

From Digital Satire to Feminist Counterpublic Discourse

A Study of Participatory Mashups in China during the COVID-19 Pandemic

FAN XIAO AND YUE HUANG

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged the effectiveness of China's state apparatus and accumulated social discontent in the first half of 2020. Aided by a creative adaptation of a popular music video, a group of Chinese feminists initiated a short-term movement on the Chinese Internet in protest of the propaganda campaign of the Communist Youth League of China. The debut of two anime characters (Jiangshanjiao and Hongqiman) amid the pandemic stirred up strong grievances which led to an online feminist movement. Utilizing mashup videos, the movement, though ephemera, delivered a powerful counter-public discourse of women's sufferings, which resonated widely in the digital sphere. Adopting a cultural perspective of Internet memes, this study closely examined the metamorphosis of a music video from an apolitical fanatic tool to sarcastic "*guichu*" mashups and eventually a powerful feminist counter-public discourse. Findings from this study suggest the strong potential of participatory mashups in the articulation of counter-public narratives from grassroots Internet users.

Keywords: participatory mashup, Internet meme, digital activism, feminist movement, counter-public discourse

On Feb 17, 2020, the Communist Youth League of China (CYL), the youth branch of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), introduced two anthropomorphic mascots on Weibo. The two virtual characters, look like in their twenties, were called Hongqiman (红旗漫, male) and Jiangshanjiao (江山娇, female). At the end of this post, CYL put a link to a newly established Weibo account for the two mascots and called upon followers to send their support to these two “idols of the League” (团属偶像). However, this propaganda targeting the younger generation soon backfired—comments flooded in, interrogating the two virtual “idols,” especially the female character, Jiangshanjiao. People left comments on the only post of their official account, asking questions such as, “*Jiangshanjiao*, do you have periods?” ““*Jiangshanjiao*, can you do as good as boys in high school?” These questions covered a wide range of gender discriminations, such as job discrimination, sexual harassment, and menstruation shame. The comment section became a field of furious expressions and a temporary space for online protest.

The official account of Jiangshanjiao and Hongqiman was cleared hours after CYL’s official introduction, mocked by some as “the most short-live virtual characters.”¹ On February 21, a mashup video (“Jiangshanjiao X Chuchuwen”) was posted on Weibo. The video adopted a meme song, “Chuchuwen,” and went viral on social media, attracting over seventy-five thousand reposts and more than seven thousand comments on Weibo. The publication of the “Jiangshanjiao X Chuchuwen” mashup symbolized the climax of a feminist movement in the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic. The movement was coordinated with several collective actions, including donations of sanitary products to female workers in hospitals, the “kidnapping” of Jiangshanjiao’s comments area, and the publication of the mashup video. These grassroots actions derived from a public disappointment about

1. Li Yiqin, “Coronavirus Weakens China’s Powerful Propaganda Machine,” *New York Times*, February 26, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/26/business/china-coronavirus-propaganda.html>.

Chinese officials' harsh treatment of female medical workers, who were not provided enough sanitary pads and were forced to shave their hair before work. The mashup video not only served as an outlet for complaints but also as an outcry of long-standing gender inequality experienced by Chinese women. On February 27, the video was censored and removed by Weibo.

While "Jiangshanjiao X Chuchuwen" successfully amalgamated public resentment for temporary activism, it remains controversial whether the participatory mashup has the critical potential for satire and subversive interventions.² Adopting a cultural approach to Internet memes,³ this study examines the memetic transformation of the mashup protocol used in the "Jiangshanjiao X Chuchuwen" mashup. Going beyond a dichotomous understanding of critical potential, this study argues the need to analyze participatory mashups as fluid and multifaceted. Strategies are needed to politicize popular mashups for the goal of progressive advocacy. This study also contributes to a move forward the Western-centric focus on the studies of Internet memes, demonstrating the use of Internet memes for counter-public articulation in an authoritarian context.

Participatory Mashups, Intertextuality, and Digital Satire

Mashups are the creation of new media objects by accumulatively and selectively remixing media resources. It is a process of participatory media production where media consumers become producers to generate new meaning from existing media pieces or even create a whole new story line.⁴

2. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822378419>.

3. Limor Shifman, "Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 18, no. 3 (2013): 362–77. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12013>.

4. Stefan Sonvilla-Weiss, ed., "Introduction: Mashups, Remix Practices and the Recombination of Existing Digital Content," in *Mashup Cultures* (Vienna: Springer, 2010), 8–23.

In the digital age, widespread personal computers and amateur media editing software provide Internet “producers” (a combination of “producer” and “user”) with unprecedented opportunities to generate media products for their personal goals.⁵ The flourishing of mashups and other reappropriation techniques challenged the hegemony of professional media institutions. It was deemed a “constructive rupture . . . that shows possibilities for new forms of cultural production.”⁶

Mashups have their roots in musical remixes, where hip-hop DJs select and remix famous songs into new albums. With the advent of personal computers and the Internet, mashups have become a common practice of various media forms and constitute a significant part of the sampling culture.⁷ What is prominent in this process is that it is a creation with a clear awareness of previously existing materials. While extending or transforming the original soundtrack, music mashups are relative to the materials they reference. Mashups facilitate a recontextualization of the original content, potentially broadening the audience of cultural work. In early studies of television shows, scholars found that cross-referencing creates a sense of community and enriches the content of TV programs without extra investment.⁸ However, critics of media intertextuality dismiss such practices for discouraging originality and creating “an ever-increasing, but less diverse, verbal and visual landscape.”⁹ According to Fredrick Jameson, cross-referencing media as “heaps of fragments” contrasts it with modernist parodies and criticizes

5. Axel Bruns, “Distributed Creativity: Filesharing and Producersage,” in *Mashup Cultures*, 24–37.

6. Eduardo Navas, “Regressive and Reflexive Mashups in Sampling Culture,” in *Mashup Cultures*, 157–77.

7. Navas, *Regressive and Reflexive Mashups in Sampling Culture*, 157–77.

8. Lillian Boxman-Shabtai, “The Practice of Parodying: YouTube as a Hybrid Field of Cultural Production,” *Media, Culture & Society* 41, no. 1 (2019): 3–20, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443718772180>; Angela McRobbie, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

9. McRobbie, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*.

popular remixed content as an indulgence in consumerism with the inability to erect critical thinking and aspirations for social change.¹⁰

Debates about media intertextuality are further animated by the tension between the critical potential of participatory culture to challenge mainstream discourse¹¹ and the exploitation of user-generated content for commercial value.¹² Boxman-Shabtai found that the position-taking of producers influences the tone of digital parodies.¹³ In her study of YouTube parodies, she differentiates content creators into two types: aspiring parodists who saw YouTube as a place for creative experiments and enjoyed expressing themselves through parodies and strategic parodists who used parodies to attract new viewers and thus displayed less satire and more respect to the materials they imitated. To further explicate the critical potential of cross-referencing media, Navas proposes two types of mashups: regressive mashups versus reflexive mashups. Regressive mashups are simple remixes of two or more cultural products, such as songs, films, or scenes of dramas, while reflexive mashups are more familiar with Web 2.0 techniques and are characterized by challenges to the “spectacular aura” in the original work and “claims of autonomy even when it carries the name of the original.”¹⁴ His argument highlights the multifaceted nature of mashups and the importance of subversive intentions in the process of remixing. On the one hand, mashups share traditional visual editing skills such as montage or collage in their reliance on juxtaposition and sequencing to convey meaning or evoke emotions. On the other hand, mashups draw from diverse origins to generate fresh insights, making them particularly adept at engaging a wider audience and contributing to forming a new culture.

10. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 25.

11. Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

12. Brooke Erin Duffy, (Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017).

13. Boxman-Shabtai, “The Practice of Parodying,” 3–20.

14. Navas, *Regressive and Reflexive Mashups in Sampling Culture*, 157–77.

The critical potential of mashups involves an active negotiation with the ideology of original materials and specific cultural acumen of creative storytelling to engage with the intended audience. Previous studies of digital intertextuality mainly focused on Western contexts and platforms (e.g., YouTube, 4chan, Reddit). Moreover, research is still being conducted on combining digital intertextuality and political satire. As the current study will show, the employment of satirical expressions in mashup videos provides significant room for political expressions and memetic spreading.

China has a long history of using parody and political satire in expressions of social discontent.¹⁵ In the early 2000s, parodic videos started to boom on the Chinese Internet. Online publics remixed various online resources to generate grassroots story lines of social issues. These videos were sometimes coined *egao* (恶搞) by early scholars of Chinese Internet culture.¹⁶ *Egao*'s videos were not necessarily political, but humor and irony are elements that must be included. A famous example is a mashup video by Hu Ge. In Hu's *egao* video, he crosscut the movie *The Promise* (无极), which is directed by the famous blockbuster director Chen Kaige, with a Chinese crime show, *China Crime Report* (中国法治报道). The film was deconstructed and ridiculed as "a murder caused by a steam bun" (一个馒头引发的血案). In the thirty-minute *egao* video, Hu Ge made fun of the sloppy plots of Chen's movie and the awkward insertion of foreign actors in Chinese epic fantasy. This video challenged the authority of Chen Kaige and the Chinese movie industry with an absurd remaking of the film. Though Chen threatened to take legal action, Hu's video received broad support from online communities and spurred a flood of imitations, which marked

15. Xiaoli Ding, "Freedom and Political Humor: Their Social Meaning in Contemporary China," in *Humour in Chinese Life and Culture: Resistance and Control in Modern Times*, ed. Jocelyn Chey and Jessica Milner Davis (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), 231–53.

16. Haomin Gong and Xiaoling Yang, "Digitized Parody: The Politics of *Egao* in Contemporary China," *China Information* 24, no. 1 (2010): 3–26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0920203X09350249>; Christopher Rea, "Spoofing (*é*gao) Culture on the Chinese Internet," in *Humour in Chinese Life and Culture*, 149–72.

a significant development of Internet satire in China.¹⁷ Pioneering in the transformation of serious criticism into humorous digital satires, egao represents a form of participatory parody bred in the specific sociopolitical environment of China.

Articulating Counter-Public Discourses

Following the above debates and early studies of user-generated parodies in China, this study aims to examine the critical potential of participatory mashups in articulating counter-public discourses. The conceptualization of a counter-public sphere was proposed by feminist scholars to reevaluate and renew Habermas's conceptualization of the public sphere.¹⁸ In his work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas envisioned a bourgeois deliberation sphere critical to maintaining democratic societies. In the public sphere, people's class and other sociocultural attributes should be rendered invisible, and rationality is the only criterion for winning a debate about the common good.¹⁹ However, this idealization of the public is widely criticized for failing to acknowledge the deeply rooted inequality of opportunity to participate in the public sphere and the exclusion of female and nonwhite populations in the bourgeois public.²⁰ Fraser argued that instead of one all-compassing public sphere facilitating deliberations, multiple public spheres promote participatory parity in society.²¹ She defined counter-public spheres as "parallel discursive arenas where members of

17. Gong and Yang, *Digitized Parody*, 3–26.

18. Robert Asen and Daniel C. Brouwer, eds., *Counterpublics and the State* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

19. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, translated by Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence, 10th ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

20. Rea, *Spoofing (égao) Culture on the Chinese Internet*, 149–72.

21. Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 56, <https://doi.org/10.2307/466240>.

subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs,”

Not only are more diverse participants in public deliberation included, but the rise of counter-public spheres also introduces a more inclusive vocabulary. A striking example is the feminist movement in the United States during the late 1990s. New words and phrases such as “sexism,” “the double shift,” and “acquaintance rape” were invented to describe a social reality that women are suppressed and to visualize the unequal power relations in dominant discourses. Counter-publics bring new perspectives to public discourses in the hope of a reconfiguration of power. To feminist counter publics, this reformulation of public discourses may be achieved by public discussions about sexual harassment, domestic violence, and other issues that are imperative to gender equality but are deemed “private.” Following the Foucauldian tradition of power analysis, Fraser pointed out that the division of private and public is actually a practice of exclusion, where gender issues and interests were personalized and/or familiarized for the power structure to suppress and marginalize women.²²

The popularity of social media has dramatically accelerated the breakdown of this suppressive division between public and private discussions. On the one hand, social media encourages users to be active on social media by sharing mundane, daily life experiences with personal networks. On the other hand, the large population of social media users attracts media outlets and administrative institutions to join this wave of rigorous information exchanges. On social media, media and government agencies, which are thought of as traditional authorities, have to compete with a person’s friends and acquaintances to win one’s attention and affection. The decentralized feature of social media sometimes brought ruptures to official discourses. Jackson and Welles studied a grassroots movement that hijacked the Twitter hashtag #myNYPD. This hashtag was originally a public relations campaign of the New York City Police Department that called for the sharing

22. Fraser, *Rethinking the Public Sphere*, 56.

of pictures with the police in New York.²³ But the tone of this hashtag was soon twisted and politicized by a flood of pictures depicting police beating citizens, thus becoming a collective protest against police brutality. The counter-public discourse, in this case, was robust. The images tagged directly communicated a picture of police violence and the vulnerability of marginalized races (in this movement, most pictures shared were of people of color brutally treated by the police), making extensive use of effective discursive strategies in order to attract public attention.

To progress social change, counter-public discourses are not only inwardly acknowledging marginalization. Felski proposed a dual function of the (feminist) counter-public sphere.²⁴ While the counter-public sphere generates a collective identity grounded in the consciousness of community and solidarity of the marginalized group, it also seeks to validate the claim of counter-public discourses, challenging existing power structures through political movements and theoretical criticism. Against this backdrop, the politicization of participatory mashups aims to raise public awareness of marginalized women in contemporary China, which may lead to progressive social changes.

Analyzing Mashup Videos as Internet Memes

The participatory and imitative nature of mashup videos situates itself well within a broader social phenomenon of the digital age: the meme culture. The term *meme* was coined by scholars in the predigital age to describe practices of person-to-person copying or imitation of cultural items.²⁵ But this

23. Sarah J. Jackson and Brooke Foucault Welles, "Hijacking #myNYPD: Social Media Dissent and Networked Counterpublics," *Journal of Communication* 65 (2015): 932–52, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12185>.

24. Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

25. Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, new ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

term was revitalized by scholars of Internet culture who were interested in the swift diffusion of ideas in the digital age, which is sometimes called *Internet virality* by other researchers.²⁶ Following Shifman's inclusive approach,²⁷ this paper defined Internet memes as "units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process."²⁸

Internet memes are digital vernaculars that networked participants socially construct. As a kind of social discourse, reading Internet memes is more flexible. Popular memes went through evolutions in terms of both usages and interpretations. Shifman provided a useful framework to analyze how memes evolve by looking at three dimensions of memes: *content*, *form*, and *stance*.²⁹ *Content* refers to the "text" of a meme, the theme manifested by a meme, and the cultural ideas incorporated. *Form* refers to how a meme is composited, including the editing techniques of photos or videos. *Stance* is a more complex concept, including memes' participation structure (audience), keying (tone), and communicative functions. In the process of meme diffusion, one or two of these characteristics of memes may be distorted or reappropriated to convey new meanings, sometimes subversive to the previous one.

However mundane and trivial at first glance, creating and circulating Internet memes are cultural practices inscribed with existing cultural values and norms. In their analysis of online satire, Yang and Jiang argued that online satire is not only a form of verbal resistance but a networked

26. Jean Burgess, "All Your Chocolate Rain Are Belonging to Us?' Viral Video, YouTube and the Dynamics of Participatory Culture," in *Art in the Global Present*, ed. Nikos Papastergiadis and Victoria Lynn (Sydney: University of Technology, Sydney, 2014), 86–96, <https://doi.org/10.5130/978-0-9872369-9-9.e>; Kate Miltner, "'There's No Place for Lulz on LOLCats': The Role of Genre, Gender, and Group Identity in the Interpretation and Enjoyment of an Internet Meme," *First Monday* 19, no. 8 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v19i8.5391>; Shifman, *Memes in a Digital World*, 362–77.

27. Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014).

28. Shifman, *Memes in a Digital World*, 362–77.

29. Shifman, *Memes in a Digital World*, 362–77; Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*.

cultural expression that serves the ritual function of Chinese netizens. Sharing political satires can be an act of relationship-building, in which friends and families are invited to laugh together.³⁰ In their study of serial memetic responses to an LGBTQ+ theme video “It Gets Better,” Gal, Shifman, and Kampf found the video has become a public sphere where community members selectively include or exclude features of the original video in their imitations to negotiate their perceived LGBTQ+ values,³¹ thus coconstructing an LGBTQ+ collective identity. Scholars traced how cultural values and norms were negotiated in digital spaces by investigating how the content, form, and stance of memes evolved through diffusion.

Taking Shifman’s cultural perspective of memes and the three-dimensional model, this study attempts to discover the evolution of a popular mashup protocol in the Chinese Internet: Chuchuwen. By deconstructing the transformation of popular cultural pieces, this study examines the strategies by which an Internet meme was transformed and politicized. The subversiveness of participatory culture is recalibrated through this process. The conditions that facilitated or constrained feminist protest are also discussed.

A Popular Mashup Protocol: The Chuchuwen Archive

“Chuchuwen” (处处吻, literally meaning “kiss everywhere”) was a song originally sung by the Hongkongese signer Miriam Yeung (杨千嬅). First published in 2004, the song was revitalized in late 2019 and early 2020,

30. Guobin Yang and Min Jiang, “The Networked Practice of Online Political Satire in China: Between Ritual and Resistance,” *International Communication Gazette* 77, no. 3 (2015): 215–31, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1748048514568757>.

31. Noa Gal, Limor Shifman, and Zohar Kampf, “‘It Gets Better’: Internet Memes and the Construction of Collective Identity,” *New Media & Society* 18, no. 8 (2016): 1698–1714, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814568784>.

mainly on Bilibili (<https://www.bilibili.com>), a subcultural streaming website famous for Chinese youth. The song was transformed into a device of memetic mashup, in which the song was remixed with different visual materials to create new music videos. These videos usually include the term “chuchuwen” in their title, with varied ways of editing and different themes. The song used in the videos could be a covered version with rewritten lyrics, but the rhythm needs to be kept intact to be recognized as a “Chuchuwen” mashup. Through this process, “Chuchuwen” became a popular “mashup protocol” (剪辑模板) on the Chinese Internet and started to take on a new life.

This study was conducted from January to April 2020, following the popularization of the Chuchuwen protocol and the temporary social media activism triggered by the publication of Jiangshanjiao. The first author is a veteran Bilibili user and self-identified as a straight female. During the viral spreading of Chuchuwen mashups, she actively participated in watching and commenting on the mashup videos. After the publication of “Jiangshanjiao X Chuchuwen” on February 21, she started to collect other Chuchuwen mashups on Bilibili. Only videos with view counts larger than three hundred thousand were added to the archive. As the goal of the study is to trace back the metamorphosis of the Chuchuwen mashup that bred the feminist remix, videos posted after February 21 were excluded. This resulted in a corpus of 116 videos for later analysis. The mashup video “Jiangshanjiao X Chuchuwen” was later removed from Weibo. A screen recording of the video was found on YouTube. This video was then downloaded by the first author and used for analysis.

To understand the context of the viral circulation of the Chuchuwen mashups, the two authors conducted analysis with continuous observation on both Bilibili and Weibo during the study period. During this period, the Chinese government extended the spring festival and discouraged citizens from outdoor activities. The quarantine led to a boom of online activities and to the circulation of mashup videos.

The Early Stage: Apolitical Appreciations of Celebrities

Among all the videos in the studied corpus, the earliest one can be traced back to 2016, when “Chuchuwen” was remixed with edited movie scenes starring Leonardo DiCaprio³² (figure 1). Concerning the content, this video contained no narrative structure but served as a pure exhibition of young DiCaprio in movies. Combining closeup clips, the face of young DiCaprio was displayed from various angles. There were also considerable kissing scenes in the video, creating a highly erotic atmosphere. No subtitle was used in this video. The theme of this video is relatively straightforward: this is a fan-made video appreciating the handsomeness and sexual attractiveness of Leonardo DiCaprio.

Regarding the form, this video was relatively high quality, made with semi-professional editing skills: the rhythm of cutting matched the song beats while the organization of scenes matched the song’s lyrics. In terms of the stance, the participation structure of this video is quite engaging. The audience was directly addressed by DiCaprio’s forward-looking scenes, in which the actor was seemingly looking at the watcher. The kissing scenes nevertheless triggered a sense of jealousy among the audience with comments such as, “Don’t kiss her, kiss me,” or, “I want to be kissed by him until I die.” The tone of this video is arguably positive and emotional. This video served several communication functions: (1) referential, oriented toward young DiCaprio and his film productions; (2) phatic, as this video created and sustained a communicative path between the uploader and other fans of DiCaprio; (3) poetic, where the aesthetic facet of the video is worth watching even if you do not belong to the fan community.

32. Minni De Dalaogong, “[Leonardo DiCaprio] Kisses Everywhere (Young Editing for My Wife),” Bilibili, accessed June 29, 2024, <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Qs41167GA?from=search&seid=14718746932982454072>.

Chuchuwen mashups in their early stages were homogeneously meant for celebrity worshipping. The content varied with their protagonists and the presence/absence of subtitles and gradually extended to include more than real-world celebrities but also virtual characters of novels or games. But generally, they followed a consistent editing style (form) with hedonistic functions (stance): to showcase the protagonist's charisma and the editors' editing skills. This Chuchuwen mashup resembled the type of *Jungian* (混剪, literal meaning "remixing") videos on Bilibili. A typical Hungarian video usually remixes cuts of different films or dramas revolving around a theme (e.g., Marvel heroes, Harry Potter, the female protagonists in costume dramas) and adds a song to the background. The titles of videos frequently contain affective terms such as "high intensity" (高燃) and "explosive" (炸裂). With simple plots and strategic scene switching, Fujian videos aim to bring

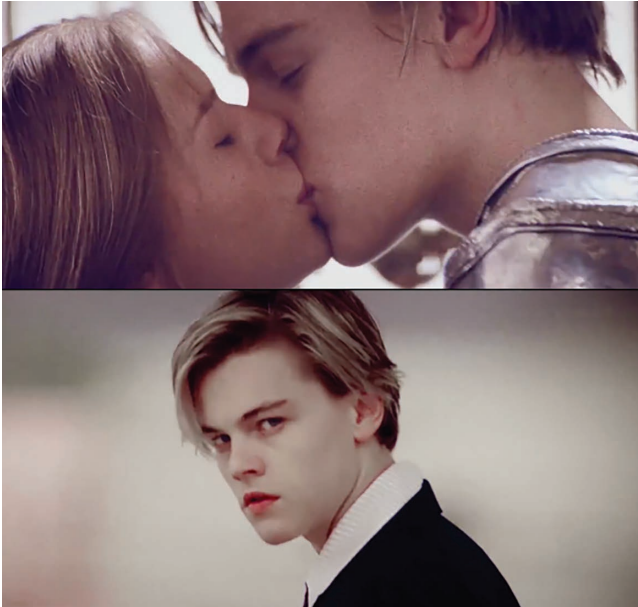


Figure 5.1 Screenshots of "Chuchuwen X DiCaprio."

Source: Screenshots by the authors.

solid affective arousal by remixing highlighted moments of cultural productions, which serve as a ritual and aesthetic device for fandom activities.

Hijacked by *Guichu*: Adding Narrative Structures

Chuchuwen mashup videos became viral in late January 2020, when the pandemic situation in China got severe, and Chinese citizens were discouraged from participating in any outdoor activities. Its virality was partly due to the appropriation of the Chuchuwen protocol by *guichu* (鬼畜) producers on Bilibili. Originating from Japanese anime culture with reference to brutal or demonic characters, *guichu* (“kichiku” in Japanese) in China has been developed into a unique aesthetic of video mashups in ACG (anime, comic, game) subculture. With signature characteristics such as autotuned songs, witty wordplays, and blunt absurd sequencing, *guichu* enjoyed high popularity in Chinese ACG communities. On Bilibili, the most prominent hub of the *guichu* subculture, producers draw inspiration from social media influencers, politicians, and even celebrity entrepreneurs as sources of their mashup inspirations. *Guichu* mashup prioritizes the “brainwashing” effects of video editing and satire on public figures. Producers deliver humorous and entertaining content by quickly repeating materials mixed with catchy tunes. Sometimes, the satire is made counterintuitive and absurd, creating a grotesque effect that triggers affective responses from the viewers.

Compared to early stage Chuchuwen mashups, the memetic remixing of Chuchuwen by the *guichu* community was characterized by clear narrative structures and more sophisticated story lines. Chuchuwen became a narrative vehicle for storytelling, significantly improving this mashup protocol’s usability. Given the public sentiment during the pandemic, it was not surprising that this mashup became viral on the Internet.

In the corpus of our study, there are two types of *guichu*-edited Chuchuwen videos. The first type of Chuchuwen imitations followed the original mashup logic, which featured a specific celebrity in the video. An example

of this type is a video of Donald Trump.³³ The video told a story from the first-person perspective, with Trump passionately narrating himself being a patriotic Chinese spy who was born in the Sichuan province of China. The apparent absurdity of a then US president being a Chinese spy created an ironic atmosphere with rewritten lyrics such as, “I was hysteria in the face but clam in my heart and I covered myself in service of my homeland” and, “My heart belongs to the [Chinese] party, the country, and the citizens.” A Chinese national flag was photoshopped into a heart shape and attached to a photo of Trump talking in front of the American national flag, exaggerating the sarcastic feeling of this mashup.

The satirical portrayal of Donald Trump appropriated a famous conspiracy about him. Though with the slogan “Making America Great Again,” his controversial domestic policies and bold speeches on international relationships led people to speculate that he was strategically ruining the country. This was interpreted by the Chinese Internet users as Trump being “pro-China” and his name was mocked as Chuan Jianguo (川建国, a combination of the Chinese terms “Trump” and “building up the country”). Though a widespread story, it was more of a mockery than truth. This video, together with the Chuan Jianguo conspiracy, deprived Trump of any serious political discussions and demoted him to a funny figure with goofy behaviors.

With a radical alternation of content, this type of guichu video requires semi-professional editing skills, especially for the employment of Vocaloid soundtracks. In terms of stance, this type of guichu video with a sole protagonist was often ironic and funny. This tone of communication provided opportunities for producers to express their discontent with the protagonist in a witty way. At the time when the video was published, the then American president was intensifying his harsh policies against China with an aim to win a second presidential election. Echoing the political tension between

33. Kala Xiaoke Jin, “[Trump] Kiss Everywhere,” Bilibili, accessed June 29, 2024, https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV187411W7av/?spm_id_from=333.788.videocard.2&vd_source=b33762b478773b791767aeea1fe42dba.

the United States and China, the Chuan Jianguo satire served as a conduit for the Chinese guichu community's nationalistic expressions. Young Chinese fans sometimes participate in collective worshipping of their country and through fandom activities.³⁴ Scholars argue that fandom nationalism is gaining popularity among Chinese youth.³⁵ The Trump mashup constituted an example of fandom nationalism. By transforming a hostile political figure into a clumsy spy, it narrated the nationalistic ideology of the producer in the idolization of China.

While the first type constructed their story lines around the respective protagonists and employed mashup cuttings to read against them, the second type was marked by a need for more protagonists in their narrative structures. In these videos, narrative structures were centered around social issues such as COVID-19, censorship, or online learning. A prominent example of this type is video roasting online piracy.³⁶ In this video, Chu-chuwen's lyrics were rewritten into a story of an immoral wolf stealing videos from Bilibili and sending them to another streaming platform without the producers' authorization. This video also encouraged other producers to defend their copyrights to "kill" this stealing wolf.

About the form, this video was amateurish compared with the videos mentioned previously. The visual part was made by combining screenshots and simple hand drawings. Lyrics were displayed. Although the first type of guichu videos also had rewritten lyrics shown as subtitles, the exhibition of lyrics constituted the central part of this video's visual elements. This

34. Xuan Liao, Angela Zhenyu Koo, and Hernando Rojas, "Fandom Nationalism in China: The Effects of Idol Adoration and Online Fan Community Engagement," *Chinese Journal of Communication* 15, no. 4 (2022): 558–81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2022.2088587>; Yuchen Zhang, Shaojing Huang, and Chuanli Chen, "Idolizing the Nation: Chinese Fandom Nationalism through the Fangirl Expedition," *Chinese Journal of Communication* 16, no. 1 (2022): 53–72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2022.2108861>.

35. Zhang, Huang, and Chen, "Idolizing the Nation," 53–72.

36. Xiaoxiong Chunyilang, "Stealing everywhere," Bilibili, accessed June 29, 2024, https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1x74115773/?from=search&seid=18339484379160661063&cvd_source=b33762b478773b791767aeaa1fe42dba.

type of video was more like an autoplaying storybook, where the story unfolded page by page (in the video scene by scene) with obvious transitions between scenes.

A prominent feature of this type of videos is the clear narrative stances of the producers. The absence of a protagonist made it important for these videos to connect with their audience through shared experiences. Thus, the rewritten lyrics were made to articulate the everyday life experiences of the community while the target community may be varied. The keying of this video about online piracy is obviously an angry one, depicting the Internet pirate as a wolf and video producers as shepherds. While not all videos in this category delivered an explicitly angry key, the use of it is a unique practice that only appeared in videos of this collection. A possible explanation may be the theme of videos. Videos in this category were mainly about social issues closely related to the whole community. Unlike celebrities or political figures, to which only specific communities would pay attention, pandemic disease, online piracy, and online learning are everyday experiences of netizens. The angry tone of communication carried the function of connecting the emotions of producers with their audience.

Another unique feature of this type of Chuchuwen was its conative function. As in the video about online piracy, a target was hit by using the Chinese word “right protection.” The producer made this video hoping to create a call for action against Internet pirates. This feature also appeared in other Chuchuwen videos related to social issues. In this sense, the Chuchuwen mashup was reappropriated into moral discourses promoting certain behaviors in the community.

The capture of Chuchuwen by guichu-style mashup videos had derived from the ordinary usage of celebrity worshipping. By adding diverse narrative structures to the rigid frame of a popular song, participatory mashup practitioners creatively veered toward an apolitical meme for their own goals, be it nationalistic political satire or advocations for specific moral behaviors. This process of memetic diffusion is far from a united movement. However, various readings were attached to the memetic symbol of Chuchuwen by

negotiating the meaning of the video. As suggested by Shifman, this process of meme diffusion is a construction of social discourses in which “different memetic variants represent diverse voices and perspectives,”³⁷ resulting in a polyvocal public sphere.³⁸ In the next section, the politicized version of Chuchuwen³⁹ is closely examined to reveal a feminist counter-public discourse, which seems to be the most radical alteration among all derivatives.

Radicalized the Meme: Feminist Counter-Public Discourses

To politicize the popular mashup, the original trinity (content, form, stance) of Chuchuwen was altered in a vast range. The form of this politicized version is quite simple, with only subtitles of lyrics and words of questions displayed one by one, which was easy to compose with video editing software such as iMovie or Premier. The amateur nature of this video showed that this alteration needs to be planned. The aesthetic aspect is not a primary concern in this video.

Regarding the content, instead of creating a personal story centered around the official virtual idol Jiangshanjiao, this radical mashup of “Chuchuwen X Jiangshanjiao” was written as a letter to the protagonist (figure 2). The narrative structure is loose and not as coherent as in the earlier-mentioned Trump video, but more like a sharing of women’s suffering. Jiangshanjiao was directly addressed in this sharing as the one who may experience these difficulties. The lyrics are concerned with several controversial topics in

37. Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, 8.

38. Ryan Milner, “Pop Polyvocality: Internet Memes, Public Participation, and the Occupy Wall Street Movement,” *International Journal of Communication* 7 (2013): 2357–90.

39. The original video posted on Weibo was censored and removed. A reproduced video was used for a screenshot. Yufei Kou, “江山娇版处处吻” [Jiangshanjiao version kisses everywhere], YouTube, March 19, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RoU0cZFdvww>.



Figure 5.2 Cover photo of “Jiangshanjiao X Chuchuwen.”

Source: Screenshots by the authors.

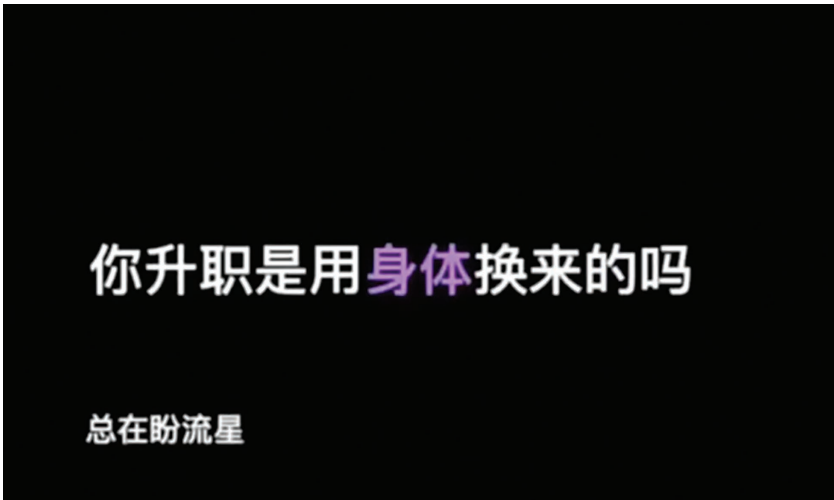


Figure 5.3 A Screenshot of Jiangshanjiao X Chuchuwen.

Source: Screenshots by the authors.

China. For example, in the first corpus, the marital issues of women with a high education profile:

Jiangshanjiao, you are so attractive,
But you are still the one being picked up during blind dates,
Master or PhD degree doesn't make you proud,
Cause it would be hard for you to find a husband.

This narration exposed a significant disempowerment of women in the mainstream discourse, in which women were being “picked up” as passive commodities sitting on the shelf.

Another example concerned a widely discussed social issue: sexual harassment:

There are thousands and millions of people,
Have to hold their cellphone tightly while walking at night,
The most fearful thing is ‘movie adapted from real-life criminal case’,
Only a long skirt can make you safe.

Since the MeToo movement began in China in 2018, the issue of women suffering from sexual harassment has become a highly controversial topic. While more and more sexual misconduct of celebrities—professors in renowned universities, cultural celebrities, famous lawyers, etc.—were exposed through social media, there are voices from mainstream discourses that practiced victim-blaming, accusing women of wearing short skirts and walking outdoors late at night. These discourses generally ignored or downplayed the criminal element of harassment and put the responsibility on women to protect themselves. This step disempowered women by evading the need for lawmaking and alleviating the accusations toward perpetrators. Along with these two verses, questions appeared in the comments of Jiangshanjiao's official account, which were displayed one by one, including, “Do you have periods? Are you ashamed about that?” or, “Are you giving out your body in exchange for a job promotion?” (figure 3). These questions epitomize gender stereotypes against women. For example, period shaming

refers to the hesitancy of women to talk about their menstrual periods in public and the public shaming of women who are on their period (usually experienced by teenage women). Sex in exchange for a job promotion is a widespread gender stereotype used to demean women's professional achievements and sexualize their career presence. By strategically mocking the dominant hostility toward women, this video exposed the imbalanced power relationship between male-dominant stereotypical discourses and women's narratives in contemporary China.

The content of this video did not contain only experiential narrations but also affective expressions, which are angry and ultra-emotional in terms of keying. In the middle of the video, there is an emotional outcry from the "producer":

Why are you always so gloomy?
In this unfair situation,
Feeling like a drowning fish.
How come equal rights become a talk to yourself?
This confusing world, these indifferent people.

This part of the content is highly emotional and points directly to the equal rights movement. This direct exposure of ideological messages is rare in guichu videos, in which ideological messages were always hidden behind strategic imitations (like in the case of Trump's video). This affective discursive strategy also triggered emotional responses in the comment area. Among the four hundred and fifty most-liked comments on this video, eighty-one of them contained emotional expressions. Apart from compliments (fifty-two out of eighty-one), sadness is the most frequently revealed emotion, such as, "I was crying while watching/listening."

In terms of the communicative functions, three aspects were prominent in this video: (1) emotive, as the emotional state of the addresser is clearly exhibited in the video (anger, disappointment); (2) phatic, as this video was posted on Weibo as a continuity of the feminist movement that started from

the hijacking of Jiangshanjiao's comments area; and (3) conative, which was gradually uncovered in the third verse of the song:

There has to be someone to speak up,
Even though risking being slapped.
I guess this is a revolutionary spirit,
Even Marx would give me a thumbs-up.
Who is she, the next girl,
She or she or she or she,
Fed up with being disciplined,
Quickly get up and fight back.

From narratives of suffering to an emotional outburst mixed with anger and disappointment, the lyrics went deeper and deeper to reveal their goal. This video is a satire of the marginalization of women in mainstream society and a call to action for female solidarity and activism. This video echoed Fel-ski's dual function of feminist counter-public discourse.¹⁹ On the one hand, a counter-public sphere aims to solidify a collective identity among women grounded in the consciousness of marginalization. On the other hand, this counter-public discourse is not only inward-looking but referential toward the outer world, exposing and challenging the existing power structure where women were disempowered and excluded from public deliberations.

Comparing with other guichu videos, the altering strategies used by "Jiangshanjiao X Chuchuwen" were familiar. First is the subversive reading of the protagonist, like the Trump video, where the American president was recontextualized as a patriotic spy of China, Jiangshanjiao, as one of the idols representing the Chinese Communist Party, was reconstructed to be an ordinary Chinese girl who was not privileged and suffered a lot in her life. Second is the strategic use of shared experiences in the content of this video. In the original mashup used for celebrity appreciation, the protagonist was constructed as someone perfect, handsome, and sexually attractive, which was distant and only for admiration. By altering the content toward sharing life experiences, the distance between the text and the audience was

significantly reduced. Finally, the communicative function of the meme is altered, as in the video condemning online piracy. “Jiangshanjiao X Chuchuwen” radicalized its stance toward an activist’s position. This alteration was made possible by its affective discursive strategy. Through the channeling of outrage, a radicalized mashup served as a counter-public discourse in an attempt to attract mainstream attention, thus challenging mainstream discourses about women.¹⁸

Politicize an Internet Meme: Participatory Mashups and Their Critical Potential

Does participatory mashup culture challenge hegemonic discourses and radical expressions? This question should be answered from two aspects. Firstly, as shown by our analysis, participatory mashups, as forms of postmodern parody, can entertain the audience while sarcastically expressing discontent with digital intertextuality and cross-referencing. Secondly, participatory mashup culture prompts an appreciation of amateur work that goes beyond skillful editing and aesthetic superiority. Internet memes gain ground on the Internet for their ability to precisely, though usually indirectly, describe sophisticated emotional states and personal situations. The more democratic media production ecology provides room for expressions once marginalized in institutional discourses. Our analysis of the memetic morphosis of Chuchuwen mashups shows how mashup culture has propelled alternative public discussions by expressing frustration, prompting inquiry, and ultimately promoting the formation of a temporary, feminist counter-public sphere. This illustrates that, beyond merely collating, reusing, or entertaining, participatory mashups can wield the influence of a unified narrative structure in the expression of cultural resistance.

This study should also clarify that there is a critical potential for participatory mashup culture, but the subversiveness is not guaranteed. This point becomes crystal clear in the analysis of Chuchuwen mashups. By tracing

its originality and involvement in the online sphere, we found intentional appropriation is essential to the politicization of Chuchuwen as an Internet meme. It was first used as a mashup protocol for fandom worshipping. Later, the guichu community hijacked it and turned it into a narrative device for personal experiences and public entertainment. Only when producers started building a narrative structure with the protocol did Chuchuwen become a vehicle for resistant expressions of disappointment in lived experiences? Even among videos created by the guichu community, political dynamics can be observed in different versions of mashups. For example, the complaint about copyright infringement on the Chinese Internet, the nationalistic mockery of Donald Trump, and, eventually, the feminist outcry of gendered inequalities. Our analysis demonstrates the critical potential of participatory mashups while cautioning a purely celebratory understanding of it.

The “Jiangshanjiao X Chuchuwen” mashup showcased similarity to what Jia Tan referred to as “digital masquerading,” in which Chinese feminists strategically alter images of women’s bodies to circumvent censorship and potential legal repercussions.⁴⁰ Performing digital masquerading, “Jiangshanjiao X Chuchuwen” appropriated the virtual girl who was supposed to represent the governing force as a symbol of resistance toward hegemonic culture. This alteration went beyond the use of one’s body in Jia Tan’s case to the symbolized body of Jiangshanqiao. This approach, while circumventing censorship, also directly confronts the root cause of women’s sufferings. The video resonated with Weibo users, empowering them to collectively nurture a feminist identity and momentarily articulate an alternative feminist narrative.

The “Jiangshanjiao X Chuchuwen” mashup is poignant, not because it throws sharp questions at a virtual girl. Instead, by articulating female suffering in the way of questioning, this video turns the girl into an

40. Jia Tan, “Digital Masquerading: Feminist Media Activism in China,” *Crime, Media, Culture* 13, no. 2 (2017): 171–86, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741659017710063>.

imperfect but more actual representation of Chinese women who are gazed at, harassed, and devalued. However, as previous studies of Internet memes indicate, memetic vernacular is polyvocal with different tones and variations coexisting in the online sphere. Thus, it would be wrong to conclude that participatory media production and circulation facilitate social movements. The politicization of Chuchuwen needs editing efforts, motivation for mass circulation, and good timing. The reappropriation of political symbols by the studied mashup is stylish and nuanced, relatable to its audience, demonstrating a new possibility to counter public discourses.

Conclusion

Through an in-depth analysis of an Internet meme that went viral in China during the pandemic—the Chuchuwen mashups—this study examines the critical potential of participatory mashups in articulating counter-public discourses. The analysis shows that while a mashup protocol like Chuchuwen has the potential for political expression and online activism, the criticality needs to be actively negotiated with the producer's ideological intentions. The critical distance essential to political satire can be achieved by creatively reappropriating existing materials if the producer aims to do so. Pastiche can be disruptive and innovative in connecting with its favored audience, where the taking-over of forms and cross-referenced media resources enable the social minority to speak for themselves, to put their deviant identity at stake.¹⁰

This paper contributes to the study of digital mashups by adopting the cultural perspective of Internet memes to dissect the metamorphosis of musical videos. The analytical framework developed by Shifman proposes three coevolving components of an Internet meme: content, form, and stance.⁴¹ The three elements interact with each other in the participatory remix of cultural materials, providing opportunities for creative interventions and

41. Shifman, *Memes in a Digital World*, 362–77; Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, 8.

the formation of counter-public discourses. For example, the addition of a narrative structure to the Chuchuwen protocol by the guichu community opened a new direction of memetic mashups. The adoption of a narrative structure by feminist content creators, and the divergence from technical and aesthetic showcasing in memetic diffusion, all contributed to the birth of “Jiangshanjiao X Chuchuwen.”

The current research also contributes to studies of Internet memes by going beyond a Western-centric approach to Internet memes. Findings from the current research demonstrate the prevalent Internet memes provided a fertile ground for the expression of counter-public discourses and the forming of counter-public spheres in the authoritarian context. The Chinese guichu community, which played an essential role in facilitating the virality of the Chuchuwen mashup, though with a transnational cultural imprint of Japanese ACG subculture, prefers absurd plotlines and subtle resistance with the earlier egao culture. This demonstrates that political satire has to be studied with its cultural context. More research should be done to discover the employment of parody in the Chinese digital sphere.

Acknowledgments

We want to express our gratitude to Hong Zeng (guest editor) and the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on the manuscript.

