figure 7.13 presents a comparison of the involved memes. Like several memes examined above, cartoon characters in these three examples are connected by performing the same action of hitting and involving the cartoonish visual style. All the paired cartoon characters depict Diba participants as the attackers while Jesper and SVT as someone being attacked. To justify the aggressive action, written texts in these three memes elaborate Jesper and SVT either as an offensive jackal or as an unwelcomed dog. The depiction of Jesper and SVT as a dog can be connected to the earlier representation of Sweden as a subordinate dog of the US.



(translation)

1. I will slap you to death
2. Pa
3. As the ancient Chinese saying goes: when friends are here, there is fine wine, but if the jackal comes, what greets it is the wooden club
4. Whose dog is this, fuck you

Figure 7.13 Cartoon characters involving a templated action but different utterances

The depiction of Jesper and SVT as a jackal is realised through quoting and recontextualising a specific sentence. Although Diba participants introduces this sentence as a “*中国古话* (*zhongguo guhua*, ancient Chinese saying)”, it is interdiscursively appropriated from a Chinese patriotic song, *我的祖国* (*wode zuguo*, *My Motherland*). This song was composed in 1956 for a Chinese war film, *上甘岭* (*shang ganlin*, *The Triangle Hill*), narrating China’s first foreign war in Korea after the founding of the PRC. Although the battle line was mainly drawn between North Korea and South Korea, two competing camps was form in that situation. One camp included China and the Soviet Union who supported North Korea, while the other camp contained South Korea who was supported by the US and other allied countries. After its victory in the war against Japan and the civil war against the Nationalist-led government, the Communist government saw the 1950 Korean War as an opportunity of demonstrating China’s military power and responding to the US’s anti-communist sentiment. Thus, in the war-themed song, the lyrics not only describes Chinese soldiers’ homesickness but also states China’s diplomatic attitude towards invaders. Against this historical background, this song and certain lines of its lyrics have been widely used in China to express patriotic feelings and criticise foreign invaders. Throughout generations, this song has been transmitted in different versions of modification. The patriotic sentiment is also mimetically restated. For Diba participants, interdiscursively recontextualising the ideal part of the lyrics fits their purpose of demonstrating pro-government stance. The patriotic sentiment embedded in the lyrics is shaped in Diba’s memes to highlight national pride amid foreign pressures and evoke a sense of

solidarity. This practice also enables a comparison between the 2018 expedition and the 1950 Korean War. By doing so, Jesper and SVT are transformed into foreign invaders, while Diba participants are represented as faithful soldiers. The aggressive action of hitting someone is therefore justified as an action of self-defence. However, it is important to note that although the blend of formal (patriotic songs) and informal (internet memes) discourses may emotionally resonate for Diba participants, interpreting the conveyed political messages requires knowledge of relevant historical events and the symbolism underpinning the patriotic lyrics.

In addition to the cartoonish elements, four TV characters are found and illustrated below in Figure 7.14. Their photographic elements are interdiscursively recontextualised from a Chinese novel-based television series, *如懿传* (*ruyi zhuan*, *Ruyi's Royal Love in the Palace*).

In the upper right corner, two Chinese written texts indicate that these series were aired on Tencent Video, one of China's video streaming platforms.



(translation)

1. This is what a king would do
2. Tencent Video
3. You are a troublemaker and a promiscuous person
4. Put him or her to death immediately
5. Tencent video
6. Are you looking for trouble

Figure 7.14 TV characters recontextualised to represent Diba participants

In the aspect of the plot, these TV series chronicles the romantic and marital relationship between Emperor 乾隆 (Qianlong) and Empress 那拉氏 (Nara). This kind of story line can be

typically found in China's palace intrigue dramas. *如懿传* (*ruyi zhuan*, *Ruyi's Royal Love in the Palace*) was aired in China from 20 August to 15 October 2018. As a popular TV series around the time of the 2018 expedition, it was inevitably seen as a potential source providing suitable resources for making meaning.

Like the borrowed scenes of Jesper, the TV characters were taken from the series as media objects. However, what was intentionally captured is not necessarily the visual scenes but subtitles of specific lines. Because palace intrigue dramas often describe the competitions between characters, it is extremely common to see aggressive lines and behaviours. As illustrated in Figure 7.14, the three lines at the bottom either accuse someone of being a troublemaker or declare a death sentence. After being interdiscursively recontextualising these three scenes into the 2018 online expedition, the TV characters somewhat become the deputies of Diba participants. Accusations and declarations in their lines are turned into political messages that Diba participants intend to articulate. Specifically, these TV characters are recontextualised to accuse Jesper of being a troublemaker and sentence Jesper to death. In the first meme in Figure 7.14, the written text is not placed at the bottom while several flowers surround the Chinese text as decoration. Despite of this difference, the character still functions as Diba participants' deputy to elaborate the expedition as “*王者操作* (*wangzhe caozuo*, what a king would do)”. The four memes in Figure 7.14 collaborate in constructing a more comprehensive meaning. That is, Diba participants are represented as someone of a superior status who is powerful enough to sentence Jesper to death. This aggressive message is mainly conveyed through lines spoke by the TV characters. Thus, these four networked memes exemplify how image elements from China's popular cultures are creatively used for political purposes.

According to Table 7.4, image elements of Asian people (n=2) and a Chinese political figure (n=1) are also deployed to represent Diba participants. However, these photographic elements are not as noticeable as the recontextualised TV characters. For the elements of Asian people, their personal identities are not indispensable in representing Diba participants. As it is presented below in Figure 7.15, the informative part is their gestures of speaking to someone else. In these two memes, Diba participants are depicted as addressers who ask Jesper to apologise for his misbehaviour and warn him of the severe consequence.





(translation)

1. This is a society where people plead guilty if they made mistakes
2. Your misbehaviour will kill yourself

*Figure 7.15 Diba's memes featuring Asian people and a templated gesture*

As show in Figure 7.16, the image element depicting Mao Zedong, Diba participants collocate it with one of Mao's famous saying: “人不犯我, 我不犯人; 人若犯我, 我必犯人 (ren bu fanwo, wo bu fanren, we will not attack unless being attacked)”.



(translation)

1. we will not attack unless being attacked
2. Mao Zedong

*Figure 7.16 Diba's meme depicting Mao Zedong*

This sentence is one of the political slogans playing significant roles in the history of the CCP. In 1936, this slogan was firstly used by Mao to clarify the CCP's attitude towards Chiang Kai-shek's anti-communist policy. In China's contemporary diplomatic activities, it is common that diplomats or ambassadors intertextually recontextualise Mao's slogan to justify China's foreign policy as a rightful self-defence (The South China Sea Issue, 2021). In Diba's memes, this political slogan represents the Diba participants as defenders while Jesper as the attackers, justifying the 2018 expedition as a reasonable self-defence.

In summary, self-representations of Diba participants provide a different angle to examine the 2018 expedition. The relevant memes fundamentally construct mockeries and offenses against Jesper. The cartoonish visual style allows for more flexibility in representing Diba participants via cartoon characters. More choices are given to format the cartoon characters in the aspects of outfits and performed actions. The templated elements generate a sense of collectivism. Additionally, Diba's self-representation depends more on quoted lines and intertextual relations. The recontextualised elements help to justify the expedition and aggressive written texts as patriotic self-defence. However, most of these justifications and aggressiveness is realised through Chinese written texts which are exclusively accessible to audience who can read Chinese.

### 7.6 Multilingually restated objections

Among all Diba's expeditions, the 2018 expedition stands out not only for its motivation in response to external pressures but also for the inclusion of two different foreign languages. Within the 81 annotated memes, 12 include English texts while Swedish texts were identified in seven memes. Specifically, English texts primarily tease white people's behaviour of public defecation and Europe's struggles in the refugee crisis, while Swedish texts serve to restate ideas expressed by Chinese or English texts. Among the seven memes including Swedish texts, four collocate Swedish and Chinese, two integrate English and Swedish, and only one of them contain the three languages. Figure 7.17 illustrates this multilingual meme which presents a multimodal declaration.



Figure 7.17 Coexistence of Chinese, English, and Swedish written texts

Although the Chinese text is larger in terms of size, the three written texts convey an identical meaning. That is, China does not welcome stupid people, such as Jesper and the female host in

Jesper's short video. Through this declaration, Diba participants simultaneously clarify their hostile attitude and evaluate the two targets.

Despite the number of Swedish texts is not salient, it reveals Diba participants' intention and efforts of communicating with the Swedish audience directly. As Swedish is not a widely used foreign language in China, it is understandable that English is preferred when Diba participants want to communicate with international audiences. Given the language challenges, the seven Swedish texts demonstrate how Diba's memes use limited resources to deliver the most important messages to Swedish audiences. These exclusive messages are highly aggressive and insulting.

### **7.7 Diba's attitudes towards political satires**

The findings in this chapter provide a comprehensive understanding of Diba's memes produced and transmitted during the 2018 expedition. As introduced in section 7.1, the content of Jesper's TV show revolved around two key issues: (1) the clash between Chinese tourists and the Swedish police, and (2) the broader diplomatic disputes between China and Sweden in 2018. These tense confrontations were presented in a satirical manner. Selected parts of Jesper's satirical show were frequently uploaded to the YouTube channel *SVT Humors*, with the clip that sparked the 2018 expedition being uploaded on 22 September 2018. Following the expedition, another clip was released in response to Diba's memes and to apologise to those who felt offended. Overlooking this contextual background may lead to perceiving the 2018 expedition as a reaction to perceived racial discrimination. However, considering the context and the satirical nature of Jesper's show allows for a deeper understanding. Specifically, it becomes evident that the trigger for the 2018 expedition was not solely about perceived racism but rather a response to Jesper's political satires, which played on common stereotypes about the Chinese people. From this perspective, the 2018 expedition serves as a significant case study reflecting how Diba participants perceived and reacted to political satire, especially when such satire addressed sensitive cultural or national issues.

As several researchers noted (Highet, 1962; Knight, 2004; Ziv, 2010), satire is rooted in skeptical observations of everyday life and often blends amusement with harsh criticism. Whether satire is expressed through parody, irony, or simple exaggeration (Worcester, 1960; Kreuz and Roberts, 1993; Jonathan et al., 2009), it typically presents a one-sided perspective (Jones, 2010). Simpson (2003) identified four general targets of satire: (1) specific actions or public events, (2) individuals whose personalities exhibit stereotypical human behaviours, (3)

social norms, and (4) linguistic codes or language uses that invite debate or ridicule. Beyond its role in everyday conversation, satire functions as a rhetorical tool for critically discussing political issues. From traditional television programming to user-generated content, political satire has been evaluated as "soft" or even "fake" news (Jones and Baym, 2010; Reilly, 2012; Rubin et al., 2016). Moreover, it has been studied as an entertainment-oriented political text capable of influencing political attitudes and behaviours (Brewer and Marquardt, 2007; Hoffman and Young, 2011) by providing political knowledge (Young and Hoffman, 2012; Becker and Bode, 2018). However, the extent of this influence can vary depending on individuals' prior textual experiences, existing beliefs, political preferences, and the context in which they receive the satire (Boukes et al., 2015).

In this sense, Jesper's political satire transcends mere humour. Rather, it uses an entertaining tone to draw attention to Sino-Swedish diplomatic disputes that were intertwined with the conflict between Chinese tourists and the Swedish police. Similarly, the 2018 expedition served more than as an outlet for Diba participants' anger. Instead, it reveals a fundamental clash between Jesper's satire and the Diba participants' interpretation of the issues at hand. Analysis in this chapter indicated that Jesper's satire and mockery address various aspects of China and its people, including the country's official policies, cultural conventions, social practices, and the language pronunciation of Chinese tourists. Since these aspects are addressed in specific memes, it is evident that Diba participants have thoroughly understood Jesper's satirical messages. As Holbert and Young (2013) suggest, effective engagement with political satire requires individuals to draw on their existing knowledge of the topics involved. Thus, Diba participants' anger can demonstrate that Jesper's satire is perceived as a challenge or denial of their previous textual experiences (Landreville and LaMarre, 2013), which may stem from other media texts or personal value frameworks.

After examining the meaning constructions of Diba's memes, it became clear that only a few memes address the global political situation around 2018 and China's role in it. Notably, these representations are achieved through cartoonish image elements which create metaphorical analogies but do not further elaborate the implied meanings through written texts. To interpret the conveyed ideas, viewers are required to possess relevant cultural and historical knowledges. Although Diba's memes incorporate and recontextualise various elements, their primary function is to critique Jesper's racist stereotypes of Chinese people and customs. In other words, the criticism reflects Diba participants' perception of Jesper's political satire as a threat to their self-image as Chinese people (Nabi et al., 2007). Considering Diba participants' strategic criticism and aggressive responses, it can be argued that their attitudes towards Jesper's

political satire reflect a subtle combination of the collective anger towards racist stereotypes and a careful avoidance of commenting on topics that are highly sensitive in the China's socio-political context, such as the Uyghur-related human rights issues.

## **7.8 Summary**

Through a thorough analysis of notable memes included in the 2018 sub-corpus, this chapter revealed how Diba participants construct political ideas and deploy multimodal memes to respond to external pressure during the 2018 expedition.

In terms of form and stance, Diba's memes use creative modification and imitation to offensively mock Sweden, Swedish people, and Jesper. This communicative effect is primarily achieved through flexible visual styles and recontextualised elements. When depicting Sweden, the Swedish people, and Jesper as uncivilised and disrespectful, Diba's memes prioritise depictions of vulgar objects and scenes. In contrast, when representing themselves, Diba's memes innovatively make use of recontextualised quotations and cultural elements. This practice intertextually connects the expedition to historical incidents and generate a sense of patriotic heroism. It also justifies the aggressive nature of Diba's memes and portray the expedition as a form of rightful self-defence.

In terms of content, Diba's memes not only express Diba participants' anger towards Jesper's political satire but also show support for the Chinese tourists who clashed with local Swedish people. Furthermore, Diba's memes reflect how Diba participants interpret Sino-Swedish conflicts and China's position in the international environment. They strategically emphasise criticism of Jesper's offensive stereotypes about Chinese people and customs, while avoiding to directly address his satire regarding controversial topics.

## Chapter 8 The 2019 expeditions to Hong Kong

The 2019 expedition consists of several rounds of Diba's collective activities, revolving around Hong Kong's Anti-ELAB Movement and relevant street demonstrations against proposed amendments to the existing extradition laws. Although these activities took place over months, ranging from July to October, they primarily targeted two types of individuals and institutions (see section 4.1.3 for details). The first group includes politicians, protesters, and public figures who supported the movements and criticised the government's response to the demonstrations. The second group contains government officials and local police, who acted as political symbols of state authority and exerted state power over the protesters during the movement. As explained earlier in section 4.1.3, posts from eight Facebook pages were selected as representative sources of data collection. One of these pages is managed by the Hong Kong police as an official government outlet for statements and announcements. Two pages belonged to local news agencies, *Apple Daily* (Hong Kong) and *Stand News*. In addition to Daryl Morey, an American basketball executive who posted to support the movement, the remaining four pages are either owned or administered by protesters who participated in the demonstrations or publicly declared their anti-government stance.

Before diving into Diba's memes, the following section provides background information on the expedition and elaborates on specific incidents that can facilitate the interpretation of Diba participants' meaning-making practices.

### 8.1 Background of the expedition

In 2019, the first round of expedition took place in July as a direct response to a group of radical protesters who stormed Hong Kong's Legislative Council and defaced the Chinese national emblem on 1 July (BBC News, 2019e), a symbolic date marked the 22<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of Hong Kong's handover from British to Chinese sovereignty (see section 6.4 for further elaboration). However, it is important to note that this round of expedition was triggered within a broader context, where demonstrations and protests occurred in Hong Kong since March.

In early 2019, under the leadership of former Chief Executive Carrie Lam, the Hong Kong government proposed amendments to the existing extradition laws. The primary aim of these amendments was to establish a mechanism for case-by-case transfers of fugitives to jurisdictions with which Hong Kong lacks formal extradition agreements. In addition to neighbouring regions such as Taiwan and Macao, mainland China was also included in the amendments (Lee, 2020). Given surge of anti-mainland sentiment in the 2010s and the 2017

imprisonment of Hong Kong pro-democracy activists (see section 6.4 for further elaboration), the inclusion of mainland China sparked fear and opposition within the Hong Kong society. Citizens were concerned that the amendments could undermine Hong Kong's judicial independence, erode the principle of One Country, Two Systems, and compromise its autonomy. Driven by these concerns, a series of demonstrations and protests began in March, urging the Hong Kong government to explore alternative mechanisms or withdraw the proposal immediately.

Despite large-scale marches, the Hong Kong government remained unyielding, categorising the protesting action of surrounding the Legislative Council Complex as "riot" on 17 June (Kang-chung and Lok-kei, 2019). Meanwhile, the Hong Kong police faced criticism for using excessive force, such as tear gas, to disperse clashes during officially approved rallies. Although Carrie Lam announced the suspension of the extradition bill on 15 June (Pang and Siu, 2019), her refusal to fully withdraw it arose additional waves of criticism. Public outrage intensified after a protester tragically fell to death while producing an outcry against the government decision on scaffolding. This situation escalated further on 1 July when a group of radical protesters temporarily occupied the Legislative Council and defaced the Chinese national emblem (The Guardian, 2019b). This act drew widespread attention from mainland internet users, including those who called for a collective online expedition to support the Hong Kong government and police.

In August, two rounds of expedition were organised amid the ongoing and increasingly confrontational protests in Hong Kong. One of these expeditions was a response to the significant flight disruptions caused by a general strike and sit-in protests at Hong Kong International Airport (BBC News, 2019d; Iaquinto, Barber and Yu, 2023). The other one was prompted by criticisms of police brutality and the firing of warning shots in front of numerous protesters. As mass protests spread across various districts of Hong Kong, including university campuses, discussions among mainland internet users intensified. Pro-government propaganda and polarised online debates motivated some mainland resident to travel to Hong Kong, organising counter-protests in support of the police and the government (Cheung, 2019). Capitalising on the heightened sentiments and the timing of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the PRC, the fourth round of expedition took place on 30 September. Following this, three additional rounds of expedition were performed in October. They were organised to (1) support Carrie Lam, who invoked the Emergency Regulations Ordinance to curb the protest by banning face masks at public gatherings (BBC News, 2019c), (2) comfort the families of police officers who were criticised for alleged police brutality (Hui and Tiantian, 2019), and (3) respond to

Daryl Morey, an American basketball executive who posted support for the protests on Facebook (BBC News, 2019b).

As illustrated in Figure 8.1, two recruiting posters were discovered during my non-participant observation.



(translation)

1. Diba
2. Supporting Hong Kong police. Upholding the rule of law. Opposing violence and chaos in Hong Kong. Safeguarding the principle of one country, two systems  
《Together, we oppose violence and cherish the rule of law》
3. Date of expedition: 23 July, 8:00 PM  
Targeted Facebook pages: Join Diba's official Weibo group chat for details
4. Diba goes on the expedition, nothing can survive  
Where there are Chinese people, there is Diba
5. Facebook (group) Diba's Theatre Command Amy, Facebook (group) Sino-US competition  
Patriotism: no explanation needed. Civility: rejecting insults. Rationality: listening to both sides for mutual understanding. Truth-seeking: pursuing truth and rejecting falsehoods  
@ Diba's official Weibo account





(translation)

1. Diba
2. Diba goes on the expedition, nothing can survive  
Safeguard the unity of the motherland, and resist all anti-China advocacies
3. Notice of the Diba Expedition to confront with Hong Kong independence organisations  
[Organisers] Overseas Chinese associations  
Facebook (group) Diba's Theatre Command Amy, Facebook (group) Sino-US competition  
[Aim]  
Patriotism (no explanation needed), Civility (rejecting insults)  
Rationality (listening to both sides for mutual understanding), Truth-seeking (pursuing

Figure 8.1 Recruiting posters attracting and mobilising participation in the 2019 expedition

Both prominently feature the red colour and the flags of Hong Kong and the PRC, symbolising a pro-Beijing stance and collective support for the CCP-led central government. This first poster specifies the timing of the expedition and methods of participation, while the second one serves more as a notice announcing the upcoming expedition. In addition to indicating the organising role of Diba and assertive attitude, these two posters concisely clarify that the group interests revolve around supporting the Hong Kong police, emphasising the rule of law, criticising protesters for violence and chaos, advocating the One Country, Two Systems policy, and safeguarding territorial integrity. Moreover, these two posters reiterate that the primary purpose of the expedition is to express patriotic sentiments and spread truths about the conflicts in a civilised and rational manner.

Bearing the above group interests and communicative purpose in mind, the following sections focus on 468 memes included in the 2019 sub-corpus, exploring notable meaning-making practices in Diba's memes and the expressed ideas.

## **8.2 Love the country and love Hong Kong**

Like memes produced and transmitted in the previous three years, the national flag of China remains a prominent feature in the 2019 expeditions. Of the 85 image elements featuring the national flag of China, 50 depict it in a photographic style, while the remaining 35 use a cartoonish style. The flag of Hong Kong appears less frequently, with 43 instances identified. Among them, 29 are depicted in a photographic style and 13 in a cartoonish style, with one filtered exception that has been specifically adjusted for lighting and contrast. As analysed in the following three subordinate sections, Diba's memes deploy these flags not only to demonstrate a pro-government stance and highlight territorial integrity. They also function to express Diba participants' patriotic sentiments and criticise anti-government protesters who have repeatedly shown disrespect towards the national flags.

### **8.2.1 Emphasis of territorial integrity**

Figure 8.2 illustrates three memes depicting the Chinese flag in a cartoonish style. The left meme was previously circulated during the 2017 expedition (see section 6.3 for further elaboration). In this meme, the national flag, the outlined boundaries of China's administrative map, and the accompanying written text collaborate in asserting a strong territorial claim over the depicted area. The logo in the upper left corner and the watermark at the bottom indicate that this meme has been interdiscursively recontextualised from applications or social media accounts of *People's Daily*, the CCP's official newspaper. As explain in section 6.3, the territorial claims conveyed by this meme are deliberately general, allowing for their repeated use in various contexts to counter any dissent related to China's territorial integrity. Rather than foregrounding the claimed region, this meme focuses more on China's identity as a nation-state with predefined territorial boundaries.



(translation)

1. People's Daily
2. China shall not loss any territories
3. @People's Daily

*Figure 8.2 Diba's memes highlighting territorial integrity*

The other two memes feature the flags of China and Hong Kong in different ways. They emphasise that “Hong Kong is a part of China” either through written text or visual metaphor. For instance, the bottom right meme merges the flags of China and Hong Kong into a single image, symbolising their unity. In addition to asserting territorial claims over Hong Kong, the upper right meme deploys a short English text expressing affection for China and Hong Kong. This written text is integrated with the paralleled flags, aiming to demonstrate patriotic love which recurs in additional memes examined in the following section.

### **8.2.2 Patriotic love towards China and Hong Kong**

In the 2019 sub-corpus, the meaning of “love” is expressed linguistically through the Chinese character “爱/愛 (*ai*, love)” (n=43) and the English word “love” (n=16). When English is used to articulate collective love towards China or Hong Kong, Diba’s memes feature three types of meaning-making practices.

As exemplified by the upper right meme in Figure 8.2 and another meme in Figure 8.3, the first type primarily involves written text that reiterates the core idea of “I love China, I love Hong Kong” as a slogan. In the meme shown below, the English text, though placed at the bottom and smaller in terms of size, uses capital letters to emphasise the message. Both sides

of this memes present traditional Chinese texts, stating Diba participants' support for the Hong Kong police with a firm tone. These three bilingual texts are evenly distributed upon a filtered image of the Hong Kong flag, which is adjusted in terms of lighting and contrast to create a solemn visual effect. On the one hand, this composition highlights the political symbol of Hong Kong and the tense situation. On the other hand, it underscores that Diba participants' patriotic love is embodied as their strong support for the Hong Kong police.



(translation)

1. The Hong Kong police
2. Strongly support

*Figure 8.3 Diba's meme expressing patriotic love through written text*

In contrast to the first type of meaning-making practice, the second and third types creatively incorporate multimodal elements. As shown in Figure 8.4, the two meme examples express affection for China and Hong Kong through written text, where a heart icon or heart-shaped flags replace the verb “love”.



(translation)

1. Opposing violence, saving Hong Kong
2. @People's Daily
3. I, too, supports the Hong Kong police
4. People's Daily | News application
5. @People's Daily

Figure 8.4 Diba's memes expressing patriotic love through written text and heart-shaped flags

The left meme in Figure 8.4 imitates the iconic “I ❤️ NY” composition to express love for Hong Kong. This imitation mirrors a similar practice found in the 2016 expedition (see section 5.5.2 for further elaboration). By intertextually recontextualising this composition into a new communicative situation, this meme employs the red heart to highlight its symbolic meaning of “love” and to soften the serious tone of the surrounding written texts. Moreover, this explicit recontextualisation links this meme to Diba participants’ previous practices of meaning-making, enhancing the recognisability of the interconnected memes. The multimodal integration is further highlighted by using a yellow square as the background. Meanwhile, the yellow colour also features other elements inserted inside the above Chinese text. In this Chinese text, a cross mark and a check mark are integrated into the Chinese characters “反 (*fan*, oppose)” and “救 (*jiu*, save)” as essential strokes. On the one hand, removing these two marks can disrupt the “holistic visual impression” (Bellantoni and Woolman, 2000, p. 6) of the characters. On the other hand, these marks act as cultural symbols, reinforcing the meanings of “oppose” and “save” by connoting “negation” and “confirmation”. In addition to the creative

modifications to Chinese characters, this meme deliberately uses the symbolic colours of yellow and red, which corresponds to the colour of China's five-star red flag.

The right meme in Figure 8.4 similarly recontextualises the iconic “I ♥ NY” composition when expressing patriotic love for China and Hong Kong. Instead of using a simple heart symbol to replace the verb “love”, Diba participants innovatively customise the flag of China and Hong Kong in terms of shape. Consequently, the heart-shaped flags not only merge the connotative meanings of the heart symbol and the flags but also enhance the clarity of the message “love China” and “love Hong Kong” for viewers who may not understand English.

Although Diba's memes primarily use the phrase “love China, love Hong Kong” as a political slogan to manifest a collective sentiment of patriotism, it is important to recognise that this phrase carries significant political and cultural implications in the context of Hong Kong.

On the one hand, Diba participants deploy this slogan to signal support for the principle of One Country, Two Systems, which defined Hong Kong's status as an administrative region subordinate to mainland China. This principle, established under the Sino-British Joint Declaration, guarantees Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy while acknowledging it as part of China (see section 6.4 for further elaboration). As introduced in section 8.1, the Anti-ELAB Movement was partly motivated by collective concerns that the amended extradition laws can compromised the autonomy of Hong Kong and its judicial independence. In this context, advocating for “love China, love Hong Kong” goes beyond rejecting any form of separatism or independence for Hong Kong. It reflects a deliberate disregard for the protesters' fundamental demands and an emphasis on national interests.

On the other hand, as explained earlier in section 6.4, since the 2017 Chief Executive election, “爱国爱港 (*aiguo aigang*, love the country and love Hong Kong)” has been promoted as an essential criterion for evaluating the eligibility of candidates (Xinhua News Agency, 2014). Meanwhile, fostering national pride and affection towards China as a nation-state has been incorporated into Hong Kong's educational reforms over the past decades (Chong, 2013; Morris and Vickers, 2015; Lam, 2016). Thus, within the broader context of mainland-Hong Kong relations, Diba participants may utilise the reiteration of “love China, love Hong Kong” to stress the importance of patriotism and loyalty to China. Specifically, they dismiss protesters' motives and suggests that loving Hong Kong is inseparable from loving China. Furthermore, the relevant memes enable Diba participants to reinforce the idea that Hong Kong's identity is firmly tied to China's national identity.

### 8.2.3 Rally for patriotic action

In addition to the 85 image elements featuring the national flag of China, it was found that the Chinese term “护旗 (*huqi*, protect the national flag)” recurs for four times. The meme in Figure 8.5 is a typical example, integrating a Chinese celebrity, a wordy text, and logos of China’s official media or government institution.



(translation)

1. Join Jackie Chan in protecting the national flag  
See you at Tiananmen Square at 10 am on 18 August!  
#1.4BillionFlagGuardians#  
“Recent events in Hong Kong have left me heartbroken and worried. By participating in this activity, I want to express the patriotic passion that I have as a Hong Konger and a Chinese. Through taking part in this activity, we can let everyone's voices be heard. Are you a flag guardian like me? If so, please follow me to the square!”— Jackie Chan
2. People’s Daily, Xinhua News Agency, Communist Youth League of China  
Jointly organised

Figure 8.5 Diba’s meme recontextualising official mobilisation of patriotic rally

On the left side of this memes, Jackie Chan, a well-known Hong Kong actor, engages with potential viewers by pointing at them with his finger. As a celebrated actor known for his pioneering contributions to martial arts cinema, Chan is often regarded as a cultural icon. His early works, such as *Police Story*, embody Hong Kong’s unique identity, resilience, and international success. While his depiction in this meme is likely intended to resonate with local Hong Kongers, the adjacent simplified Chinese text calls for unity under national interests and stress national identity. Featured by the red colour, an invitation at the top of this meme rallies for participation in an activity of protecting China’s national flag. Below this invitation, instructions are provided for taking a part both offline at the Tiananmen Square and online by spreading the presented hashtag. In addition to this invitation, Chan’s comment on the ongoing

protests is quoted, expressing his concern about the tense situation in Hong Kong, stressing patriotic duty, attempting to resonate with viewers, and motivating collective support for the government. Notably, three logos are displayed at the bottom of this meme, indicating that the invitational messages originated from *People's Daily*, Xinhua News Agency, and the CYL. This indication clarifies that this meme resulted from Diba participants' practice of directly appropriating available resources from China's official media and institutions. This finding does not provide sufficient evidence to determine the specific role that the listed media outlets and government institution played during the 2019 expedition. Nevertheless, it manifests their pro-government propaganda efforts. These efforts were so influential that their promotional materials were mimetically circulated on foreign social media platforms, such as Facebook.

Another meme including the Chinese term “护旗 (*huqi*, protect the national flag)” is illustrated below in Figure 8.6. In terms of image elements, the photographic flags of China and Hong Kong are integrated to convey a pro-Beijing stance. Beneath this integration, the cartoonish visual style and medium shot depict a patriotic scene in which a male figure salutes a crowd of people holding up China's national flag. In terms of written texts, a simplified Chinese quotation is placed next to the depicted male and elaborates his determination to confront those who disrespectfully tear down the national flag. Following the quotation, the term “香港护旗手 (*xianggang huqishou*, Hong Kong guardian of the national flag) clarifies that the cartoonish male figure represents pro-government Hong Kongers who are committed to protecting the national flag as a political symbol of China and the national identity. At the bottom of this meme, the script typeface mimics the appearance of Chinese calligraphy, creating a sense of solemnness and highlight the patriotic sentiment of safeguarding Hong Kong as a part of China. Like other memes discussed in previous sections, the logo and Weibo watermark of *People's Daily* are included in this meme, demonstrating Diba participants' efforts to intertextually recontextualise official promotional materials across different digital platforms.





(translation)

1. Every time you tear it down, we will raise it again  
Hong Kong guardian of the national flag
2. Hong Kong, China, we will protect it
3. People's Daily | News application  
@People's Daily

Figure 8.6 Diba's meme representing a "guardian of the national flag"

Unlike the invitational meme presented in Figure 8.5, the above meme in Figure 8.6 primarily serves to deliver a patriotic statement. Nevertheless, their shared use of the term “护旗 (*huqi*, protect the national flag)” carries deeper implications, closely tied to the following two incidents occurred during the peak of the Anti-ELAB Movement.

As introduced earlier in section 8.1, the first round of the 2019 expedition was organised in response to a group of radical protesters who temporarily occupied Hong Kong's Legislative Council and defaced the Chinese national emblem. According to relevant news reports (Chan, 2019; The Guardian, 2019b), during this occupation, protesters displayed the colonial-era flag as a symbol of opposition to the central government and as a reminder of Hong Kong's past under British colonial rule. This colonial flag was frequently waved when protesters confronted with police on the streets. In the context of the Anti-ELAB protests, the colonial flag became a symbol implying values associated with the colonial government, such as civil liberty and the rule of law. This symbolism allows protesters to emphasise the perceived erosion of Hong

Kong's autonomy and criticise the legislative amendments imposed by the government. Waved as a political symbol, the colonial flag represents a strong sentiment of resistance against the central government's growing influence over Hong Kong and reflects the anti-Beijing protester's desire to assert a collective identity which is differentiated from the national identity promoted by Beijing. From the perspective of pro-government individuals, the colonial flag not only evokes memories of national humiliation but also represents an objection to the narrative of national rejuvenation as a collective interest (see section 6.4 for further elaboration). In this context, Diba's emphasis on protecting the Chinese national flag reflects a collective dissatisfaction with the protesters' nostalgia for the colonial government and their disregard for the historical suffering under foreign oppression.

Moreover, the choice of the term “*护旗* (*huqi*, protect the national flag)” is closely linked to another incident that occurred outside a shopping centre in Tsim Sha Tsui. During intense confrontations between protesters and the police, the symbolic national flag was thrown into the harbour twice as an expression of anti-government sentiment. This act prompted many mainland Chinese to travel to Hong Kong, organise counter-protests and vow to protect the national flag from anti-government protesters. As shown in the meme in Figure 8.6, these counter-protests rallied for collective actions to both protect and raise the flag. While the act of protection can be interpreted as an advocacy for national identity and the cultivation of a sense of heroism, the act of raising the flag represents national pride, which is typically fostered through China's patriotic education campaigns. As Zhao (1998) pointed out, flag-raising ceremonies constitute a crucial part of these education campaigns. In the Chinese context, such ceremonies in schools and public settings are often accompanied by the singing of the national anthem and speeches that advocate national loyalty. The solemn atmosphere of the ceremonies, along with the flag-raising process, not only reinforces the national identity but also instils a patriotic sense of collective responsibility. In this sense, what is rallied through Diba's memes extends beyond protecting the Chinese flag as a symbol of national identity. These memes aim to promote national cohesion and convey the idea that confronting anti-government protesters is a collective duty of all Chinese citizens.

### **8.3 Support and defend the Hong Kong police**

As an essential part of the Anti-ELAB protests, the Hong Kong Police typically symbolise state power and a pro-government orientation. In the 2019 sub-corpus, 61 image elements feature the police through photographic ( $n=38$ ) and cartoonish ( $n=23$ ) visual styles. Notably,

these elements predominantly rely on medium shot (n=31) to capture actions or gestures of the police. A few image elements involve full (n=16), close-up (n=8), long (n=3), and head (n=3) shots. Excluding the 27 elements which only depict the police staring at someone, the remaining 34 image elements portray a variety of actions or gestures, including speaking (n=11), walking (n=8), running (n=5), holding gun (n=4), arresting (n=3), saluting (n=2), and raising the national flag (n=1). Regarding the circumstance, 15 of the 61 identified elements portray the police without any surrounding objects or settings, while the other 46 elements present the police in public space, either alongside or without protesters. Based on their focus of representation, memes that include the Hong Kong police can be classified into the following two types.

### 8.3.1 Support and gratitude

The first type of memes depicting the Hong Kong police primarily serves to express support and gratitude. Figure 8.7 presents two examples that convey this depiction through the cartoonish visual style. Among the 61 image elements representing the police, the instance in the left meme is the only one annotated as “cartoonish” while featuring an artistic imitation of washing painting. At the centre of this meme, the image element illustrates the low part of a police officer’s body, highlighting a walkie-talkie clipped to the back and handcuffs in hand.



(translation)

1. Hong Kong wants peace  
Resist violence  
Support Hong Kong police
2. I also support HK Police
3. Child, please trust your father, he is the true hero

Figure 8.7 Diba’s memes depicting the police through cartoonish visual style

Although this element does depict any facial expression, it uses the walkie-talkie and handcuffs to symbolise the police' responsibility to enforce the law and maintain order. When collocated with the adjacent Chinese texts, this meme not only expresses support for the police but also positions the protesters as criminals who violently disrupt social order. Accompanied by photographic flags and bilingual texts expressing patriotic sentiments, this meme demonstrates Diba participants' support for the government's decision of categorising the protesters as rioters and dispersing the protests through police actions.

The right meme also includes an image element depicting the police in cartoonish visual style. However, rather than focusing solely on the police, this meme portrays a group of protesters throwing different objects at the police who refrains from using the gun in his hand. This cartoonish depiction suggests that Diba participants interpret the protesting actions as disruptive behaviours and highlight the police's restraint in handling such behaviours. Given that the Hong Kong Police was criticised for using excessive force during the protests, this meme also serves to refute such criticism and instead accuse the protesters of physical aggression. This message is further reinforced by the surrounding written texts. Two English texts surround the cartoonish police officer, expressing gratitude and attempting to explain his inner thoughts. As shown by the English text at the bottom, Diba participants metaphorically compare the police to the "only light". This metaphorical expression implies that the ongoing protests have plunged Hong Kong society into darkness, with the police being the only hope to dispel it.

Above the English text expressing gratitude and showing support, a Chinese text is added to emphasise the police's additional role as a father, attempting to communicate with his child. This practice not only highlights the multiple identities of the police but also responds to a phenomenon that occurred during the Anti-ELAB Movement. As the polarised movement intensified conflicts between protesters and the Hong Kong police who represent state power, there emerged various forms of harassment and cyberbullying directed at the children of police officers (Hui and Tiantian, 2019; Lim, 2019). Threatening messages and doxing attacks were deployed to distress these children and exert psychological pressures on the police by targeting their loved families. In this context, it is evident that Diba participants target children of the police as potential viewers. They try to comfort these children by portraying law enforcement as a heroic duty and emphasising the significant role that their fathers played in the contentious protests.

Among the 38 image elements involving photographic representations of the police, 27 are collocated with written texts expressing support for law enforcement. Figure 8.8 provides two typical examples.



(translation)

1. Support Hong Kong police  
Severely punish rioters
2. # Severely punish rioters  
# Support Hong Kong police  
Diba goes on the expedition, nothing can survive
3. Official seal of Diba Central Theatre Command Army  
Official seal of Diba Central Theatre Command Army
4. Support the police in enforcing the law fairly and protect Hong Kong!
5. A-Sir, you protect Hong Kong, and I will protect you!

*Figure 8.8 Diba's memes depicting the police and expressing support for law enforcement*

The left meme focuses on individual police officers, depicting the moment of engaging with or arresting someone, while the right meme portrays a group of police officers holding guns and running. Despite this differed focus of visual representation, both memes use Chinese texts to support the police, whether they are depicted as arresting a rioter or on their way to protect Hong Kong. All these texts are intentionally highlighted in blue, a colour symbolising pro-government and pro-police orientations during the Anti-ELAB Movement (Zhang and Gu, 2022). In the corners of these two memes, Diba's group slogan and self-designed seal (see section 5.5.1 for further elaboration) are reused to indicate authorship. The supportive messages conveyed by these memes are rather straightforward. However, as explained below, the Cantonese slang “黃燦 (*huangcan*)” in the first meme carries a meaning that contradicts to Diba participants' support for the police.

Commonly, the Chinese character “*燦 (can)*” carries positive connotations of “bright” and “brilliant”. In Cantonese, a variety of Chinese predominantly used in Hong Kong, the character “*燦 (can)*” evolved from the name of a Hong Kong TV character to a localised morpheme. It is often added to names or other words to introduce a sarcastic or derogatory undertone (Tian, 2009; Zhang, Ni and Pan, 2018). During the Anti-ELAB Movement, the term “*港燦 (gangcan)*” was specifically used by pro-government individuals to criticise and mock Hong Kong protesters (Song and Wu, 2018). Conversely, the term “*黃燦 (huangcan)*” was deployed by anti-government protesters as a derogatory label to ridicule the children of police officers, who were expected to be upright and honourable. Moreover, this term frequently appeared in cyberbullying against these children to stigmatise the families of law enforcement. Given that the term “*黃燦 (huangcan)*” is included in Diba’s pro-government meme alongside the term “*暴徒 (baotu, rioter)*”, it is highly possible that producer of this meme is not familiar with Cantonese slangs and expressions contextualised during the protests. This inappropriate wording may also result from misunderstandings related to the symbolic colours associated with pro-government and anti-government orientations. As mentioned earlier, blue represents pro-government and pro-police orientations, while *黃 (huang, yellow)* is generally seen as a symbol of pro-democracy and anti-government sentiments (Zhang and Gu, 2022). From this perspective, it becomes evident that despite Diba participants’ efforts to communicate with local Hong Kongers through Cantonese slang, their limited knowledge of the relevant socio-political culture prevents them from achieving the intended communicative effects.

### 8.3.2 Injuries from tense confrontations

The second type of memes depicting the Hong Kong police stands out for its focus on the police’s injuries resulted from tense confrontations. All these depictions purposefully involve the photographic visual style and a combination of multiple shot types.

As illustrated in Figure 8.9, the left meme uses the medium shot to portray police officers amid the protests, while the close-up shot highlights injuries on their hands. Additionally, two photographic elements use full shots to present chaotic scenes of clashes where protesters are engaging in aggressive actions. This combination of different shot types is also found in other memes, such as the one presented on the right side of Figure 8.9. In this meme, the medium

shot depicts a child and an injured citizen, while the head shot is utilised to emphasise the facial injuries of a police officer. Unlike other memes examined earlier in this chapter, this type of meme skilfully utilises shot types as rhetorical tools to showcase both sides of the conflict. This practice reflects Diba participants' efforts to influence how meme viewers perceive the conflict. Moreover, it demonstrates their intent to undermine the legitimacy of the protests by positioning protesters as violent offenders while portraying the police as victims.



(translation)

1. Is attacking police what you call a peaceful protest?
2. People's Daily  
@People's Daily
3. Support the Hong Kong police
4. Rioters attack the police
5. Rioters exploit children
6. Rioters assault and surround citizens

Figure 8.9 Diba's memes depicting police officers and their injuries

This intent is reinforced by the bilingual texts placed upon the image elements. At the centre of the left meme in Figure 8.9, a traditional Chinese text directly addresses the Hong Kong protesters through the pronoun “*你們* (*nimen*, you)”, accuses them of attacking the police, and questions the legitimacy of their actions. At the top of this meme, another written text shifts to English-speaking audiences and addresses protesters through the pronoun “they”. This shift suggests that this meme is produced more than showcasing clashes between the police and

protesters. Instead, the chaotic scenes and injuries are presented as evidence in communicating with two different groups of potential viewers. One group consists of Hong Kong protesters and those who can read traditional Chinese, while the other one contains English speakers or those who use English as a lingua franca. Consequently, this meme allows Diba participants to defend law enforcement and accuse the protesters of violent attacks. It also enables Diba participants to, as claimed in their posters, spread the “truth” about the protests to international audiences.

Given that the logo and watermark of *People’s Daily* also appear in this meme, the skilful combination of different shot types and shifts in targeted audiences may result from careful planning by professional propaganda staffs. However, this practice is not unique in Diba’s memes. For instance, the right meme in Figure 8.9 collocates image elements with simplified Chinese, traditional Chinese, and English texts. All the image elements are accompanied by simplified Chinese texts, emphasising the protesters as rioters and condemning their violent behaviours. Adjacent to these multimodal integrations, an English text summarises the core idea of this meme. Building on this summary, additional traditional Chinese and English texts are placed at the top of meme, highlighting Diba participants’ pro-police stance.

### **8.3.3 Comparison between the Hong Kong and US police**

Although Diba’s memes predominantly focus on depicting the Hong Kong police, it was found that the US police are mentioned and portrayed in three memes. As shown in Figure 8.10, these memes illustrate similar scenes in which police officers arrest someone on the street. Notably, an identical Chinese text is placed upon these visual representations to specify that the depicted police are from the US and to suggest that the Hong Kong police should learn from their practices. Prior to the Chinese text, a logo indicates that these memes are originally produced by the “*后援团* (*houyuan tuan*, fan club)” of China (see section 8.5 for further elaboration). Given that the Hong Kong police were widely criticised for using excessive and inappropriate force during the protests, these three memes primarily serve to demonstrate Diba participants’ pro-police attitude. However, as discussed below, to fully understand the specific comparison between the Hong Kong and US police, it is necessary to consider these three memes within the broader context of the intensified Sino-US relations amid the trade war and the Anti-ELAB protests.





(translation)

1. Fan club of China, Support the Hong Kong police in learning from the practices and experience of the US police
2. Fan club of China, Support the Hong Kong police in learning from the practices and experience of the US police
3. Fan club of China, Support the Hong Kong police in learning from the practices and experience of the US police

*Figure 8.10 Diba's meme portraying the US police*

As mentioned in section 7.2.3, the Sino-US trade war in 2018 was characterised by escalating tariffs, tense negotiations, and fluctuating relations between the two countries (Chong and Li, 2019; Itakura, 2020). While domestic hostility towards the US was fuelled by tariff pressures, Sino-US relations were further strained after John Bolton, the former national security adviser of the US, warned Beijing and compared the turmoil in Hong Kong to the 1989 Tiananmen Square Movement (BBC News, 2019g). This comparison was criticised by Chinese official as interference in China's internal affairs. Furthermore, Kurt Tong, the former Consul General of the US to Hong Kong, also suggested that the government should avoid to handle the protests with strong measures (Feng, 2019).

In this context, the three memes in Figure 8.10 can facilitate Diba participants to convey multiple ideas. First, they illustrate that law enforcement is deployed in any country to manage civil unrest or protests. This illustration helps Diba participants justify the actions of the Hong Kong police during the protests. Second, these three memes constitute a satire, criticising perceived double standards by pointing out that the US police similarly resort to harsh tactics to disperse protests. This satire also responds to voices that criticise the Hong Kong police for brutality and enables Diba participants to challenge negative narratives about how the government deal with the tense situation in Hong Kong. More importantly, through these three memes, Diba participants emphasise that maintaining stability and security is the fundamental duty of any police force. This emphasis reflects their stance on prioritising government authority over the protests.

## 8.4 Criticism and ridicules of protesters

Apart from depictions of the Hong Kong police, Diba's memes also make significant efforts to portray protesters and their protesting activities. In the 2019 sub-corpus, 143 image elements were identified for representing the Hong Kong protesters, with 118 of these elements deploying the photographic visual style to create a sense of reality. This type of portrayal is primarily achieved through medium (n=71) and full (n=47) shots, which frame the protesters either engaging in aggressive actions (n=93) or walking on the street (n=25). In addition to depicting protesters in group, Diba's memes also single out specific figures, such as Nathan Law (n=14) and Joshua Wong (n=4), who are illustrated as leading figures. In terms of textual extractions, it was found that protesters are addressed through different terms, including 暴徒 (*baotu*, rioters, n=46) · 甲由 (*gaat6 zaat6*, cockroach, n=15), rioter (n=28), mob (n=10), and 废青 (*feiqing*, useless youth, n=7).

Focusing on these noticeable elements, the following subsections will explore how the above image and textual elements are used in Diba's memes to criticise and ridicule the protesters. Moreover, these subsections aim to demonstrate methods that Diba participants utilise to delegitimise the protesters, depict them negatively, and underscore the broader socio-political commentaries regarding the protests.

### 8.4.1 Violence and chaos

As mentioned above, when Diba participants depict protesters, the use of medium and full shots is a prevalent technique. However, these depictions are not evenly distributed across all memes. Instead, Diba participants often combine different shot types within a single meme to present a sequence of scenes that depict protesters as instigators of chaos or as clashing with the police. This method of combining shots serves to create a more comprehensive narrative of the events, emphasising the perceived violence and disorder. A typical example of this practice is shown on the left side of Figure 8.11. This meme integrates four photographs, and each captures different aspects of the protests on the streets of Hong Kong. The photographs are presented in a way that highlights the destructive activities of the protesters. English terms are superimposed on these images to label and identify the tools of destruction being used, further reinforcing the narrative of chaos. Moreover, this meme includes two English sentences in the centre and at the bottom, condemning the protesters as "heartless", questioning their motives, and calling for an end to the violence. The pronoun "you" is used to directly address the

protesters, making the message personal and confrontational. The deliberate choice of English rather than Chinese suggests that this meme primarily targets international audiences and attempts to influence global perception of the protests. This strategy also reflects an intent to counter negative narratives about the Hong Kong police and the central government's handling of the tense situation.



(translation)

1. Defenceless

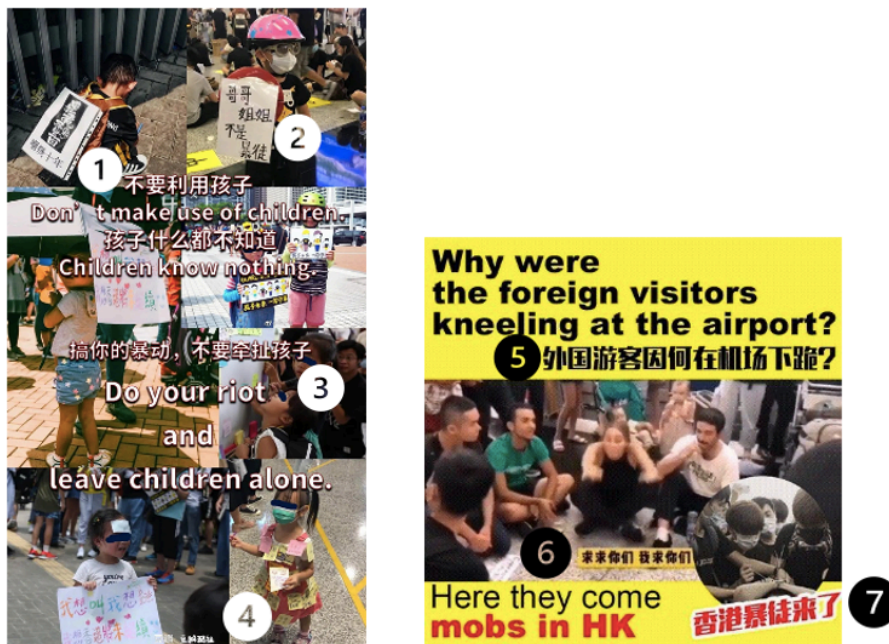
This is what you call as “defenceless”

*Figure 8.11 Diba’s memes depicting protesters through different shot types*

This intent is equally evident in memes that focus on a single scene of protest and underscore the aggressiveness of the protesters. For example, the right side of Figure 8.11 illustrates a meme in which a protester uses a long stick to attack a police officer. Above this photograph, the English word “defenceless” is presented as a quotation, emphasising the vulnerability of the police officer in the situation. This message is further reinforced by a corresponding phrase in traditional Chinese, ensuring that both Chinese and international audiences receive the same interpretation. Following this quotation, a written text poses a rhetorical question, intended to engage with local Hong Kongers who use Cantonese in daily communication, criticise the protesters' violent behaviours, and highlight the perceived hypocrisy in their actions. Below the photograph, an English text concludes the core message of this meme. That is, the accusations against the police are baseless and protesters are the true instigators of violence. This

conclusion enables Diba participants to reinforce the narrative that the police are merely maintaining order while handling unjustified aggression from protesters.

In addition to depicting violent actions, a few memes also focus on the involvement of children in the protests and the disruption caused to foreign travellers. These depictions serve to further discredit the protests by showcasing their damages to the Hong Kong society. In Figure 8.12, the left meme exemplifies the former depiction, while the right meme showcases the later portrayal.



(translation)

1. Don's exploit children  
They don't know anything
2. These young people are not rioters
3. If you want to carry out the protesters, don't involve the children
4. Douban Goose Group
5. Why did the foreign tourist kneel at the airport?
6. I beg you, please. I am begging you
7. Here they come, Hong Kong rioters

Figure 8.12 Diba's memes depicting children and foreign tourists

Using medium shot, the left meme in Figure 8.12 illustrates several children who hold signs with political messages or demands. In the centre of this meme, a bilingual text critiques the protesters for exploiting children for political purposes and condemns the act as irresponsible. On the one hand, this meme reflects that Hong Kong protesters and Diba participants percept children's involvement in political activism from different perspectives. For pro-democracy protesters, introducing children to political movements is a valuable opportunity to empower

the young generation, educate them about social issues, and instil a sense of civic responsibility. For pro-government Diba participants, involving children in chaotic protests is an unethical and irresponsible act. They focus more on the potential dangers that these protests pose to the safety and mental well-being of the children. This perspective echoes voices underscoring that hundreds of teenagers were arrested during the protests (Chen, 2019; The Guardian, 2019a) and the youngest one convicted of an offence was 12-year-old (BBC News, 2019a; Lan, 2019). On the other hand, given that the photographic portrayal can effectively generate a sense of reality, the left meme in Figure 8.12 enables Diba participants to undermine the legitimacy of the protests and influence public perception.

This negative portrayal also features another meme which reflects Diba participants' reaction to the sit-in protests at Hong Kong International Airport. As introduced in section 8.1, during the protests in August 2019, key events at the airport marked growing frustration among protesters and the escalated tension in Hong Kong (BBC News, 2019d; Wu, 2019). During the sit-in protests, protesters occupied terminals and chanted slogans against police brutality and government's rejection of responding to protesters' political demands. Although this collective action aimed to draw international attention to Hong Kong's situation, it inevitably led to significant flight disruptions, cancellation of hundreds of flights, and resentments among travellers (Iaquinto, Barber and Yu, 2023).

In this context, Diba participants, as exemplified on the right side of Figure 8.12, shift their focus to foreign travellers whose daily routines were suspended due to flight disruptions. In the central part of this meme, a photographic element depicts several travellers sitting on the ground and begging someone. Above and below this depiction, Diba participants pose a rhetorical question and provide answer to it in both Chinese and English. Specifically, they use a bilingual text to engage with Chinese- and English-speakers, criticising the protesters for causing undue stress to the travellers. At the bottom of this meme, the photographic protesters are labelled as "mob," and their sit-in is categorised as excessive and inappropriate. Notably, this meme strategically deploys the symbolic colour of yellow to highlight all written texts. However, this choice does not imply a support for the pro-democracy protesters, it serves more to catch viewers' attention through the bright colour and visually emphasise the negative portrayal of the protests. This portrayal is strategically used to resonate with international audiences, particularly those who may empathise with the inconvenience or danger posed to foreign travellers.

Besides, it was found that when illustrating chaos in the airport, six memes pay particular attention to 付国豪 (Fu Guohao), a mainland journalist who was attacked during the sit-in protests. Half of these memes involve the photographic visual style, while another half utilise the cartoonish style to facilitate more flexible representations. Figure 8.13 provides two representative memes to exemplify Diba participants' practices of meaning-making.



(translation)

1. I support the Hong Kong police!  
You can beat me now!
2. Salute to the hero
3. I love the police

*Figure 8.13 Diba's memes portraying Fu Guohao*

The left meme presents a scene where Fu is surrounded by a crowd and tied up by a masked protester. The central part of this meme features a hashtag labelling the scene as a “shame” to Hong Kong. Through the cartoonish style, the right meme depicts several objects. In addition to Fu whose hands are tied up, an adhesive tape and a pro-police t-shirt are included. Moreover, the surrounding crowd is symbolised by malevolent gaze hidden in darkness. At the top of this meme, a simplified Chinese text expresses support for the police. In the lower part of this meme, a traditional text praises Fu as a hero and clarifies that this meme was intertextually recontextualised from a political comic on Facebook. As discussed below, the depiction of Fu in these memes is not merely a recount of events but serves a deeper purpose within the broader narrative of the protests.

While the sit-in at the airport caused significant flight disruptions, the massive protests and clashes attracted domestic and international journalist. Working as a reporter for the state-run media outlet *Global Times*, Fu was confronted by protesters during the sit-in (Global Times, 2019; Stand News, 2019). Due to his affiliations with mainland Chinese media, Fu was accused of being a spy or an undercover agent. The confrontation quickly escalated when some radical protesters surrounded him, tied him to a luggage cart, beat him, and prevented medical aid. During this process, Fu shouted that “I support the Hong Kong police, you can beat me now”. Captured by on-site media, the clash soon went viral on Chinese social media, and his statement was widely circulated.

In this situation, Fu’s experience became another flashpoint in the tense and polarised atmosphere between the mainland and Hong Kong. In the left meme in Figure 8.13, the crowd of protesters occupies the largest portion of the photographic depiction, while Fu is placed in the bottom right corner. This composition not only position Fu as a vulnerable mainland victim but also highlights the overwhelming aggressiveness of the Hong Kong protesters. Accompanied by the negative hashtag labelling the protesters’ actions as a “shame”, this meme enables Diba participants to portray the protesters as violent and unruly, further deepening the Hong Kong-mainland division. In the right meme in Figure 8.13, Fu’s statement, “I support the Hong Kong police, you can beat me now”, is repurposed as a slogan to evoke a strong patriotic feeling among mainland viewers. It also transforms Fu into a symbol representing a determined individual who firmly supports the government and police. This symbolism provides the emotional foundation for Diba participants to describe Fu as a “好漢 (*haohan*, hero) for standing up to the protesters.

By showcasing how the protests involve children, foreigners, and mainland journalists, it is evident that the above memes seek to convey a core idea that impacts of the protests are far-reaching and indiscriminate. Specifically, Diba participants intend to influence domestic and global perception of the Anti-ELAB Movement by bolstering the argument that the protests are not just a local issue but also a broader social problem. More importantly, these memes serve to delegitimise the protests by highlighting instances where individuals of different backgrounds were victimised. They allow Diba participants to reinforce the narrative of the protests as chaotic and violent.





Unlike the sarcastic and derogatory depictions of Wong’s relations with the US, Diba participants focus on a leader-follower dynamic when representing Nathan Law as a leading figure in the protests. Among the 14 memes portraying Law, 10 contrast him with groups of protesters, while the remaining four memes present him alone. Figure 8.15 illustrates three representative examples.

Both the left and central memes present a comparison between Law and protesters gathering on the street or being involved in sit-in events. The left meme deploys the English word “you” to address protesters and remind them of the fact that Law was planning to study at Yale University while numerous young people boycotted classes at the risk of imprisonment. Diba participants deliberately enlarge the words “Yale” and “Jail”, highlighting the contrast between Law’s promising prospects as a leading figure and the dire circumstances faced by other protesters as followers. This contrast is connected to another English text in this meme, which ridicules the protesters and suggests that Law’s admission to Yale was based on his activist experience in the Anti-ELAB Movement.



(translation)

1. The shrewdest consumer in Hong Kong: Nathan Law
2. Idiots boycott classes, I go to class
3. Nathan Law, the traitor

Figure 8.15 Diba’s meme criticising Nathan Law in sarcastic tone

This idea is similarity expressed by the central meme in Figure 8.15. In addition to visually contrasting Law with the protesters, traditional Chinese texts are used to engage with Chinese-speaking viewers. In the centre, a traditional Chinese text categorise students who participate in class boycott as “傻仔 (shazai, idiot)” and utilised the pronoun “我 (wo, I)” to refer to Law who was preparing for enrolment. At the top, another traditional Chinese text sarcastically accuses Law of exchanging the protesters' efforts and Hong Kong’s social stability for personal

interests. The right meme conveys a more straightforward comment and criticises Law as a traitor.

After embedding the above three memes into the communicative situation of the 2019 expedition, it was found that Diba participants' sarcasm is primarily prompted by one of Law's Facebook posts. Amid escalated tensions in Hong Kong, Law announced on Facebook in August that he had arrived in the US to pursue a master's degree (Phoenix Media, 2019). Although most students were about to start the school year in September, the campus environment was highly unpredictable due to the tense atmosphere, massive class boycott, and student-police clashes (BBC News, 2019f; The Guardian, 2019c). In this situation, Law's announcement sparked widespread discussion, questioning his motive for mobilising student protests, mocking his departure during a time of significant political unrest, and accusing him of prioritising personal safety over collective interests (Cho and Prihar, 2019). Therefore, by presenting Law as a leading figure in the protests, Diba's memes intend to portray Law's departure as an act of cowardice or betrayal. This portrayal implies that he abandoned his responsibilities or claimed commitment to the pro-democracy movement. More importantly, these memes allow Diba participants to ridicule the protesters who were deeply engaged in the movement and sacrificed a lot for their political advocacy.

### 8.4.3 Protesters as cockroaches

As listed earlier in section 8.4, Diba's memes typically address pro-democracy protesters through terms such as 暴徒 (*baotu*, rioters), 甲由 (*gaat6 zaat6*, cockroach), rioter, mob, and 废青 (*feiqing*, useless youth). Among these five terms, 甲由 (*gaat6 zaat6*, cockroach) is a Cantonese expression referring to cockroaches which are commonly seen in warm, moist, and dark places. In the 2019 sub-corpus, seven memes use a cartoonish visual style to represent protesters as anthropomorphised cockroaches. Figure 8.16 illustrate two typical examples of such representation.



(translation)

1. Sorry, I was too impulsive
2. I am sorry for causing all these troubles
3. Trash, asshole, idiot, scum, traitor, bitch, pest, useless person, troublemaker

Figure 8.16 Diba's memes comparing protesters to cockroaches

Notably, both memes mimic the outfits worn by the Hong Kong protesters. By dressing the depicted cockroaches in symbolic yellow helmets and masks, Diba participants use the left cartoonish meme to portray protesters as duplicitous in their interactions with the media and ordinary citizens. This portrayal primarily aims to accusing the protesters of manipulating the media to advance their political agendas. In the right meme, a yellow ribbon is used to indicate the political orientation of the anthropomorphised cockroach. This visual representation is surrounded by cursing words and derogatory slangs that are commonly used either in Mandarin or Cantonese.

Davies (2020) pointed out that some Hong Kong protesters tend to embrace the anthropomorphic rhetoric comparing them to cockroaches, as this insect is often seen as one of the most resilient species. However, according to Cheng (2019) and Hui (2019), the Cantonese slang 甲由 (*gaat6 zaat6*, cockroach) is commonly used by the police and mainland media to create an insect slur, dehumanising pro-democracy protesters and mocking them as undesirable pests. In this sense, for pro-government Diba participants, the visual representations of cockroach contribute more to expressing their disdain for the protesters and promoting law enforcement as a solution to eliminate troublemakers. Moreover, this insulting depiction reflects Diba participants' intent of devaluing the protesters' cause and diminishing their public image.

### 8.5 Fanship and self-representation

According to previous studies reviewed in section 2.3.2, the Diba Expedition is widely recognised as a representative case of China's fandom nationalism. Several researchers have

examined how Diba participants repurpose fandom tactics to mobilise a broader audience and amplify pro-government voices across different platforms (Guo and Yang, 2019; Liao, Koo and Rojas, 2022; Chen, 2023; Zhuang, Huang and Chen, 2023). Nevertheless, apart from the fandom technique of national personification used in memes circulated during the 2016 expedition, no fandom-related memes were found in the 2017 and 2018 sub-corpus. In the 2019 sub-corpus, the simplified Chinese term “饭 (*fan*, fans)” was identified in one memes, while the term “阿中 (*azhong*, Ah-zhong)” was detected in 18 memes. Despite the low occurrence frequency, relevant memes can showcase how Diba participants apply fandom expressions in their pro-government memes.

Figure 8.17 provides the sole meme including the simplified Chinese term “饭 (*fan*, fans)”. This term is placed on a hat worn by a fangirl, representing female participants in the Diba Expedition. The fangirl is depicted holding the hand of a male who holds a shield and confronts a group of masked individuals. According to the memes examined earlier in section 8.4.3, the masked crowd symbolises the Hong Kong protesters. Given the depicted shield features yellow and red as symbolic colours representing China, the male is likely utilised to represent male participants in the expedition. Additionally, the national flag and bilingual pro-police slogan indicate the pro-government stance of this memes. Based on these multimodal elements and their composition, it is evident that this meme conveys the idea that Diba participants of different genders stand together to support the Hong Kong police and protect China from the protesters. In this construction, the term “饭 (*fan*, fans)” primarily works to clarify the identity of the depicted cartoon characters and demonstrate a firm support for the police and government.



(translation)

1. Fans
2. Firmly support the Hong Kong police

Figure 8.17 Diba's memes including the Chinese term “饭 (fan, fans)”

Unlike the meme including the Chinese term “饭 (fan, fans)”, the term “阿中 (azhong, Ah-zhong)” features a common way that Cantonese speakers use to express familiarity or affection. Functioning similarly to “dear” in English, the character “阿 (ah)” is attach to “中 (zhong)” as a nickname for 中国 (zhongguo, China). It is notable that the term “阿中 (azhong, Ah-zhong)” only appears in memes which are commonly defined by researchers as *biaoqingbao* (Jiang and Vásquez, 2019; Ying and Blommaert, 2020). As shown in Figure 8.18, the relevant memes feature a simple composition of cartoon characters, short written texts, heart emojis, the Chinese flag, or cute animals.



(translation)

1. No one is allowed to bully Ah-zhong
2. If you disrespect Ah-zhong, I will disrespect you
3. Stop for a second, I want to post an advertisement  
Brother Ah-zhong is the best
4. Brother Ah-zhong! Brother Ah-zhong!

Figure 8.18 Diba's memes including the Chinese term “阿中 (azhong, Ah-zhong)”

The two memes in the upper row explicitly position Diba participants as protectors of China. The left meme uses the fandom expression “izhong” to highlight a collective love towards China, which is personified as a vulnerable child hiding behind Diba participants. The right meme innovatively appropriates the “diss” concept which is commonly used in hip-pop culture to refer to public insults or critiques through combative lyrics or performances (Ogbar, 2007). By interdiscursively recontextualising this concept and using a facial expression of disdain, this meme facilitates Diba participants to show a combative attitude and counter criticism of the central government and the Hong Kong police. The other two memes in the bottom row focus on expressing strong affection and admiration for China, as they either praising it as the best nation-state or adapting fandom practices to show support with cheering sticks.

The above memes demonstrate that by personifying China into a vulnerable or appealing figure, Diba participants position themselves as protectors and emphasise their personal connection to the nation-state. These memes also reflect collective fondness, loyalty, and support. However, given the complex context of the Anti-ELAB protests, this personification applies not only to China as a nation-state but also to the central government and the Hong

Kong police. Thus, the strong sentiments of confidence and worship can extend to both the government and the police.

## **8.6 Summary**

To sum up, this chapter focused on notable memes produced and circulated during the 2019 Diba Expedition. It was found that the examined memes are featured by a notable reliance on the photographic visual style in 259 meme data which constitute more than half of the 2019 sub-corpus. Additionally, across the four years, the skilful combination of shot types was firstly used in 2019 to present political disputes and the depicted participants or circumstances from different perspectives. Chinese and English remain to function as the primary channels of communicating with potential viewers from Hong Kong, mainland China, and the international society.

In terms of content, Diba's memes concentrate on highlighting China's territorial integrity, expressing support for the Hong Kong police, rallying for patriotic action, criticising the protesters for violence and chaos, ridiculing leading figures in the protests, challenging negative narratives of the government, and delegitimising the Anti-ELAB Movement. In terms of stance, it was found that Diba participants intend to position themselves as heroic protectors of the nation-state, depict the protesters as selfish hypocrites, and portray the police as victims of violent protesting actions.

Moreover, it was revealed that fandom expressions are included in Diba's memes (n=22) to represent female participants of the expedition and highlight a strong personal attachment to the nation-state. Although these fandom expressions were not found in previous expeditions, relevant memes only occupy only 4.70% of the 2019 sub-corpus. Most of the examined memes play a more significant role to convey mockeries, justify government decisions, and promote law enforcement. Another notable finding in this chapter relates to the frequent occurrence of logos and watermarks. These elements not only demonstrate Diba participants practice of interdiscursive recontextualisation but also specifically indicate the close relationship between Diba's memes and state-own media as sources providing suitable semiotic resources of meaning-making.

## **Chapter 9 Conclusion**

This chapter consists of five subordinate sections. Section 9.1 provides a summary of the thesis's main content and leads the subsequent four sections that focus on the contributions of this research. Section 9.2 addresses the three research questions posed at the beginning of this thesis, while section 9.3 engages with existing research and reviews the main findings related to multiple aspects of Diba's memes. The final two sections respectively present the original contributions of this research and indicate its limitations, which may suggest directions for future studies.

### **9.1 Summary of the thesis**

Emphasising the social aspects of internet memes and the agency of meme producers, this thesis examined a network of 980 internet memes produced and transmitted for political purposes during the Diba Expedition, a pro-government online activity conducted from 2016 to 2019. Theoretically, this examination relied on a threefold analytical framework, which was specified and extended by incorporating the concept of recontextualisation and key notions from social semiotic multimodal analysis (Chapter 3). Methodologically, it integrates a non-participant observation approach with multimodal corpus-assisted methods to identify repetitive elements, detect mimetic practices of meaning-making, and facilitate a qualitative analysis on salient characteristics (Chapter 4). Chronologically, this qualitative analysis investigated representative memes articulating pro-government opinions on cross-strait relations (Chapter 5), Hong Kong-mainland relations (Chapter 6 and Chapter 8), and Sino-Sweden conflicts (Chapter 7). It also explored individual and group interests underpinning Diba's memes in various communicative moments.

### **9.2 Answers to research questions**

This section is divided into three parts. Each part addresses one of the principal research questions listed in section 1.3. Section 9.2.1 summaries notable characteristics of Diba's memes, including prominent elements, expressed meanings, involved addressees, and the resultant communicative effects. Section 9.2.2 focuses on the social and ideological positioning of Diba participants as reflected in their self-generated memes. Section 9.2.3 moves to the broader socio-cultural context of China and concludes its relations with Diba's memes.



### 9.2.1 Notable characteristics of Diba's memes

*a. What representational elements and formal properties are commonly involved?*

Image elements included in Diba's memes fall into eight categories, as listed below:

(1) Objects that are widely acknowledged as political signs representing group identities and involved in territorial and sovereignty disputes. While passports only appear in memes transmitted during the 2016 expedition, other symbolic objects, such as national or regional flags and emblems as well as administrative or geographical maps, are consistently used in all expeditions to present specific areas, claim China's territorial integrity, and oppose pro-independence or pro-democracy advocacy.

(2) Constitutional monarchs and individuals who work as political leaders, political activists, diplomats, legislative council members, police officers, soldiers, journalists, and so on. These elements highlight social structures where identity and status are defined based on socioeconomic stratification, patterned power relations, and norms of behaviour. They are also involved in Diba's memes to advocate political policies proposed by the Chinese government, highlight China's military strength, and support the nation-state in front of geopolitical tension or foreign pressures.

(3) Celebrities and fictional characters recontextualised from various subcultures, including anime, movies, TV series, entertainment shows, and fandoms. In addition to lend a sense of entertaining playfulness, the relevant memes play important role in showcasing the innovative incorporation of popular cultural and subcultural elements in online political communication.

(4) Cartoon characters recontextualised from algorithmic recommendations into mundane objects. Appearing in all expeditions, this type of elements not only works as technical products informing the role played by meme generators in Diba's meme production but also illustrates the templated formats that Chinese internet users deploy to create memetic artefacts during their daily online communication.

(5) Objects and sceneries connoting cultural identities in certain situations, such as regional cuisines, historical sites, and landscapes. Rather than repeating this type of elements across years, Diba's memes mainly involve them during the 2016 expedition and target pro-independence Taiwanese. This practice helps demonstrate Diba participants' national pride evoked by the cultural power of mainland China and justify their anti-independence stance by highlight cultural similarities shared across the Taiwan Strait.

(6) Emojis conveying emotive messages or substituting the verb "love" in Diba's patriotic slogan, such as "I ❤️ CHINA" and "I ❤️ HK".

(7) Logos indexing digital platforms, media, and institutions involved in the production and transmission of Diba's memes. This type of elements was found in all expeditions, demonstrating the diversity of sources from which Diba participants selected and appropriated suitable semiotic resources for constructing their political memes.

(8) Cartoon characters originally created by meme producers were primarily used to facilitate more flexible practices of meaning-making, allowing Diba participants to convey pro-government assertions and ridicule opponents.

In terms of formal properties, image elements of the above categories are manipulated in two key aspects. Firstly, their visual styles shift between four types: photographic, realistic, filtered, and cartoonish. These styles are inherent in the recontextualised elements, recommended by meme generators, or deliberately selected during the creation of original elements. Each style serves specific representational priorities and creates a distinct visual impression, such as generating a sense of playfulness or emphasising the perceived violence of the depicted pro-democracy protesters. Secondly, these image elements involve various types of shots, intentionally highlighting different parts of the represented objects or scenes and affecting viewers' perception. The choice of shot type was made either by individuals who produced the image elements in other contexts or by Diba participants who created the original elements during the Diba Expedition. In some cases, meme producers selected the type of shot when capturing a desired portion from a digital image displayed on the screen.

Written texts included in Diba's memes are characterised by multilingualism. Chinese and English are the most frequently used languages, with instances of Swedish identified in a few memes. Chinese texts typically involve either simplified or traditional Chinese characters. Moreover, acting as a variety of Chinese, written Cantonese occasionally appears in memes addressing Hong Kong-related issues.

In terms of other formal properties, meme producers primarily focused on two resources: typeface and colour. Typefaces used in Diba's memes can be classified into three categories, ranging from modern to the traditional styles: (1) impact and 黑体 (*heiti*) typefaces are ubiquitously seen, as they are likely recommended by meme generators as default options; (2) handwritten typefaces mimic the style of hand-drawn text to generate visual impressions of casualness and cuteness; (3) script typefaces enable the imitation of calligraphy. This imitation emphasises the cultural connotations derived from the historical development and past uses of calligraphy. Apart from colours like black and white, which distinguish written texts from other overlapping elements, red, green, yellow, and blue generally work as symbolic colours.

Depending on the relevant communicative situations, they represent different countries, regimes, and political parties or camps. Despite these identified colours being mainly used as semiotic resources of writing, they also feature in backgrounds highlighting some written texts and their expressed meanings.

*b. What meanings are primarily expressed?*

Over the four years, Diba participants used their self-generated memes to convey a range of meanings, which can be summarised into the following six groups.

(1) Distilling complex political issues and simplifying multifaceted conflicts into binary oppositions. This kind of meaning is explicit in Diba's recruiting materials and posters, which present all expeditions as battles between government supporters and pro-independence or pro-democracy individuals as opponents. Also, this tendency can be ubiquitously seen in Diba's memes, where values of polarisation and hegemony underpin the construction of symbolic meanings. Relevant memes not only amplify simplistic narratives but also ensure that meme viewers interpret the involved political struggles through a lens of clear moral or ideological opposition.

(2) Mimicking the utterances of the targeted individuals, mocking their behaviours, ridiculing their appearances, and criticising their political positions. By adopting traditional Chinese, English, Swedish, and localised expressions that the targeted individuals may use in their daily communication, Diba participants weaponise ridicules to diminish the social and political standing of the targets.

(3) Disparaging relevant countries and regions while emphasising mainland China's economic achievements, military strengths, and soft power in a condescending tone. The emphasis mainly involves the mainland's rapid economic development, advanced military capabilities, and increasing global influence. This dual strategy not only shows Diba participants' condescending attitude when positioning other countries and regions but also fosters national pride among Diba participants by presenting China as a superior global actor.

(4) Expressing support for policies advocated by different Chinese administrations, showing approval of the government's approach to political issues, and demonstrating identification with China's socialist ideological values. Through visual representations and written supports, Diba participants consistently convey admiration in all expeditions for the government's strategies, portraying them as rational, effective, and aligned with the national interest. Relevant memes often reinforce Diba's identification with China's socialist ideology, framing it as a unifying force that binds Diba participants to a collective political identity.

(5) Motivating, demanding and even threatening the targeted individuals to adopt pro-Beijing or pro-government positions on issues related to China's territorial and sovereignty integrity. The assertive and sometimes coercive tone is particularly notable in memes transmitted during the 2016, 2017, and 2018 expeditions. The conveyed messages often emphasise the non-negotiable nature of issues such as territorial integrity and national sovereignty, revealing Diba participants' commitment to defending the nation-state.

(6) Depicting the Diba Expedition as a heroic activity and rallying more like-minded participants. This depiction helps portray the expeditions as noble and necessary, and relevant memes function as a call to action, encouraging others to join the collective activities and reinforcing Diba participants' belief in the legitimacy of their efforts.

*c. Apart from the targeted individuals and institutions, are there other potential addressees?*

Before each expedition, recruiting posters or information were disseminated across platforms to indicate the targeted individuals and institutions (see section 4.1.3 for the full list). However, Diba participants employed multimodal and multilingual memes to reach a larger population of addressees. This population does not simply include viewers who can understand the multilingual texts presented in Diba's memes. It also comprises a select group of potential audiences who can successfully interpret the "esoterically constructed signs" (Kress, 1993, p. 179) embedded in these memes.

These audiences are aware of the multiple layers of intricate symbolism and capable of identifying the semiotic resources' provenance associated with China's internet hotspots, popular subcultures, historical legacy issues, government policies, and foreign relations. Depending on their specialised knowledge acquired through past social experiences, potential audiences in the select group can decipher Diba participants' interests of sign-making and understand the obscure messages to varying degrees. Some are informed viewers, decoding Diba's memes based on their familiarity with the necessary background. Others are culturally literate viewers who have broader understanding of how the layered meanings are constructed before being incorporated into Diba's memes. For example, in addition to recognising the provenance of a fictional character related to Japanese anime culture, they are also knowledgeable about its past uses in China's popular culture and the meaning potential shaped during the process of transfer-and-transformation. Stressing the adaptability of Diba's memes, this type of potential audience is more likely to uncover the hidden messages built on Diba participants' life experiences of witnessing ideological clashes and engaging with diverse subcultures.

*d. What effects are generated to different groups of meme viewers?*

The level of semiotic opacity and the required efforts to decode the layered meanings are the two key factors influencing the communicative effects of Diba's memes. Depending on meme viewers' language proficiency, political positions, cultural backgrounds, and familiarity with the involved subcultures, Diba's memes have the potential to generate communicative effects in the following four aspects.

(1) All viewers can occasionally fail to obtain useful information from Diba's memes. This situation primarily appeared during the 2016 expedition to Taiwan, where a few memes were circulated virally across platforms and continuously resized. The visual blurriness prevents meme viewers from extracting any valuable messages. However, this blurriness can make the conveyed information exclusive to Diba participants, who may achieve a sense of self-satisfaction and involvement through the in-group messages and copy-and-paste dissemination.

(2) Multilingual texts make Diba participants' mix of political commentary and offensive mockery accessible to a broader audience. By reiterating pro-Beijing or pro-government slogans in Chinese and English, Diba's memes manifest a very general sense of patriotic love in every expedition. This manifestation is amplified by multilingual critiques, attracting speakers of Chinese, English, or Swedish and affecting their understanding of relevant political disputes. In addition to political commentary, Diba's memes make fun of the targeted individuals and demean dissidents through ridicule, humiliation, and threat in multiple languages. This political mockery allows Diba participants to attack targeted individuals coming from different language backgrounds. Furthermore, it highlights the offensive and nationalist nature of the Diba Expedition, which can easily provoke resentment and antipathy among both domestic and foreign potential viewers.

(3) For viewers who identify with the political and cultural identities depicted in Diba's memes, they may resonate with Diba participants' portrayal of China as a nation-state and cultural community. Politically, this resonance is based on a collective endorsement of the Chinese ruling party's ideological values and government policies that increased China's national strength. Culturally, this resonance features the long-lasting and deeply rooted idea of valuing Chinese culture as a superior civilisation (Harrison, 1969). On the one hand, the aroused resonance reflects an enhancement of national identification. On the other hand, it translates Diba's political position into replicable opinions, linking Diba's memes in terms of content and motivating like-minded viewers to promote Diba's group interests of sign/meaning making.

(4) For viewers who can recognise the subcultural symbols in Diba's memes, they may feel a strong connection with the encoded messages. This sense of connection can be strengthened as they decode more layers of meaning. The richer and nuanced references can attract potential meme viewers who appreciate relevant subcultures and intrigue them to participate in the Diba Expedition. By using symbols like Ah-zhong or panda men and recontextualising tactics from Jinjiang romance and *moe* anthropomorphism, this type of meme viewers and users can infuse their personal experiences with relevant subcultures to construct individual narratives of nationalism and demonstrate emotional attachment to China. These individual interests provide a solid foundation upon which complex subcultural symbols are utilised to generate a sense of community, foster group solidarity among these individuals, and motivate them through non-political interests. Although Diba's memes may exclude viewers who cannot identify these subcultural symbols, the high level of semiotic opacity can produce certain positive effects, such as innovatively adding a sense of playfulness to the online political confrontation and reducing the aggressiveness of the Diba Expedition.

### **9.2.2 Indications of Diba participants' political positions**

*a. How Diba's memes indicate Diba participants' relations with the targeted individuals and institutions?*

Excluding the Hong Kong police involved in the 2019 expedition, other individuals and institutions were targeted by Diba participants as anti-Beijing or anti-government forces.

In memes depicting the Hong Kong police, Diba participants repeat supportive slogans, symbolic colours, and photographs of police enforcement scenes to indicate their pro-police or pro-government position. When communicating with targeted individuals who reject China's territorial claims and articulated anti-China remarks, Diba participants consistently deploy memes to indicate hostile and adversarial relationships through four ways:

(1) They draw extensively on China's ancient history, traditional culture, international treaties, and government documents to educate the targeted individuals and defend claims of territorial integrity.

(2) They recall China's historical sufferings and modern successes to accuse target individuals of being traitors.

(3) They question intentions behind anti-China and anti-government advocacy to criticise target individuals as disrespectful and hypocritical opportunists.

(4) The explicitly produce a sense of authoritarian paternalistic superiority through specific words, such as “爸爸 (*baba*, daddy)” and “王 (*wang*, king)”.

*b. How Diba’s memes indicate Diba participants’ relations with China’s central government?*

Diba’s memes generally portray Diba participants as patriots who love and protect China as a nation-state. Nevertheless, this depiction does not accurately reflect their self-positioning in relation to China’s central government.

Diba’s memes indicate this government-citizen relationship in four facets:

(1) The recurring logos and watermarks signal that China’s official media and social media accounts of some government organisations are related to Diba participants’ practice of sign-making as semiotic provenance.

(2) By consistently and metaphorically echoing territorial claims, Diba participants position themselves as defenders advocating for the government’s views on national sovereignty and regional issues.

(3) The photographic representations of China’s economic and military advancements repeatedly signify Diba participant’s self-positioning as proponents who are pleased with relevant policies proposed by the CCP-led government and feel proud of the resultant achievements.

(4) By referring to China’s previous socialist campaigns, reproducing propaganda posters, questioning Western democracies’ liberal values, and depicting contemporary diplomats, Diba participants position themselves as followers of China’s socialist values and imitators of the ruling party’s recent diplomatic styles.

*c. How Diba’s memes indicate Diba participants’ and China’s position within the international situation of each expedition?*

From 2016 to 2019, the Diba Expedition were conducted within a constantly changing international environment. During this period, China dealt with intensified regional issues involving Taiwan and Hong Kong. Meanwhile, it navigated shifts in foreign relations with Nordic countries and the US. Through the following two ways, Diba’s mems reflect Diba participants’ self-positioning as Chinese citizens and their understanding of China’s role as a member within the dynamic global society.

(1) They represent China's UN membership, administrative divisions, and agreements in historical joint announcements to underscore the recognition of its international status as a sovereignty nation, uniting Taiwan and Hong Kong as subordinate regions. These representations also justify Diba participants' self-perception as compatriots of Taiwanese and Hong Kongers. Additionally, Diba's memes further affirm these positionings by recontextualising supportive online posts and offline remarks from certain countries as evidence, such as Sweden and Norway.

(2) They construct visual metaphors to illustrate China's tough position amid its trade war with the US and troubled economic cooperations with Nordic countries. This approach is replicated when ridiculing European countries grappling with the growing refugee issue and positioning China as a wise guardian protecting its citizens from external chaos.

### **9.2.3 Relations between Diba's memes and China's socio-cultural context**

As products of Diba participants' sign-making practices, some semiotic elements in Diba's memes are closely tied to mainstream Chinese values, such as gender stereotypes, collectivism, and Han-centricism. In the following six ways, these elements also reflect the life experience of Diba participants, who are predominantly Chinese youths born after 1990 and have benefited from China's rapid development over recent decades.

(1) Multilingual texts in Diba's memes illustrate the linguistic practices of China's young generation. On the one hand, Chinese and English are the primary languages to disseminate information to a broader and more diverse audience online. Although traditional Chinese, Cantonese, and Swedish also appear, a few notable typos suggest that these texts are more indicative of machine-aided communication rather than everyday linguistic practices. On the other hand, dialects and slangs not only link Diba's memes to China's regional cultures but also to localised popular culture. For instance, the phonetic pinyin abbreviation "ww" recontextualises Japan's *moe* culture and conveys a sense of cuteness in depicting Taiwanese people.

(2) The recontextualised meme templates, logos, and watermarks in Diba's memes provide a snapshot of China's internet landscape. Originating from Chinese meme generators as algorithmic recommendations, the templates featuring panda men, celebrities' faces, and various written texts reflect a transformation from everyday online conversations among Chinese internet users to the political communication employed by Diba participants. Moreover, the frequent appearance of news application logos highlights the commentary roles



that China's official media activity play in political disputes. The automatically attached watermarks manifest the policies of domestic social media platforms regarding content originality and the traceability of cross-platform transmission.

(3) Criticisms expressed in Diba's memes stress certain taboo remarks and ideas that are controversial or unacceptable in mainland China. Beyond political topics related to China's territorial claims, Diba participants view ridicules of China's historical cultures as racist and perceive questions about the purchasing power of Chinese people as a denial of China's economic achievements.

(4) Diba participants' strategic priority and focus of meaning-making represent an act of self-censorship. This self-censorship is driven by a collective awareness of sensitive topics and influenced by their previous experiences with China's online censorship and platform regulations.

(5) While helping form and reinforce group identities, the subcultural references in Diba's memes demonstrate the diversity of China's cultural landscape. These references create intertextual connections between Diba's political memes and elements from Chinese TV drama, Japanese ACG, Korean idol, and Western movie industries. They also offer an overview of China's contemporary cultural environment, which has become increasingly diverse since the implementation of the Open Door Policy as a fundamental national policy in 1992 and exposure to global cultural products.

(6) Diba's memes reflect the mainstream and entrenched perspectives on the cross-strait relations, Hong Kong-mainland relations, and China's foreign relations with Western countries. This habitual way of thinking has formulated and developed over time within China's socio-cultural context, where historical humiliation has been institutionalised as collective memory and national confidence has surged alongside modern China's fast development.

### **9.3 Main findings**

This section consists of three interrelated parts, summarising the main findings of this thesis while engaging with the relevant literature reviewed in Chapter 2. Section 9.3.1 concludes the emotions expressed in Diba's memes and underscore messages that extend beyond collective emotions. Section 9.3.2 sums up Diba participants' sign- and meaning-making practices across various communicative situations. Finally, section 9.3.3 recaps different national sentiments conveyed through Diba's memes.

### **9.3.1 Diba's memes as expressions of emotion, political commentary, and cultural identity**

Although previous analyses of Chinese internet memes (Jiang and Vásquez, 2019; Ying and Blommaert, 2020) focus on their emotive function in online conversations, meme studies in Anglophone contexts particularly stress the innovative use of internet memes for public commentary (Milner, 2013). These two perspectives are especially relevant to memes produced and circulated during the Diba Expedition, a collective online activity organised to present attitudinal reactions and express pro-government opinions.

In terms of expressed emotions, findings of playful attitudes and affection for the country echo past studies (Guo and Yang, 2019; Z. Wang, 2019) that highlighted the entertaining aspect of Diba's memes and the collective love for China as a motherland. Additionally, the qualitative analysis in this thesis showed that aggressive and offensive emotions are equally predominant. These emotions differ from the playfulness of ridiculing targeted individuals in a joking, teasing, or light-hearted manner. They are demonstrated not simply through a lecturing tone and the emphasis on China's hegemony in various fields. The aggressiveness derives from Diba participants' forceful and confrontational attempts to draw on ancient history, political agreements, government assertions, and even death threats to dominate narratives concerning China's territorial integrity. Meanwhile, the offensiveness is manifested in the recurrent acts of humiliating targeted individuals by insulting their cultural backgrounds and attacking their personal appearances. Beyond playfulness and affection for the country, collective hostility and a heroic intention to overpower opponents in political disputes played a crucial role in uniting Diba participants.

The complex of emotions features Diba's memes at a relatively superficial level. These self-generated memes carry deeper implications by presenting Diba participants' subjective comments on relevant political issues and mirroring the group interests that underpin their pro-government stance.

In terms of public commentary, findings of multimodal justifications resonate with Guo and Yang's (2019) observation that Diba's memes construct political opinions through tactics of metaphor and reasoning. However, these findings also challenge their claim that Diba's memes primarily rely on image elements for ridicule, while written texts are used to construct metaphorical expressions and justify pro-government opinions. Although Diba's memes deploy linguistic analogies to emphasise the paternalistic authority of state power, the extensive recontextualisation of image elements plays a more significant role in constructing commentary metaphors and analogies. By transferring certain elements, such as signages, fictional characters, and medicinal herbs, Diba participants effectively expand the selection of suitable

semiotic resources. Cultural references of these elements enable them to produce visual metaphors in a more subtle manner. This nuanced practice of sign- and meaning-making reinforce group solidarity among Diba participants, as the implied meanings may be accessible exclusively to in-group viewers.

In terms of group interests, findings regarding Diba participants' self-positioning complement existing studies (Guo and Yang, 2019; H. Li, 2019; Yang, 2019), which highlighted their upbringing background without exploring its influence on meme production. Given that most Diba participants were born in the 1990s, their condescending tone likely stems from the surge of national confidence amid China's rise in global power and the growing emphasis on Chinese characteristics. Furthermore, the cultural references ubiquitously seen in Diba's memes are closely linked to Diba participants' social experiences, including their engagement with relevant cultural communities and their active consumption of domestic and foreign cultural products within a dynamic environment. Shared life experiences within this unique period and socio-cultural environment not only determine Diba participants' collective focus on political issues but also shape their construction of political ideas.

### **9.3.2 Diba's memes as context-driven expressions of nationalism**

Chinese nationalism is often event-driven and reactive to perceived pressures or hostility from the external environment (Zhao, 2000; Wu, 2007). This characteristic has been contested in previous studies, ranging from the earliest conceptualisation of Chinese nationalism (Levenson, 1967; Harrison, 1969; Townsend, 1992) to in-depth examinations of nationalist activities in various historical situations (Zheng, 1993; Zhao, 1998; Liu, 2010; Schneider, 2018a). These features also define the Diba Expedition and Diba's self-generated memes. In addition to political symbols representing China and templated image complexes, other semiotic resources included in Diba's memes are not always consistent throughout the four years of expeditions. Rather, Diba participants' practices of sign-making are dynamic and strategically responsive to distinct situations. Depending on issues triggering each round of expedition and trending events at that time, Diba participants' focuses and strategies for meme communication vary to a certain degree.

(1) The variation can be illustrated by formal properties, such as symbolic colours representing targeted individuals and institutions during different expeditions. In 2018, blue and yellow replaced green to represent Sweden. These two symbolic colours were reused in

2019, with their meaning potential extended to visually underscore the opposition between Hong Kong's pro-democracy camp and the pro-Beijing or pro-police camp.

(2) Although Diba's memes were utilised to respond to advocacies for Taiwan and Hong Kong independence, Diba participants adjust their focus based on the distinct political statuses of these two regions. Memes produced in 2016 are rich in multimodal compositions that introduce China's national conditions, explain the complex ties between both sides of the Taiwan Strait, and justify government's territorial claim over Taiwan. In contrast, memes transmitted in 2017 and 2019 seldom elaborate on the shared origins of Hong Kong and the mainland. Instead, they focus more on stressing Hong Kong's current administrative role, negatively representing pro-democracy students or activists, and contrasting protesters with local polices.

(3) When countering perceived anti-China remarks in 2018, Diba participants' sign-making practices became increasingly sophisticated. Dissecting these remarks into specific points, Diba's memes directly address objections related to China's territorial integrity and counter attacks on the collective image of Chinese people. For remarks concerning China's human rights issues, Diba participants adopt a more indirect approach, shifting the focus to ridicule social problems within the socio-cultural context of targeted individuals. Findings of this tactic deviation offer a deeper understanding of how Diba's memes respond to perceived foreign hostility while being constraining by domestic power dynamics.

### **9.3.3 Diba's nationalist sentiments as shaped by historical and ideological influences**

The Diba Expedition has been regarded as an example of China's technical and fandom nationalism (H. Liu, 2019a; Sun, 2020; Chen, 2023). Observations of Diba's memes circulated across platforms align with the former categorisation, and quantitative findings support the latter. It was noted that Diba participants occasionally personify China and address it as Ah-zhong (n=18). Meanwhile, the visual representation of fangirls was also identified in one meme. Despite the relatively low occurrence frequency, repetition of these elements lends support to the idea that Diba participants' national sentiments are featured by intense worship and a deep emotional attachment to an idol-like persona.

In addition to these two aspects, Diba participants' nationalist sentiments have more facets rooted in different historical stages of China. Their emphasis on traditional culture and shared language stems from the ancient identification with China as a superior cultural community. This emphasis also ties to the modern promotion of patriotism, which seeks to foster collective

pride in China's national conditions while reinforcing unity through the recollection of negative historical memories. Moreover, their objection of Western ideological values and assertive claims of territorial integrity echo the veneration of socialist ideologies and the long-standing prevalence of state nationalism. Diba participants' confidence in China's economic achievements can be traced back to the liberal policies advocated by past leaderships, while their self-perception as heroic warriors is linked to the recent combative attitude against external pressures. On the one hand, discoveries of these facets and their origins allow for a deeper understanding of the motivations behind certain representations in Diba's memes, such as cultural heritages, regional foods, metropolises, lethal weapons, and so on. On the other hand, these findings affirm the social agency of Diba participants as sign makers, whose articulation of nationalist ideas is embedded in China's socio-cultural context and reflects values popularised within Chinese society.

#### **9.4 Contributions**

This research integrates non-participant observation with corpus-assisted methods to analyse 980 multimodal memes, which were selected from a total number of 11,386 internet memes produced and circulated during the Diba Expedition over four years. Drawing on theoretical concepts from meme studies and multimodal social semiotics, I examined these memes as tool for expressing pro-government opinions. The findings provide a deeper understanding of the memes' notable characteristics, reflect on Diba participants' self-positioning, and clarify their relationship with China's socio-cultural context.

This section includes four parts, summarising the primary contribution of this research. Section 9.4.1 presents the implication resulting from shifts in analytical focus and methodological practices. Section 9.4.2 addresses the originality of the corpus data, while the final two sections recap advancements in the study of Chinese internet memes produced for political purpose and the phenomenon of the Diba Expedition.

##### **9.4.1 Analytical and methodological shifts**

Section 4.2.3 explained my attempt to follow the GeM model for data annotation. When applying its multi-layered annotation scheme to internet memes as digital artefacts, I made several modifications according to the technological aspect of meme production, perceptual features influencing meme consumption, and the unique composition of meme components. This application exemplified the model's instrumental usefulness in decomposing meme

artefacts, describing their formal properties, uncovering the basic layout structure, and exploring each components' rhetorical functions. It facilitated a detailed bottom-up investigation of multimodal integrations in Diba's memes.

Starting with a decomposition of Diba's meme, the GeM model offers a systematic description of the examined data. However, rather than delving into the context-dependent symbolism underpinning the decomposed multimodal artefacts, it focuses more on how these elements are integrated through layout structures and a set of predefined rhetorical relations. When applied to the analysis of Diba's memes, this focus on fixed generic features particularly struggled to accommodate the fluid, playful, and emergent nature of meme culture. Since the GeM model prioritise mode choice based on functionality, the findings obtained from the detailed annotation rarely provided insights into how Diba's memes leverage emotional appeals to mobilise and engage with potential viewers. More importantly, appropriating and remixing elements across texts or discourses are crucial driving force for meme production. Due to the GeM model's assumption of regularity in genres, it is not fully equipped with explicit tools to capture such innovative, flexible, and highly contextualised practices.

Given this consideration, I simplified the data annotation process. A top-down approach was adopted to shift the analytical focus from the functionality of Diba's multimodal memes to the agency of Diba participants as sign makers and the social aspects of their meme communication. This shift facilitated a contextual examination of Diba's memes as sites of ideology.

On the one hand, due to its emphasis on the ideological nature of everyday artefacts and social dimensions of their meaning potentials, the social semiotic perspective supported my analytical procedure where identifying the overarching theme and purpose of each political expedition was the first step. It also provided solid theoretical foundation underpinning the synthesis of contextual findings obtained from my non-participant observation and notable elements identified in the meme data. This synthesis enabled the embedding of qualitative analysis within the communicative situation of each expedition. On the other hand, as introduced at the beginning of Chapter 5, Chapter 6, Chapter 7, and Chapter 8, Diba's memes operated within dynamic, culturally charged communicative situation and often serve declared ideological purposes. The social semiotic approach helped highlight the nuanced aspects of meme communication, offering a deeper understanding of how underlying meanings are constructed, contested, and disseminated across different situational contexts of Diba's online expeditions. Given the fluid and participatory nature of meme culture, the social semiotic definitions of provenance and meaning potential offered useful perspectives for addressing Diba participants' innovative remixing of recontextualised elements and the contextually shaped

meanings. More importantly, this approach supported the simplification of the annotation process by shifting attention away from searching for generic regularities in Diba's memes. Instead, it enabled a focused exploration of the representation meanings of individual memes and a selected number of formal features, capturing the specificity and diversity inherent in Diba's contextualised meaning-making practices.

#### **9.4.2 Original corpus data**

The Diba-meme corpus used in this research is original in the following three aspects:

First, the included data were collected during a non-participant observation of Diba's expeditions over four years. Unlike Wang's (2019) and Ng's (2021) datasets, which only contains text-only comments circulated in 2016 and all comments posted in 2019, my corpus compiles image-only comments that specifically represent a pro-government stance and relate to multiple expeditions ranging from 2016 to 2019.

Second, the structured corpus data are accompanied by Diba's posters used for promotion, mobilisation, and recruiting before the expeditions. These achieved materials provide basic contextual information for the data, including the named targets of individuals and institutions, the timing of the expeditions, and the primary ideas intended to be conveyed.

Third, the Diba-meme corpus offers a relatively holistic and fertile ground for future studies concerning the Diba Expedition and Chinese nationalist expressions within online environments. It preserves Diba's memes that addressed Hong Kong-related issues in 2017 and 2019 but became inaccessible due to government regulations and decisions made by Facebook page administrators (see section 4.4 for further elaboration). Given their focus on cross-strait tensions, Hong Kong-mainland disputes, and Sino-Swedish conflicts, the corpus data can serve as valuable resources for showcasing Chinese youths' political opinions and highlighting critical aspects of political internet memes in the Chinese context.

#### **9.4.3 Showcase of political internet memes from Chinese youths**

Through the examination of Diba's meme, this research expanded the understanding of Chinese youths' political memes in terms of included elements, expressed ideas, and relations to China's socio-cultural context. Regarding the included elements, it was revealed that modes of image and writing play a vital role in conveying meanings through purposeful visual representations, localised slang, and various formal properties, such as symbolic colours, unique visual styles, shot types, and typefaces. Concerning the expressed ideas, this research

showcased that like political memes in Anglophone contexts, the primary role of Diba's political memes is to show support for or criticism of specific political entities and ideologies. Beyond amplifying collective emotions, these memes also engage in strategic reasoning, ridicules, mockeries, and attacks. In terms of relations to China's socio-cultural context, this research clarified the connections between Diba's memes and China's dynamic cultural environment, where the young generation is exposed to subcultures from Japan and Korea. It also uncovered that Diba participants' choices of specific phrases and construction of political sign are significantly influenced by values prominent in contemporary Chinese society, such as Han-centrism, paternalism, sexism, racism, and socialism with Chinese characteristics.

#### **9.4.4 The Diba Expedition as continuous phenomenon**

Drawing on findings from the non-participant observation and the exploration of memes transmitted during different Diba expeditions, this research complements existing studies that focused solely on the first expedition in 2016 and the one in 2019. On the one hand, the non-participant observation attested to previous research and uncovered that Diba's mechanism of online mass mobilisation is consistent and recurrent over four years. Efforts in promotion, recruitment, and preparation across platforms stirred nationalist sentiments among a broader audience. These efforts also led to a large meme pool that expanded during cross-platform transmission, providing diverse resources from which Diba participants can select during different expedition. On the other hand, by emphasising the Diba Expedition as a continuous phenomenon, this research situated Diba's memes within specific moments of communication and verified that Diba participants' meaning-making practices are not static. Depending on distinct cause and communicative situation of each expedition, they utilised different semiotic resources, repositioned themselves, and adjusted the focus of meme production.

#### **9.5 Limitations and future studies**

Limitations of this research can be summarised into three points: the exclusion of certain memes from the corpus, the reuse of memes beyond the Diba Expedition, and the comparison of memes transmitted across different expeditions.

First, the Diba-meme corpus only includes memes that have duplicates within the dataset of 11,386 collected data. Since Diba participants typically circulated their memes in a copy-and-paste manner, this decision was made to focus on representative memes that were recognised as suitable resources by at least two meme users. Although these excluded memes are not



prominent in terms of repetition rate, they may offer additional insights into the political opinions and preferences of Diba participants, highlighting their roles as meme producers rather than mere users copying existing memes. Moreover, while Chapter 5 discussed the meme exchanges between Diba participants and supporters of Taiwan independence, the Diba-meme corpus excludes memes that represent an anti-Beijing stance. It will be interesting to compare the meaning-making practices of both sides, further exploring their differences and similarities in terms of included elements, expressed ideas, self-positioning, and their relations with cross-strait tensions.

Second, during the non-participant observation, it was found that some of Diba's memes were reused by China's official media in communicative situations beyond the Diba Expedition. This type of replication is not explored in this research, as the primary focus is on Diba participants' use of political memes within the expeditions. Nevertheless, the official media's act of recontextualisation not only underscores the domestic impact of the Diba Expedition but also raises important questions: Did Diba's memes provide the authorities with examples of effectively mobilising Chinese youths and promoting pro-government ideas? When the official media reused Diba's memes, which types were preferred? Beyond directly copying Diba's memes, did they also imitate Diba participants' sign-making practices and apply their tactics in producing original propaganda materials.

Third, although this research utilised frequency findings to support the qualitative analysis, it did not systematically compare memes transmitted across different expeditions using statistic results. Quantitative findings are solely deployed to highlight notable elements that can be explored in depth alongside relevant contextual information. However, it will be valuable to investigate how certain semiotic resources are used diachronically across different expedition and to assess their generalisability with statistic supports.

## Appendix A. XML annotation files

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  <unit id="u-NL2019081703.03" alt="a screenshot of Nathan Law's Facebook post"/>
  <unit id="u-NL2019081703.04" alt="an airplane"/>
  <unit id="u-NL2019081703.05" alt="Nathan Law carries a bag and holds a mobile
phone"/>
  <unit id="u-NL2019081703.06" alt="the lower part of a smiling emoji"/>
  <unit id="u-NL2019081703.07" alt="Sina Weibo"/>
  <unit id="u-NL2019081703.08">傻仔去罷課</unit>
  <unit id="u-NL2019081703.09">我先去上課</unit>
  <unit id="u-NL2019081703.10">全港最精明消費者 羅冠聰</unit>
  <unit id="u-NL2019081703.11">@東方網
</unit>
</gemBase>

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    <layout-unit id="lay-NL2019081703.02" xref="u-NL2019081703.02" alt="speech
bubble"/>
    <layout-unit id="lay-NL2019081703.03" xref="u-NL2019081703.03" alt="a screenshot
of Nathan Law's Facebook post"/>
    <layout-unit id="lay-NL2019081703.04" xref="u-NL2019081703.04" alt="an
airplane"/>
    <layout-unit id="lay-NL2019081703.05" xref="u-NL2019081703.05" alt="Nathan Law
carries a bag and holds a mobile phone"/>
    <layout-unit id="lay-NL2019081703.06" xref="u-NL2019081703.06" alt="the lower
part of a smiling emoji"/>
    <layout-unit id="lay-NL2019081703.07" xref="u-NL2019081703.07" alt=" Sina Weibo
"/>
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</layout-unit>
    <layout-unit id="lay-NL2019081703.09" xref="u-NL2019081703.09">我先去上課
</layout-unit>
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費者 羅冠聰</layout-unit>

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  <graphics xref="lay-NL2019081703.05" imtype="photo" shotype="medium" />
  <graphics xref="lay-NL2019081703.06" imtype=" cartoon " shotype="close_up" />
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public place"/>
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    <segment id="s-NL2019081703.03" xref="u-NL2019081703.03" alt="a screenshot of
Nathan Law's Facebook post"/>
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    <segment id="s-NL2019081703.05" xref="u-NL2019081703.05" alt="Nathan Law
carries a bag and holds a mobile phone"/>
    <segment id="s-NL2019081703.06" xref="u-NL2019081703.06" alt="the lower part of
a smiling emoji"/>
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</segment>
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羅冠聰</segment>
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<span id="span-NL2019081703.03" nucleus="s-NL2019081703.03" satellites="s-NL2019081703.02" relation="preparation"/>  
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<span id="span-NL2019081703.05" nucleus="s-NL2019081703.01" satellites="s-NL2019081703.08" relation="interpretation"/>  
<span id="span-NL2019081703.06" nucleus="span-NL2019081703.04" satellites="s-NL2019081703.09" relation="summary"/>  
<multi-span id="span-NL2019081703.07" nuclei="span-NL2019081703.05 span-NL2019081703.06" relation="contrast"/>  
<span id="span-NL2019081703.08" nucleus="s-NL2019081703.10" satellites="span-NL2019081703.07" relation="evidence"/>  
<span id="span-NL2019081703.09" nucleus="s-NL2019081703.11" satellites="span-NL2019081703.07" relation="elaboration"/>  
<span id="span-NL2019081703.10" nucleus="span-NL2019081703.08" satellites="span-NL2019081703.09" relation="elaboration"/>  
</rst-structure>  
</gemRst>

## Appendix B. Examples of simplified annotation

	NO.	Participant	Process	Circumstance	Visual style	Shot
 <p>孩子 别挣扎了 看爸爸手上拿着什么</p>	1.1	cartoon character	hold sth		cartoon	medium
	1.2	master kim	smile		filtered	close-up
	1.3	tea eggs			photo	close-up
	1.4	cnflag			cartoon	
	1.5	heart emoji			cartoon	
 <p>你们淘宝的时候 还不得乖乖地选台湾省</p>	34.1	jack ma	frown	crowd	photo	head-shoulder

	NO.	Extraction	Colour	Typeface
 <p>孩子 别挣扎了 看爸爸手上拿着什么</p>	1.1	孩子 别挣扎了,看爸爸手上拿着什么	black	default
	1.2	中国制造	red	default
	1.3	I LOVE CHINA	black	default
 <p>你们淘宝的时候 还不得乖乖地选台湾省</p>	34.1	你们淘宝的时候	black	default
	34.1	还不得乖乖地选台湾省	black	default
	34.1	made in china	orange	handwritten

## Appendix C. Ethical approval

### AHC Research Ethics University of Leeds

21 January 2022

Dear Zhe

**Title of study:** Internet memes, digital activism, and youth civic engagement in China: a multimodal corpus-based analysis of the Diba Expedition

**Ethics reference:** FAHC 21-037

I am pleased to inform you that the above research ethics application has been reviewed by AHC Committee and I can confirm a favourable ethical opinion based on the documentation received at date of this email.

Sou, [s.chung@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:s.chung@leeds.ac.uk)

Sou Sit Chung, On behalf of Professor Robert Jones (AHC REC Chair)  
Research Ethics Administrator, The Secretariat, University of Leeds, LS2 9NL

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