| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

A Socio-cultural Analysis of Carnivalesque Languages on Corruption Incidents in Chinese Digital Context

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| **ABSTRACT**

Discussion on corrupted cadres is heated in the Chinese digital context, which is categorized as being carnivalesque by the Chinese academy. However, it did not draw enough attention from English literature. Under Carnivalesque theory, this paper tends to fill the gap. The objective of this study is to explore the language production of the carnivalesque vernacular in the Chinese digital context. it collects 325 comments on Chinese social media on the expose of corruption and conducts in-depth interviews with 16 informants as attenders of the online Carnival. The results of the study revealed a landmark compilation of the hot debates on corruption in public discourses and illustrates the content and form of carnivalesque languages in a Chinese context. In content, it serves as a vehicle of a mentality of hatred for the rich behind a complexity of emotions and assists in negotiating with authoritarian censorship mechanisms through egao production. Besides, it is a complex of disengagement from and return to the compared language in reality.

1. Introduction
1.1 Background
Online carnivals in the Chinese context have received extensive attention from English literature. However, under a double burden of both difficulties of data collection due to strict censorship and linguistic barriers behind the high-context languages, few has paid attention to the content and form of carnivalesque language in the Chinese context and the presentation of its features of transgression and polyphony (Gardiner, 1993). In addition, as a hot theme in digital carnivalesque activities, the exposure of corruption has not received enough attention from the English academy either. This article attempts to fill these gaps. It explores online discourse on corruption incidents and the content and form of carnivalesque languages in the Chinese digital context. By using the qualitative method, this paper argues how the theme of hatred for the rich behind complex sentiments are generated and shared in digital carnival and how attenders form responses to the mainstream language in the quasi-separate space under authoritarian censorship via egao production.

1.2 Theories on Online Carnival and Social Media Vernacular
Carnivalized activity has a long history in the material world, the motivation of which originates in sensual confrontation against the official, serious, and hierarchical world of order where the privileged have the power to dominate the common masses who are submissive when facing authoritarian oppression and religious dogma (Ye, 2006). From medieval squares to virtual cyberspace, the Internet enhances carnival in the digital filed by applying global open access, decentralized interactive modes, and personal empowerment of the internet (Meng, 2011). In a cyberspace that is not limited by geographical striction, the dissemination of information easily occurs among attenders of distinct regions, cultures, and identities. Everyone shares the same identity: netizens.

As a response to reality, the free but virtual utopia brings the imagination of freedom and equality, reflects an inverted version of the real world, and forms a contrast. Those who live in rigid discipline and enjoy the subordinate status of others are pulled out of their status in the hierarchy, obtaining a fresh cyber identity: they either join the grassroot and become carnivalesque attenders on a cyber square or become objects of ridicule from the former (Ye, 2006).

In carnivalesque activities, the text of languages serves as a medium of symbols for communicating behaviors and symbolizing interactions (Bakhtin, 1984). The language of the wild in the carnivalesque escapes from the characteristics of written and formal language in the order world, both in form and content (Thorne, 2009, 2011; Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008; Vigmo & Lantz-Andersson, 2014). As informal combinations of words and phrases, online carnival language does not follow the requirements of formal language in terms of grammar, vocabulary, sentence pattern, etc. In terms of content, carnival language is free from the formal, official, and serious requirements of written language and is full of exaggerated, ironic, and comedic expressions of emotions. Carnival language is also a mirror that reflects the dominant style of discourse. It breaks free from rules and hierarchies and responds to the polite and official narratives of the former through unorthodox expressions such as insults and cursing. However, carnivalesque language is not only an escape from reality but also a return. In the online carnival, language is the mask and costume of inverted identities endowed by the attenders, behind which people wantonly take on different roles and make performances, satirically mimicking the serious behaviors of those in power and endowing with hilarious traits through the creative reuse of official language (Nordin & Richaud, 2014). In addition, as a linguistic toolkit, carnival language also imitates the mapping of sensual and physical contact in the material scene in the linear and cyber plane. It also releases passions and desires of a subject, which are suppressed by the seriousness and strict hierarchy in the daily routine and resonated with others in the virtual square of carnival, full of a sense of catharsis, subversion, and popularity.

The authoritarian character of carnival in the Chinese digital context is characterized by strict censorship on keyword searches to limit the presentation and dissemination of certain information (Esarey & Qiang, 2008; Polyakova & Meserole, 2019), making the cyber-square as quasi-separate space impure (Herold & Marolt, 2011), as not absolutely free and partially restricted. Thus, since the suspension of all hierarchies, privileges, norms, and prohibitions is non-explicit, attempts at collective resistance within Bakhtin's theoretical framework appear to be weak and exhausted rather than politically progressive in the Chinese digital environment (Lachmann et al., 1988; Meng, 2011). Scholars have abandoned the full retention of the politicized character of the carnival in favor of focusing on its original part, venting emotions in an ironic manner rather than a form of direct resistance, because such an activity does not set off a social movement or pose a direct threat to the Party and the state (Lagerkvist, 2015; Sonnekus, 2010). Many scholars have conceptualized egao to examine the hidden features of the carnivalesque language that represents netizens' redeployment of such censorship (Diamond, 2018; Inkster, 2010; Meng, 2011; Perry, 2007; Qiang, 2011; Tang & Bhattacharya, 2011; Tang & Yang, 2011; Wiener, 2011). As a weapon of satirical criticism (perhaps weakly), egao is a satirical wordplay with a sense of "dark humor, irony and satire, often to mock and ridicule power holders" (Guo, 2013; Nordin & Richaud, 2014). Compared to the wild vernacular, egao clearly carries a stronger subjective intention. In online culture, its the practice of puns and wordplay to simultaneously mock and evade censorship (Nordin & Richaud, 2014). However, egao is not the entirety of carnival language; direct and aggressive expression is also a faction of carnivalesque literature. In the following section, this paper also focuses on the direct expression of carnival texts as carriers of emotions and their meanings in a socio-cultural perspective, as there is little English-language literature that focuses on the complexity of Chinese as a high-context language and the interplay of diverse forms of spoofing. Currently, the English literature focuses only on its subtle resistance to the censorship on keyword. How does egao manifest itself in longer and more complex carnivalesque language, such as sentences? Most of these keywords are homonymic transformation of political events, people or even names of political movements (Nordin & Richaud, 2014). Therefore, mastering only textual analysis of keywords is far from truly management the original text base of the dominance of egao.

2. Research Method

This paper conceptualized two types of carnival languages, namely the direct expression and egao in the Chinese context. To make a theoretical extension, this paper would focus on the egao production of phrases, sentences instead of simple key words. This paper chooses the exposure of corruption cases as an entry point to study Chinese netizens' carnivalesque behavior and language online. English-language scholarship has not paid due attention to Chinese netizens' fervor over corruption cases. It is worth mentioning that the targets to be paraded and abused in the virtual carnival is always the corrupt cadres being abandoned by the government instead of the later itself (Guo, 2013). This paper examines the feelings of carnivalesque netizens towards corrupt officials and the vehicle through which they express such feelings, the language of carnival.

This paper adopts a qualitative analysis method to collect reports on corrupted officials' incidents and the netizens' comments on the incidents in social media. It firstly collects and combs reports on the corruption officials' incidents on the Internet through official mouthpieces, We media platforms, the government's webpage, and other social media. This article also collects netizens' comments on carnivalesque activities on specific corrupt officials' exposures on Zhihu, Weibo, Little Red Book, WeChat, Baidu

Forum, Tianya Forum, Sohu, and other public platforms, amounting to a total of 325 netizens' textual comments, which are mainly produced in focused discussions on social media platforms or in the comments sections of news report. However, the strict official censorship mechanism makes it difficult to organize news and comments that are made years ago. So, this paper mainly forms its analysis on recent data. Afterwards, this paper categorizes, analyzes, and decodes linguistic symbols in netizens' comments. This paper conducts in-depth semi-structured interviews with a sample of 16 netizens who posted comments as attenders of the carnival via phone conversation. The interviews cover their linguistic deployment as participants in the carnival as well as the generation of emotions. The sample in this paper does not wipe out differentiation in demographic characteristics of the disproportionately large China.

3. Digital Languages in Carnivalesque Activities
3.1 Expose of Corruption Incidents: Initiating Heated Discussion Online
The Internet amplifies the negative social impact of official corruption by exposing it to the public. Corrupt officials receive public attention and heated debates when substantial evidence (pictures, videos, audio recordings, real-name letters, texts. etc) of their acceptance of bribes, abuse of power, or extramarital affairs are posted on the Internet. This paper first summarizes the cases of Internet corruption exposures since the decades and presents them chronologically in Table 1. The expose of corrupted incidents mainly took place before 2013 (after Xi Jinping came to power, China's institutional anti-corruption measures replaced its alternatives of Internet exposure).

A case that sparked Internet media coverage and widespread discussion among netizens on all major platforms that year was the Incident of the badger game of Lei Zhengfu in 2012. A video of him having sex with a woman was intentionally exposed by criminal groups that intend to blackmail him on the Internet. He was discharged from his position because of the enormous political damage caused by public attention and was later jailed after being found guilty of taking bribes. The case of Lei was the start of a badger game on cadres to ousted them, and subsequent cases with similar scripts have even been named after it, such as the Case of six "Lei Zhengfu" In Hengyang in 2014. The case was broken by Leiyang Online Forum, in which six officials were blackmailed by a criminal syndicate after a video of their sexual relationship with a woman (deliberately surreptitiously filmed by the woman who was one of the members of the crime) broke. In the end, the officials involved were dismissed from the Party and administratively removed from their posts. Substantial evidence of inappropriate relationships between officials and women can cause huge repercussions when it festers on the Chinese Internet. Similar cases include the case of the One-husband-two-wives secretary of district committee, the Guangxi sexual photo Gate, and the Diary gate of the Tobacco Bureau. It is worth mentioning the latest case of a State-owned enterprise (SOE) cadre's career-ending stroll. A street photographer in the commercial center of Chengdu inadvertently took pictures of a married state-owned enterprise cadre holding hands with a young woman who also works in the company, which then set off a firestorm on major online platforms. Subsequently, the authorities investigated and dismissed the cadre for the negative social impact he caused, which is not corruption or abuse of power.

Table 1: incidents of corrupted cadres and online discussion

Name of incidents	Involved cadres	Year	Result
Director of high price tobacco	Zhou Jiugeng	2008	Imprisonment
One-husband-two-wives secretary of district committee	Dong Feng	2008	Imprisonment
Diary gate of Tobacco Bureau	Han Feng	2010	Imprisonment
Incident of badger game of Lei Zhengfu	Lei Zhengfu	2012	Imprisonment
The housing girl Zhai Jiahui	Zhai Zhenfeng	2012	Imprisonment
Guangzhou housing uncle Cai Bin case	Cai Bin	2012	Imprisonment
Guangxi sexual photo gate	Duan Yizhong	2012	Imprisonment
The expensive watch, bro	Yang Dacai	2013	Imprisonment
Case of Six Lei Zhengfu in Hengyang	Zhao Anming and other six cadres.	2014	discharge
SOE cadre's career-ending stroll	Hu Jiyong	2023	discharge

In addition to scripts that come to light on the Internet as a result of inappropriate male-female relationships, exposure to bribe-taking or abuse of power is also a common narrative. Early exposures of related cases include the case of the Director of high price tobacco. Official Zhou Jiugeng was brought to the attention of netizens for making inappropriate comments in front of the media. He was then exposed for his high spending on cigarettes, watches, and automobiles, whose incomes were not comparable to his job title. The authorities then launched an investigation, and Zhou was finally sentenced to 11 years in prison. Similar cases include a case of the expensive watch bro case (The expensive Watch Bro, who was discussed by public opinion for wearing an expensive watch at work and was eventually found to be corrupt; The housing girl Zhai Jiahui, whose father was investigated as a cadre for

having multiple properties exposed on the Internet; and case of Guangzhou housing uncle Cai Bin case. The above cases sparked a wide-ranging discussion on social media as soon as they came to light and were addressed on various platforms.

3.2 The Carnivalesque Catharsis of Emotional Gathering Behind Hate-rich Mentality

The unfolding of clues and incriminating evidence about officials' corruption involves netizens' human flesh searching and extracting information about them. The widespread and rapid dissemination of messages also unfolds in the textual activities of the Internet's carnivalesque activities (Ye, 2006). This section discusses how the symbolic language of Internet carnivalesque activities serves as a vehicle for the hateful mentality of the rich.

Carnival activities are emotional, and such emotions get resonated with others in the virtual square of the carnival. As cyberspace of an imagined utopia, the emotions of netizens towards the official corruption incidents are complex, embodied in jealousy, anger, dissatisfaction, disappointment, and confusion. As a mapping of the world of order, the emotions in the frenzy are amplified and festered in the debate on the gap between the rich and the poor and social inequality. Based on the generalization and decoding of the data, the motivation for the fermentation of emotions can be categorized as a "hate-the-rich" scenario, which is reflected in the irrational and unconventional negative representations of keywords such as "the rich (Youqian Ren/ Furen)", "the dominate (Tongzhi Zhe/ Tongzhi Jieji)", "the powerful (Quanshi Jieceng)" and "the privileged (Tequan Jieceng)" in the data. The hatred of the rich can be interpreted specifically as hostility to the high consumption level of officials and the illicit sources of their wealth, as the combination of the two counteracts the legitimacy of the hierarchy of the existing order. The rhetoric of the wealth-hatred episode is often expressed in carnivalesque linguistic form and content. There is a great deal of name-calling, sarcasm, and cursing. Abuse of the appearance and behavior of the officials involved is a common phenomenon in literate production. For example, a comment discussing Lei Zhengfu on a social media platform said, "There are people who want to get laid with a man like him with a pig's face and a pig's body, so it's no wonder he's a rich man." There are tons of similar comments about Lei Zhengfu in forums. Lei Zhengfu's looks are considered ugly in Internet comments. The comment involved an insult to Lei Zhengfu's looks and an analogy to a pig, which is synonymous with ugly-looking animals in the Chinese context. In addition, curses appeared frequently in comments on incidents of corruption and bribery by corrupt officials: "Corrupt dogs (Tanwu Gou)/ raiding people's fat (Sougua Minzhi Mingao)/ The corrupted should die and so did there all families! (Fubai Guanyuan Siquanjia)/ bad luck for eight lifetimes (Dao Babeizi Mei)." Expletives that are not recognized by mainstream representations also appear frequently, such as direct insults like "dog (Zougou) /bastard (Hundan)/asshole (Hunzhang)." Another is a way to use carnivalesque language as a parody of physical contact in the material world, simulating scenes of corrupt officials' inappropriate sexual behavior through the verb: "All he knew is to insert, insert, and insert all day with his beauty." In virtual carnival, attenders simulate behaviors in the physical world through their vivid and informal deployment of verbs, which are used to construct virtual stage scenes as an essential part of the carnivalesque performance.

These languages exemplify the deviation of carnivalesque language from the language of reality, which serves as a vehicle of outward sentiments with means of direct expressions. Carnival rhetoric is the vehicle and tangible manifestation of the hatred of the rich. Hatred of the rich could be observed prominently among the participants and was characterized by a range of negative emotions. Such hatred of the rich is fueled by improper sources of income. Besides, emotional expressions offer netizens the possibility to form and strengthen a common identity. The same emotional flow is generated in the discussion of the incident of the corrupt officials, and such emotional flow makes the participants develop a feeling of a collective hatred of the rich in the carnival; people perform on the virtual stage, display the symbols of the carnival language in the interaction, and strengthen the identity of oneself as a participant of the carnival as well as a holder of the viewpoints. As in an interview with a netizen:

> Informant: I feel great joy and a sense of belonging. I get a lot of likes and approval from many netizens for a casual insult to a corrupt official online. In real life, I would be called vulgar and rude, so I had to hide it.

Netizens from all over the country broke through the geo-restrictions and gathered in the virtual square of cyberspace to speak their minds. People disguise themselves as anonymous netizens to participate in the grand carnival ceremony, in which they share their common negative emotions of anger, dissatisfaction, disappointment and confusion and try to focus, amplify, and demonstrate against corrupt officials in cyberspace through words. The shared discontent and the underlying hatred of the rich make them share a sense of collective belonging and strengthen their identity. In real life, the repressed emotions of dissatisfaction and anger towards corrupt officials are fully released on the Internet.

3.3 Recreation and Reuse of Mainstream Language

Carnival behavior attempts a weak criticism against authoritarian order. The finding of this paper discusses the language of carnival in China's digital context as a weapon of satirical criticism in terms of the seriousness of its authoritarian propaganda, the de-politicized playfulness of its archaic features, the deconstruction in the language of satire, and the circumvention of its strict censorship. The censorship of the Chinese Internet is considered too strict, and its locking of various keywords leads to the

restriction of netizens' free speech expression. To circumvent censorship, netizens strategically use expressions that imply cryptic symbols (which can only be understood by the participants in the discussion and some viewers) to avoid censorship and to express their own intentions, whether politicized or apolitical. This paper focuses on one of these strategies, egao, which, based on our interview data, can be referred to as reusing the positive in a negative sense or an Ironic repetition of positive mainstream discourse. Netizens try to deploy positive speech to express the non-mainstream ideology or obscure message hidden behind it, which needs to be decoded by the viewer's specific socio-cultural context.

When discussing corruption incidents, the deconstruction and reuse of official language used to promote their ideology and of words that have a positive connotation in the Chinese context has become a two-fold way to avoid political censorship and to express their views in a witty manner. For example, a comment on the woman involved in the SOE cadre's career-ending stroll incident, who had an inappropriate sexual relationship with an official, described the woman in question as "a female celebrity (mingyuan) with an establishment of state-owned enterprises (Guoqi Bianzhi)." The woman was a former established employee of a state-owned enterprise. In this comment, the formalized word establishment of SOE describes the type of employment relationship the woman has with the company, i.e., her personal information is entered into the establishment committee's files, and the employee serves as a regular staff member of all levels and types of agencies, institutions, and some special institutions under the jurisdiction of the state. Mingyuan, which originally meant a young woman born into a privileged class family, was later used pejoratively in the Internet context as a proxy for prostitutes. This comment combines mainstream positive words and is deconstructed by the viewer in the carnival context as a veiled satire on the woman's status as a woman with a good social status and a stable job but who has become a common target of the Internet's crusade because of her inappropriate relationships with men and women. In addition, speech that is not on the blacklist of keywords is able to evade authoritarian censorship mechanisms tactfully and strategically. According to our interviews with the informant:

> Informant: I consider such comments to be wise. Everyone knows what a female celebrity with an establishment of state-owned enterprises means - a prostitute who can get a steady paycheck. Comments like this don't get restricted or censored from viewing, either. I've noticed before that a lot of outright insults and taunts have disappeared, which should be a credit to the censorship.

Other comments involve the deconstruction of serious language and the avoidance of authoritarian censorship, and these remarks need to be analyzed in the socio-cultural context of the Chinese Internet. An example is the deconstruction of the identity of corrupt officials as leaders (Lingdao). Leader, or Lingdao, is a serious identity construction in the Chinese context, representing an individual's privileged social status, economic wealth, and political power. Quotations used in mainstream language to encourage, praise and glorify leadership and its deeds are used in the carnival to satirize and parody its corruption and other violations of morality and law, e.g., "The leader has the best eye for hiring", "No wonder the leaders are so busy, they are cultivating the passion for work of their female comrades", and "No wonder the leaders are so busy, they are cultivating the passion for work of their female comrades", and "No wonder the leaders are so busy, they are cultivating the passion for work of their female comrades. and "Everyone do their own work, and do not pry into the affairs of the leaders". According to an interview with an informant as a viewer of the above comments:

> These words are very ironic. Leaders are good at employing people and are teased for being good at digging up women as concubines; leaders are busy with their official duties and are teased for spending time in illicit relationships with female subordinates. Doing one's job well means not prying into the private life of the leader or beware of being removed from office.

The above statements continue the behavior and approach of the mainstream discourse in the carnival context, retaining the original words of praise for the image of the leader as "busy with official duties, good at exploiting the strengths of subordinates' positions, and authoritative in the hierarchy", but giving it a completely different meaning in the carnival context. The carnivalesque language of the Chinese context hides its true attributes under authoritarian scrutiny in a covert, high-context mode. A carnivalesque parody of the corrupt official's subordinate staff status, quoting and improving on his mainstream serious language represents a mask, a performance of identity and a parade of his leader's bad deeds, designed to tear down the hypocrisy of the serious propaganda and expose its hidden signs of ugliness.

4. Conclusion and Discussion
Taking the exposure of corruption cases as an entry point, this paper explores the theme of carnivalesque activity in China's digital field, which is the carnivalesque presentation of the hatred for the rich mentality in public discourse. By taking carnivalesque language as its vehicle, this theme also becomes the source and motivation for the dissemination and sharing of carnivalesque sentiments on social media. In addition to the production of direct carnivalesque language, such as curses, insults, or virtual parodies of physical contact in the material world, non-direct carnivalesque language can also be an ironic parody and repetition and reappropriation of real language. In other words, this paper conceptualizes two types of carnival language in the Chinese

context, which are detachment from and return to real language. The direct informal expression and the implicit reuse together constitute the two parts of carnival language, which suggests that carnival language is a mirror independent of the real world and that it also reflects the content of the reality.

With netizens' heated debates over the exposure of corrupt officials as an analytical focus, this paper explores the gap left by previous research on the linguistic content and form of egao in the Chinese electronic sphere, as well as the themes hidden behind the complex emotions of egao activities. Previous articles have conceptualized the notion of egao, which has been used to analyze Chinese netizens' use of homophones of keywords as a strategic deployment to evade the authoritarian censorship mechanisms of the Chinese Internet. This paper expands the study of the word source pool of egao to include key phrases and sentences in addition to keywords and provide empirical data as evidence. This paper argues that egao, as part of carnivalesque language, takes the form of not just a redeployment of keywords but also a reinterpretation and use of the vocabulary and syntax of the dominant language.

The politically progressive nature of online carnival has been the subject of scholarly scrutiny. The deployment of egao reflects netizens' avoidance and protest against authoritarian censorship rather than direct conflict, and the target of their offense is also corrupt officials as criminals rather than the government since no transfer of netizens' discontent from the incident into a critique of the governing paradigm is reflected in the interview data. Besides, the spurning of the corrupt is highly consistent and largely overlaps with the Communist Party's concept and implementation of governance. Since President Xi Jinping came to power in 2013, the anti-corruption storm on the mainland has continued unabated for more than a decade. Such findings provide new perspectives as well as challenges for the study of Internet carnivalesque activities in China. Its status as an activity strictly subject to authoritarian scrutiny is surprisingly characterized as a non-institutional anti-corruption political activity (Guo, 2013). As a start, this paper focused on analyzing the textual content of carnival literature because it is through a full understanding of its texts that a discussion of its political significance can be made meaningful.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.
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