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To be a New Laborer, or Not:
Dagongren as an Identity-in-the-Making

By

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Abstract

Emerging as an Internet meme, the word *dagongren*, literally meaning “laborer,” has recently become popular across various online platforms in China. Coined by a local security guard in September 2020, it has been taken up by the young educated white-collar workers for self-identification in work-related topics. Based mainly on the short videos on *Douyu* platform and the posts in the online group “*Dagongren* Gathering Place” on *Douban* platform, this research follows the circulating trajectory of the meme and unpacks the language ideologies underlying the changes of meanings of this word. While previous studies on the meme culture in China primarily situate these discourses under the binary liberating/reifying framework, this study instead argues that *dagongren* signals neither a united resistance nor an outright passivity towards the status quo. Uncertain and ambiguous as it is, it constitutes a “floating signifier” through which young educated white-collar workers can foster an identity-in-the-making in the face of the “loss of the ideal self.”

Introduction

In late September 2020, a hashtag named “good morning, *dagongren*”, literally meaning “good morning, laborers,” became a trending topic on Weibo, the Chinese Twitter-like microblogging site. People of different education levels, doing different jobs, and even across disparate social strata gather under this hashtag, self-identifying as *dagongren* and sharing with each other numerous related slogans and memes. While the term *dagongren* was first coined by a local security guard on a short video platform in September 2020, this memetic discourse soon spread to various other online platforms and got picked up by

heterogeneous social groups. Particularly, many young and highly educated white-collar workers have joined the re-creation of the discourse and reappropriated the term as if it were a natural label for them. The circulation of the *dagongren* meme quickly turns into a media hype.

The seemingly self-identification with the physical laborers among these educationally advantageous white-collar workers coincides with a growing trend of “underemployment” (Feldman 1996) in China partly due to the expansion and commodification of mass higher education. The increasing mismatch between supply and demand in the labor market led to a situation where even people with more cultural and social capital do not see themselves rewarded by the education system (Brint 2001), but are suffering from employment precarity and powerful status frustration (Standing 2012). A widespread phenomenon across a wide range of countries (Feldman 1996; McKee-Ryan and Harvey 2011; Bell and Blanchflower 2013; etc.), this is especially the case for China (Bai 2006). The Chinese higher education has expanded gradually since the reform and opening up of China, and in 1998 the Ministry of Education launched the *Action Plan of Education Promotion for the 21st century*, dramatically pushing for the trend towards mass higher education (Yang 2018). Right now China’s higher education system is among one of the world’s largest higher education systems (Liu and Wang 2015), with over 7.5 million people graduating with a bachelor’s degree and 0.6 million people graduating with a master’s degree in 2019 (Chinese Ministry of Education 2020).

Based mainly on the short videos on *Douyu* platform where the *dagongren* memes first emerged, and the posts in the online group “*Dagongren* Gathering Place” on *Douban* platform, this paper aims to explore the underlying language ideologies behind the use of the *dagongren* meme by these young white-collar workers in this context of economic anxiety. Specifically, the paper will address the following questions: How have the young educated

professional workers appropriated the *dagongren* meme? How have their uses of the word changed over multiple uptakes? And what does the word “do” for them in confronting the dissatisfying labor conditions and mental sufferings at work through their ideological work in linguistic interactions? Previous studies on this meme and similar memes that have captured massive audiences in China have generally situated these discourses under the binary liberating/reifying framework, where the use of these memes ends up either challenging or reinforcing the social norms. However, drawing on theories on language ideology, performativity and intertextuality, I will show that the use of *dagongren* goes beyond the binary framework and achieves more uncertain and even contradictory effects.

The rest of the paper shall proceed as follows. First, I will lay out the theoretical framework that this study is built on, as well as the previous literature this study is challenging. Then I will provide a detailed discussion of the data and methods of this study. After this, I will follow the circulating trajectory of *dagongren*, primarily examining both the physical workers’ and the young educated white-collar workers’ uptakes of this word. While the study on the emergence of the *dagongren* meme among the physical workers’ group will basically focus on their parodic reappropriation of the historical state voices surrounding *dagong*, the study of the latter stage will advance in three steps: first, how the educated young white-collar workers subsume themselves under the category *dagongren* to index solidarity with the physical laborers; second, how they turn to reestablish differentiation from the physical laborers under the same term; and eventually, how they simultaneously refuse the incorporation of the word by the state’s uptake, in which they could have remained at a relatively advantaged position in the pre-existing social hierarchies. Through this examination, I will demonstrate that the word *dagongren*, while neither constituting a united resistance nor signaling an outright passivity towards the status quo, nevertheless allows the discursive convergence of heterogeneous individuals and fosters an identity-in-the-making to

confront their insecurity and confusion, with the potential of propelling them to “find a way out” of the conventional social institution.

Language Ideology, Intertextuality and Performativity

This research is rooted in the theoretical concept of language ideology, which is defined by Silverstein as the “sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use” (Silverstein 1979: 193). In contrast with a negative conception of “ideology” which ties it with the cultural practice for power, domination, and even distortion, we use “ideology” here more in a neutral sense, with a focus on the way they mediate meanings of language for social purposes (Geertz 1973; Woolard 1998). Language ideology can be present in various forms in linguistic practices, including in explicit metapragmatic discourses — that is, direct reflexive comments about language use — and in more implicit framing of linguistic communication (Woolard 1998). Gal and Irvine have discussed some widespread semiotic processes of linguistic ideologization: rhematization, referring to the interpretation of a contrast in indexes as a contrast of the qualities or stereotypes of the social groups indexed; fractal recursivity, referring to the projection of the comparisons onto a larger or a smaller scope; and erasure, meaning the ideological work that renders these sociolinguistic activities invisible (Gal and Irvine 2019: 19-20). All these processes change the axes of differentiation in the denotational and indexical meanings of linguistic features. Since the differentiation process is open-ended and creative (Gal and Irvine 2019: 138), the indexical meanings of linguistic features are also fluid, with different potential related meanings likely to be activated in different contexts (Eckert 2008).

While examining the naturalizing moves in linguistic practices, it is also necessary to acknowledge that linguistic features, as well as cultural frames, have social histories

(Woolard 1998). Language ideology can also be discovered in the reworking of historical voices for new meanings, as captured by Bakhtin's notion of intertextuality (Bakhtin 1981). As he argues, while a particular word can transfer from one context to another, it "does not forget its own path and cannot completely free itself from the power of these concrete contexts into which it has entered" (Bakhtin 1984: 202). Bauman and Briggs further term this process "decontextualization" and "recontextualization" (Bauman and Briggs 1990), which means that people may "take some fragment of discourse and quote it anew, making it seem to carry a meaning independent of its situation within two now distinct co(n)texts" (Silverstein & Urban 1996). As someone incorporate this feature in a new context, he is not just asserting that he belongs to a pre-ordained social category, but he is also constructing his new identity and persona (Eckert 2008). People can deliberately manipulate the intertextual relations by maximizing or minimizing the intertextual gap between the text and the previous discourse, seeking to establish different forms of authority (Bauman and Briggs 1992). The manipulation of intertextual gaps is thus inherently entangled with power relations. In this sense, the emergence of the word *dagongren* from the previous word *dagong*, as well as its subsequent reappropriations by different groups, is similar to the transformations of the word *queer* as examined by Butler (1993), or the word *tongzhi*, which, originally meaning comrade, were appropriated by activists to refer to sexual minorities, and later went through pejoration by the journalists' parodic usage (Wong 2005; Wong 2008).

Further, our study on language ideology is not just a linguistic matter, or a pure quest for the social roots of linguistic variations, but also an examination of the effect of these language ideologies in reconfiguring the reality which they purport to describe (Woolard 1998). Austin proposes the idea of "performativity" in his book *How to Do Things with Words*, in which he argues that some speech and communication has specific capacity to act, in addition to the common constative functions of language (Austin 1962). Eagleton further

advances this idea and exposes the performative nature of language ideology: while pretending as a description of the world, language ideology possesses the real efficacy of acting in and changing the material world (Eagleton 1991: 19). The connection of performativity and the formation of one's identity is also suggested by some scholars, among whom Butler famously argues that the word "queer" has the effect of interpellating the subject into being. Naming is thus a part of what contributes to the formation of one's identity, rather than vice versa. Its force derives from the reiterated invocation by different groups through which social bonds among communities are formed across time (Butler 1993). While Butler does not mention the idea of language ideology, other scholars have more explicitly expanded on how language ideology can be utilized in this process to bring certain personae into being. For example, Kira Hall's study on sex phone lines (2009) elaborates how these phone line operates uses a way of speaking associated with a specific stereotype of womanhood to "create" a Mexican *femme fatale*, and capitalizes on this manufactured identity. This study on the multiple uptakes of *dagongren* is thus situated in this theoretical tradition, with a focus on what the language ideologies underlying these changes "do" for these young educated professional workers, and how they help them foster a new identity-in-the-making in the economic anxiety.

Studies on Internet Memes in China

Besides situating the changes in uptakes of the word *dagongren* in the studies of language ideology and performativity, it is also worth noting that *dagongren* is circulated on the digital platform, where it can be seen as a meme. Memes, though coined before the advent of the Internet, now refer to "remixed, iterated messages that can be rapidly diffused by members of participatory digital culture for the purpose of satire, parody, critique, or other discursive activity" (Wiggins 2019: 11). While intertextuality and recontextualization are

inherent features of the spread of memes, they are especially characterized by “intense resemiotization, productivity, and recognizability” because they are often multimodal signs including texts, images, and even videos (Varis and Blommaert 2015). Research on internet memes has particularly focused on their efficient and creative nature in terms of large-scale communication. As many scholars commonly believe, this notable aspect of internet memes possess the potential in opening the room for the public to produce sarcasm about the political system, often in a euphemistic way, which may otherwise be viewed as unfavorable by the government (Wiggins 2019). The “small expressions” in memes can thus offer us a way to look into the “complex indexical orders underlying the language ideologies of Internet users” (Aslan and Vasquez 2018), make connections to social and political values, and also shed light on larger social structures.

Considering the heavy surveillance on China’s internet platforms, studies on the meme culture in China especially have followed this theoretical line. However, many of their arguments fall under a too simplistic binary liberating/reifying framework. That is, some scholars focus on the “resistance” aspect of Chinese meme culture, suggesting that subversive memes are a common way for netizens to avoid censorship when expressing social and political critique towards the ruling party (Wallis, 2011; Du, 2014; Mina 2014; Kow, Kow and Gui 2017), forming a networked practice of satire (Yang and Jiang 2015), promoting civic engagement and challenging the hegemonic state control and authoritarian power relations (Mina 2014; Cheong and Chen 2015). Conversely, some scholars caution against the optimism towards the liberating potential of memes, arguing that discourses around memes can also be constraining as they often enact and maintain already-established social institutions and hierarchies (Pearce and Hajizada 2014; Wiggins 2019). While state control is certainly involved (Hachigian 2002), other processes are also studied as well. For example, a study on the transformation of the meaning of *gaoji* from homosexual conduct to normalized

homosocial behaviors by straight men suggests that it does not serve to bring into attention the critical questions faced by sexual minorities, but reifies the heteronormative hierarchy (Wei 2017). In the case of the study of the discourse surrounding the *dagongren* meme, the arguments were no exception in terms of the oppositional dyadic framework. Scholars either acknowledge the potential of the circulation of *dagongren* in exposing their dissatisfaction with labor conditions (Su and Ji 2021), or pessimistically suggest that *dagongren* cannot avoid being incorporated into the mainstream culture, losing its resistance power, and reifying the existing hierarchies (Wei 2021; Chen 2021).

This study regards this binary liberating/reifying framework as insufficient in explaining the emergence and consequences of the *dagongren* discourse. For one thing, these studies have not taken into account the multiple language ideologies of those who invoke the meme, either treating them as a homogeneous group or regarding the meme as capable of acting on their own without considering the real actors behind it. For another, this dyadic explanation does not fully appreciate the open-ended nature of language uptakes, but imposes a static, fixed framework onto the understanding of this emerging phenomenon. The complex and subtle layers are ignored, so are any possible future unfoldings that might develop from the current status. This study thus wants to go beyond this binary liberating/reifying framework and examine the ever-changing indexicalities of the *dagongren* meme, as well as the uncertain, and sometimes even contradictory roles it plays in confronting the current social order.

Data and Methods

The present analysis is based on data drawn from two major sites, corresponding to the two stages of the circulation of the word *dagongren* respectively. The data on the emergence of *dagongren* is collected on *Douyu*, a Chinese video live streaming platform.

Starting up as a live streaming platform for gamers, *Douyu* has now extended its service to users from various other industries, but it still retained its overall characteristic of challenging the mainstream and elite culture. The word *dagongren* was first coined by a grassroots vlogger named Yi Chen on this platform. (On *Douyu* and other video streaming platforms, his online nickname is “*chouxiangdailanzi*.” For simplicity, I will refer to him as Chen in this study.) Chen was born in a small town in Shanxi Province and failed at the college entrance exam twice. He graduated from a vocational college in Guangdong Province and became a security guard in a factory. This study collects his eight short videos in total for analyses, along with all the comments under these short videos.

The data on the young educated white-collar workers’ reappropriation of the word *dagongren* is primarily collected in the online group “*Dagongren* Gathering Place” on *Douban*, an interest-based social networking platform. While the memes on *dagongren* were also circulated on other digital platforms, *Douban*, an online community originally intended for discussion of books and movies, is notable for having a higher percentage of well-educated young users than other platforms. The group I am studying was founded on Oct 10, 2021, and currently has 16291 group members. The discussion board in this online group is divided into five sections: a “welcoming” section, where new members write their first post to greet the old members; a “memes collection” section, where re-creation of *dagongren* memes are shared; a “daily life” and a “after work” section, where all kinds of matters on and off work are posted; and finally a “job hunting” section, where members ask advice for applying for or picking a job position. Besides the posts in this group, I will also complement my analysis with some metapragmatic comments under the hashtag “what do you think of the ‘*dagongren*’ culture?” on *Douban*, where the educated young elite’s express their own perceptions of the meanings associated with the usage of the term. These metapragmatic discourses will provide additional knowledge about their uptakes of this new word, thus

helping me better analyze its intertextual relationship with previous voices and the change of ideologies in circulation.

Although the majority of contributions in both sites are posted as seemingly independent and stand-alone posts and comments, the fact that they were posted in the same online space and that some may be inspired by prior comments suggests that they nevertheless form a relation of “intertextual dialogicality” with each other (Aslan and Vasquez 2018). It is also worth noting that in both sites, the “imagined audience” plays a crucial role in the production of these conversations. Although the exact class background of the author of each post can hardly be identified due to the limitations of both platforms, the typical “imagined audience” of each platform ensures that the process of self-expression still depends on “certain assumptions exist about who we are in relationship to memes as a cultural commodity and to each other” (Wiggins 2019: 112). Considering that Chen himself is a local security guard who has a relatively lower degree of education, many of his followers also share similar educational or vocational backgrounds, recognizing themselves as vocational college graduates, or some other physical workers. In contrast, many of the members in the online group on *Douban* self-identify as professionals working in the financial, IT, advertising, or other relatively elite industries. The circulation of *dagongren* on the two platforms thus forms the “intertextual dialogue” among different social groups.

The Emergence of *Dagongren* from Historical Voices

The new word *dagongren* is coined by combining *dagong* with the suffix *ren* (which is similar to the suffix “-er” in English), which literally means “those who are doing *dagong*,” or, “those who are selling physical labor for a living.” The word *dagong* first appeared in the 1980s when China went through a sudden marketization of labor relations. Internal migration sprung up with the process of rapid urbanization, leading to millions of migrant workers

flooding into cities, especially into the pearl river delta in China (Sun 2010). The word *dagong* was imported from Cantonese at this time, containing a capitalist flavor where labor is commodified and exchanged for wages (Pun 1999). *Dagong* workers are typically shiftless and poorly educated physical laborers, suffering from residential restriction policies (e.g. hukou system) and political differentiation (Sargeson 1999), most of whom remain in the inferior status throughout their *dagong* career. In this sense, the use of *dagongren* for self-reference by Chen, a local security guard, on the *Douyu* platform, was a natural and expected uptake of the original word.

The meme-like slogans in Chen's short videos are clearly intended as a critique of class inequality and the lack of social mobility in a number of ways. From the very beginning, Chen's use of *dagongren* establishes an axis of differentiation where those who self-identify as *dagongren* occupy the lower end, and the rich and the highly educated occupy the other. For example, in (1) below, he is drawing a clear demarcation line between *dagongren* and the rich, calling for *dagongren* not to envy the "easy life" that the rich enjoy. In (2) below, he is comparing *dagongren* with people who established their own companies, pointing out an insurmountable barrier faced by *dagongren* to achieve upward class mobility. To be noted, education, wealth and status are seen as in alignment with each other in Chen's slogans. The elite university graduates were regarded as standing at the opposite end of the axis against *dagongren* as well, as shown in (3) below.

(1) *Pengyoumen, jue de lei jiu duile! Shufu shi liugei youqianren de. Zaoan, dagongren!*
'Friends, it makes sense if you feel tired. Easy life is reserved for the rich. Good morning, *dagongren!*'

(2) *Dagongren, dagong hun, dagong yongyuan nan chengshen. Kai gongsi, fa gongzi, chizao chengwei qiaobusi.*

'Laboring people, laboring spirit, it is impossible for *dagongren* to become his own God. Open a company, pay others salaries, you will become Steve Jobs sooner or later.'

(3) *Dazhuanren, dazhuan hun, dazhuanren caishi renshangren. 985, 211 biye de jianglai doushi gei dazhuanren dagong de!*

‘We are vocational school graduates with vocational school spirits, and we are cream of the crop. Those graduating from 985 or 211 universities only end up *dagong* for us!’¹

A deeper examination of his slogans would suggest that while recounting frequently the class divide, Chen is not invoking the “subaltern voices” — the endogenous and self-ethnographic expressions from the disadvantaged *dagong* community (Sun 2010) — but is actually invoking the “state voices,” most common in the mainstream newspapers and magazines “published for, not by, migrant workers” (Florence 2007). These two kinds of voices have historically pervaded the discourses surrounding *dagong*, forming two distinct genres. While the former usually constituted a “speaking bitterness” ritual, often crying out their pain and sufferings and denouncing the cruelty of the system (Sun 2012), the latter, in contrast, often adopt a pedagogical and rationalist tone vis-a-vis *dagong* workers, aiming at cultivating “self-enterprising, self-responsible and self-developing” subjects (Qian and Guo 2019), who could accommodate themselves to the neoliberal rationale of the state (Peck 2016). The frequently recurring words associated with the two voices are different as well. Most commonly, in the “subaltern voices” the word *dagong* appeared with words and phrases like “tired,” “tough” and “bitterness.” Migrant workers usually described *dagong* as a passive choice, or simply a chance to *chuangyichuang shijie* ‘try one’s luck in the world’ (Florence 2007), with little ambition of achieving a great leap in their social status. However, in the “state voices,” *dagong* was associated with *jiaotashidi* ‘earnest and pragmatic,’ *qinfen* ‘industrious,’ *jinqi* ‘make progress’ and so forth. It was especially connected to *yuanmeng* ‘fulfilling one’s dreams,’ which emphasized the achievement not only of wealth, but also of an equal standing with other people (Florence 2007).

¹ Project 985 is a constructive project for founding world-class universities in the 21st century conducted by the government of the People’s Republic of China. In the initial phase, 9 universities were included in the project. The second phase, launched in 2004, expanded the program until it has now reached 39 universities. Project 211 is the Chinese government’s new endeavor aimed at strengthening about 100 institutions of higher education and key disciplinary areas as a national priority for the 21st century. There are 112 universities in the project 211. 985 and 211 universities thus represent the best universities in China.

In Chen's uptake of *dagongren*, the typical "speaking bitterness" ritual with words like "tough" or "tired" is nowhere to be found. Rather, in many cases Chen's voices are characterized by a hyper-ambition, a highly stimulated optimism towards success through hard work. As shown in (4) below, by urging other workers to "get up at 5 o'clock," Chen is in fact establishing himself as a "model migrant worker" and advocating for such a way of self-discipline among his followers. The admonition not to be afraid of the hard work in (1) above is also such an example of the internalization of the self-realization rationale by focusing on individual endeavor alone, without questioning any structural limitations to his access to social mobility.

(4) *Weisha zhiyou ni, haizai beiwo li. Wudian yihou mei qichuang de ren o, ni genben meiba ziji de shenghuo danghuishier! Xiangbi women ye bushi yilu ren o. Zaoan, dagongren!*
'Why are you still in bed? Those who get up later than 5 o'clock, you are not taking your life seriously! I'm sure we are not on the same page either! Good morning, *dagongren!*'

Yet this close intertextual gap with the state voices does not signal a similar positioning of language ideology. Contrary to the intuitive reasoning, it in turn serves to challenge the governmental indoctrination of the "self-enterprising, self-responsible and self-developing" rationale and thus achieves a subversive effect. To elaborate this point, we shall also examine the role of metalinguistic signs, such as tones and gestures, in framing the meanings of a linguistic practice. Chen deliberately adopts the "*dongbei* 'northeastern' accent" in his videos, which is usually indexical of the earthy but sometimes awkward Chinese northeasterners frequently depicted in sketch comedies. This *dongbei* accent thus frames his utterances as an intentional effort to bring about comical effects. Also, while Chen pretends to be serious at the beginning of his short videos, very often he could not help but end up laughing at himself in the end. These metalinguistic signs constitute an incongruity with the supposedly serious and rationalist semantic meanings of his words. Chen's *dagongren* short videos are thus an example of parody, a practice "which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice" (Dentith

2000: 9). In other words, even though Chen's words seemingly resemble the state voices, the metalinguistic signs contribute to an ambiguous or even oppositional positionality in relation to the original voices, suggesting that his appropriation is intended to distance himself from, or even "denigrate the source of that voice" (Hill 1993: 149-150). Therefore, while the state voices generally contain an internalized rationale in achieving social mobility through individual hard work, the actual meaning of *dagongren* is reversed here, signaling an implicit disbelief in the possibility of social mobility instead.

Besides looking solely at Chen's utterances for the meaning of *dagongren*, we should also take a "dialogic" rather than "monologic" approach to our examination of language use. This approach posits that one must examine the way utterances come to position speakers in particular ways by looking at the interactional context (Wortham 2001). From this perspective, the replies and comments under the short videos posted by Chen provide a crucial interactional context. Many followers simply create new slogans by imitating Chen's words as a re-creation of the original content, sometimes more explicitly shedding light on the absurdity of the self-enterprising rationale. They would even intentionally play with the language by re-splitting *dagongren* into *da* and *gongren*, which, combined together, would literally mean "hit the workers." (5) below is such an example of the response to the most popular slogan "good morning, *dagongren*."

(5) *Rongren zuocuo le shenme, weishenme yidazao jiuyao dagongren.*
'What's wrong with being a worker? Why do you hit the workers early in the morning?'

It is worth noting that the word *gongren* carries the historical baggage from the Maoist era, with a specific political connotation denoting the highest class position (Pun 1999), as stipulated in the Constitution of the party-state *gongren jieji shi xin zhongguo de zhurenweng* 'The working class is the master of the new China.' In this sense, the implicit pun of *dagongren* further points out the physical labors' difficulty of defending their legal rights, who suffer not only from job losses and wage delays, but also from potential violence

by their contractors, security guards, or even the state police,² as opposed to the governmental ideological stipulation. While these conundrums faced by physical laborers are hardly known or discussed by the public because of the censorship by the state, the emergence and spread of the *dagongren* memes constitute a participatory effort in venting their dissent on labor conditions and challenging the current regime of class inequality.

The Young Educated Workers' Appropriation of *Dagongren*

While the *dagongren* meme emerges from Chen and his followers' use as a potentially subversive discourse, the subsequent circulation of *dagongren* among the young college-educated white-collar workers rather quickly transforms the associations with its usages, leading to uncertain and even contradictory effects. In this part, I will first examine the young white-collar workers' ideological work in achieving a discursive solidarity with the physical workers. Then, I will elaborate how they turn to reestablish differentiation from the physical laborers under the same term, and eventually exclude them from the "us" in their complaint genre. Simultaneously, however, these young educated workers refuse the incorporation of the word by the state's uptake, in which they could have remained at a relatively advantaged position in the pre-existing social hierarchy. Following these analyses, I will thus argue that the power of *dagongren* goes beyond the liberating/reifying framework, but is more uncertain and ambiguous. It constitutes a "floating signifier" through which people can foster an identity-in-the-making in the face of the "loss of the ideal self." The primary source of data of this section is from the posts and replies in the *Douban* community

² It is not uncommon in China that grassroots workers suffer from state violence. One of the most well-known examples is Beijing's eviction of *diduan renkou* 'low-end population' — usually referring to migrant workers at the bottom of Beijing's social ladder — since 2017. Shacks and slums where these 'low-end population' typically live were violently torn down. See "Mass evictions in freezing Beijing winter sparks public outrage but little official remorse," Nov 2017, Washington Post. [washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/11/27/forced-evictions-in-freezing-beijing-winter-sparks-public-outrage-but-little-official-remorse/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/11/27/forced-evictions-in-freezing-beijing-winter-sparks-public-outrage-but-little-official-remorse/)

group “*Dagongren* Gathering Place,” complemented with some metapragmatic comments from the *Douban* posts under the hashtag “what do you think of the ‘*dagongren*’ culture?”.

Who is Us: A Discursive Solidarity

At first sight, it seems self-contradictory for the young educated white-collar workers to take up this term and self-identify as *dagongren*, since the class antagonism inherent in the physical workers’ use explicitly places “the rich” and “the educated” at the opposite end of the axis of differentiation. However, as shown in (6) and (7) below, those who have received a master’s degree, or those who are working as a professional high-salaried computer programmer, have no hesitancy in including themselves in the *dagongren* community just as the physical migrant workers.

(6) *Modao bu wu kanchaigong, duwan shuoshi zai dagong.*

‘Sharpening your axe will not delay your job of chopping wood. Finishing a master’s degree will not delay your job of becoming a *dagongren*.’

(7) *Dagongren, dagong hun. Aoye qiao daima, doushi renshangren.*

‘Laboring people, laboring spirit. Staying up late to do computer programming, we are all cream of the crop.’

The production of these new slogans, which reunite the physical labors at one end and the richer and more educated at the other end of the axis of differentiation as a larger “us,” constitutes a process of fractal recursivity, or more specifically, encompassing recursion (Gal and Irvine 2019). It erases the differences between the previous two contrasts and projects the comparison onto a wider scale, “bringing the original sets together as against something else” (Gal and Irvine 2019: 20). In the case of the circulation of the *dagongren* meme among the educated white-collar workers’ group, the previous differentiation between them and the physical laborers is erased, and a seeming “solidarity” is established between these two groups. The new “them,” in turn, become solely the *laoban* ‘boss’ or *zibenjia* ‘capitalists,’ that is, those who own their companies and do not have to work for others. Some users contributing to the hashtag topic “what do you think of the ‘*dagongren*’ culture?” also

mention the word's association with the "new solidarity" in their reflexive comments, as shown in (8) below.

(8) ... (The circulation of *dagongren*) marks the first time in decades that the urban petty bourgeoisie and part of the middle class united with the working class in a counterattack against the bourgeoisie in public opinion.
(Larry, Nov 1, 2020)

It is not altogether without reason for these young white-collar workers to align themselves with the physical laborers. At least to some extent, they do share certain concerns over job conditions. Of the 386 posts I am analyzing, the posts about overwork and unsatisfying salaries, the two problems often haunting blue-collar workers, also constitute a major part (21.0% and 11.9% respectively) of the discourses surrounding *dagongren* among these highly educated professional workers. For example, one post directly describes his work as "suffocating," adding that he could "only sleep for 4 or five hours every day in the recent month." Another post similarly writes:

(9) Every day of *dagong* I feel drained of energy like a walking dead. I only have a salary of 3,000 CNY per month, but I have to spend 3 hours each day commuting to work. Only when I am in the toilet can I feel the most relaxed. During the rest of the time I cannot even keep my hands away from the keyboard for a second.
(*Sanfeng*, Nov 29, 2020)

As introduced above, the Chinese labor market is witnessing a growing trend of "underemployment," especially for graduates with a bachelor's degree and above. Objective mismatch between supply and demand in the labor market, plus subjective mismatches "between individuals' human capital, their expectations and preferences, and their job characteristics," easily lead to the young generation's frustration at work (Kalleberg 2008). Among the expectations discussed by scholars, a higher social status is one of the key rewards previously presumed to be brought by educational investments. Work provides status by positioning the individual in a social status hierarchy, and upper-middle-class could choose certain professions as a reliable way of reproducing their social status (Abbott 2005: 323). However, underemployment can indicate such a disruption of the previously promised

connection between education and a reward in an entry into higher social status. The youth is suffering from powerful status frustration as they can only participate in “what is little more than a lottery for jobs”, many of which are much less rewarding than they expect in terms of the education they have received (Standing 2012).

While intuitively speaking it makes sense for those suffering from underemployment to rhetorically use *dagongren* to express the status frustration, it nevertheless takes more discursive work to make the word a natural and appropriate label for all the young educated workers, whatever their real occupational conditions are. To achieve this ideological innovation, one essential characteristic of meme communication — “memetic antagonism” — is indispensable in adding to the performative power of self-naming in interpellating the subject into being (Butler 1993), and smoothing the arbitrary forming of a collective identity. As Tuters and Hagen argue, due to the anonymous nature of online communities, memes are especially efficient in “the formulation of an organic and classless ‘us’ bound together by existential antagonisms against a nebulous ‘them’,” and bring together a heterogeneous group of actors that do not necessarily commit to the same agenda (Tuters and Hagen 2019).

This blurring “memetic antagonism” is clearly manifested in the early stages of the formation of the group “*Dagongren* Gathering Place” on *Douban*. To post in this specific group, one has to gain the membership by submitting an application, usually containing several sentences explaining the reason why you want to be part of the online community. While the qualification of an applicant is reviewed by the moderator of this group, it is impossible to check the personal background of each applicant to determine his eligibility. The low bar in obtaining the membership as an “approved” *dagongren* partly explains the popularity of this online community, but it also nevertheless contributes to the heterogeneity of its composition.

What is more evident of the blurring of “us” is the recruitment process enabled by the ritualized communication based on *dagongren* memes. Through a mere exchange of the most popular *dagongren* slogans and memes, group members establish a specific communication mechanism based on shared meanings mutually recognizable to each other. In this way, newcomers are “hailed” as “comrades” into the community. The open access to the use of this meme makes it possible for virtually everyone to participate in such an interaction, thus easier for encompassing the previous contrasts and forming a larger “us.”

(10) A: *daying wo, ni yao yigeren qiaoqiaode dagong, ranhou jingyan dao suoyou laoban.*



打工人 打工魂
打工都是人上人

B: *Zaodian shuijiao, shui haole, you jingshen le, mingtian cai nenggou rang laoban gengkuai de guoshang ta xiangguo de shenghuo.*

A: *Wo liuxia le yanlei. Zhaxin le gongyou.*

B: *Dagongren shi buhui liulei de. Zhihui liuxia xinqin de hanshui. Hahaha.*

This mutually acquiesced recruitment ritual thus successfully interpellates these

A: Promise me. You will quietly *dagong* all by yourself, and surprise the rest of all others.

(a picture with the caption: ‘Laboring people, laboring spirit, laboring people are cream of the crop.’ *Dagongren, dagong hun, dagongren doushi renshangren.*)

B: Go to bed. Only if you have a good sleep and feel in high spirits tomorrow can you help your boss live the life he wants.

A: I am about to cry now. It hurts, my comrade.

B: *Dagongren* won’t cry. They will only sweat hard. Hahaha.

young educated white-collar workers as de facto *dagongren* members. However, the power of *dagongren* in their use does more than forming a collective identity across workers of different social strata — through their reproduction and re-creation of the meme, they also strategically collaborate in the creation of parodies on the state discourse, thus staging a seemingly united discursive resistance against the current social norm of labor relations. For example, on *Douban* these educated youths would intentionally invoke the voices typically found in the state media’s celebration of “model workers,”³ which emphasize the

³ An example of the “model worker” rhetoric is the state-sponsored media’s propagandist report of the “Iron Man” Wang Jinxi, an oil worker following Mao’s instructions and worked for five solid days drilling the Yumen Oilfield, Daqing’s first oil well, despite harsh working environment and extensive hard labor. Narratives in the state media at that time detailed his

perseverance and the deserved high status of workers in an exaggerating tone. This specific voice is characterized by words such as *guangrong* ‘glory,’ *gangtie ban de yizhi* ‘iron will,’ *tongzhi* ‘comrade,’ *fengxian* ‘devotion,’ *chuangzao meihao de weilai* ‘creating a bright future,’ etc., such as the slogan in (11). Highly politicized terms, especially those in the classic Marxist doctrine, are also commonly incorporated, such as *wuchanjieji* ‘the proletariat,’ *gongrenjieji* ‘the working class,’ *boxue* ‘exploitation,’ *ma-en-mao sixiang* ‘Marxism–Leninism–Maoism,’ etc., as in (12) below. It is worth noting that when this voice is invoked, these textual memes are often accompanied by pictures adapted from socialist posters in the 1950s and 1960s. They typically feature earthy rural workers doing farm work with smiles on their faces, or workers of all colors standing shoulder to shoulder, symbolizing an international proletariat alliance. These posters are also central characteristics of the propaganda in the “creation of the heroes,” where the stylized images would represent the “strength, heroism and virtue” of those model workers (Butterfield 2012). In the “*Dagongren* Gathering Place” online community, the original Maoist propaganda slogans on these posters are replaced with *dagongren* slogans and catchphrases. Examples of these memes are shown in the figures below. These text-picture combinations create multimodal memes that present a “semantically and formally interrelated sign repertoires” (Stöckl 2004: 9), with each part of them carrying certain histories that could enrich the meaning-making.

(11) *Shuo shangban jiu ganjue xiangshi wei shenghuo suopo, buqingbuyuan. Shuo dagong, jiu xiangshi daizhe meihao de chongjing, yong nuli he hanshui qu chuangzao weilai. Zaoan, dagongren!*

‘Going to work’ sounds like we are coerced, while ‘*dagong*’ sounds like we are going to create a bright future with our dedicated efforts and an optimistic vision. Good morning, *dagongren!*’

(12) *Doushi wuchanjieji xiongdi jiemei. Yao tuanjie, yao huzhu.*

‘We are all proletariat, we are brothers and sisters. We need to work in unity and help each other.’

“heroic efforts” such as “being undeterred by temperatures between -20 and -30 Centigrades” and “sacrificing all.” This propagandist genre still continues in today’s news coverage by state media, for example, China Daily wrote about Premier Wen Jiabao “called on oil workers to hand down the priceless ‘Iron Man Spirit’ from generation to generation and further display and carry forward the spirit of the Daqing Oilfield, an integration of patriotism, pioneering, truth seeking, as well as dedication.” (*China Daily*, March 8, 2003.) (Butterfield 2012)



Since the Party’s voices have largely been considered a failure “to identify with the Chinese audiences in its presentation of socialist role models”⁴ (Zhang 2000), the ideological move in this uptake is similar to the security guard’s parodic uptake of the state voices around *dagong* — by manipulating the intertextual gap with the voice cited, they are in effect distancing themselves from the original positionality. Even more, as the state discourse in the creation of model workers gets demystified, this particular propagandist genre, including its highly politicized words, slogans and stylized posters, becomes indexical of an untruthful attitude, or even duplicity. In this sense, the deliberate incorporation of the state’s propagandist genre into the *dagongren* memes exactly implies their disbelief in the words they say. When words like *guangrong* ‘glory,’ *gangtie ban de yizhi* ‘iron will’ and *fengxian* ‘devotion’ are included, they mean just the opposite — that these young elites neither have the motivation to work hard, nor feel that their current social status is imbued with the pride or glory as the state-sponsored media celebrates. Just as one metapragmatic post comments:

(13) To call oneself *dagongren* is no more than a way of self-mockery. If you think that *dagongren* is synonymous with glory, you should be more self-aware of your situations. (Fanxizuoyou, Nov 13, 2020)

We thus witness the change of the performative power of the *dagongren* meme from the last stage. Through the uptake of the meme by the young white-collar workers, the word *dagongren* addresses and interpellates the group into becoming what it prescribes. Also, self-

⁴ This disjuncture is particularly evident in the Internet age, partly because the top-down propagandist product of the PRC is likely to lack attraction due to the emergence of competing online celebrity models, and partly because people today are more immune, or even averse, to such reports given that the championed hard work and selfless sacrifice may lead to physical and even spiritual damage (Zhang 2000).

naming as *dagongren*, an invocation sarcastically echoing multiple historical voices as well as the parodic reappropriation from the physical workers, is going to form a social bond across workers of different social strata. It is likely to have the power of exposing the illusory constitution of class distinction between the white-collar and blue-collar workers, and exposing the failure of the construction of the superiority of the former which they can hardly deceive themselves into believing.

Examining the “Complaint Genre”: Differentiation and Distinction

Under the hashtag topic “what do you think of the ‘*dagongren*’ culture?”, one comment is particularly interesting:

(14) When the term *dagongren* has been turned into a self-deprecating term used by white-collar workers, is it also causing harm to those true *dagongren* who travel to big cities as migrant workers, i.e., those low-wage workers in manual labor/catering services, etc.?
(*Yeh*, Oct 28, 2020)

Admittedly, this comment does point to some crucial concerns regarding the complex implications of the changes of differentiation. To be specific, to make themselves subsumable under the apparently conflicting social category, the educated white-collar workers have to use *dagongren* in a “complaint genre” by highlighting and even hyperbolizing certain aspects of their work and ignoring others. The mechanism of erasure, the ideological work of rendering certain aspects invisible to create a totalizing vision, is inherently at work in this process (Gal and Irvine 2019: 20-21). In this sense, the solidarity with the physical laborers might be more of a mere appearance than a wholehearted alignment. Therefore, to find out how the alignment with physical workers is made to appear natural, we want to investigate what has been highlighted and what has been erased

As discussed above, comments about workload and salaries constitute a significant part of this *dagongren*-related complaint genre. However, the use of *dagongren* on these topics are often linked with more mixed feelings other than dissent or self-mockery. This

meme allows people, whether they have urgent concerns with basic work conditions or not, to negotiate their in-groupness as long as they can master the vernacular (Tuters and Hagen 2019), even though their usage betrays its original meaning. The use of *dagongren* thus sometimes serves to justify one's right in belonging to the community without lowering his pride in the superiority of his job. For example, those who identify themselves as *dagongren* in this online group have far less uniform a consensus on what counts as a "low salary."

People who earn 10,000 CNY a month join in the complaining genre:

(15) I earned 8,000 CNY a month for my last job for two years, and I quit in March. My current company pays me 10,000 CNY a month with no additional benefits. My mom asked me if I wanted to buy an apartment this year, but the mortgage is too much pressure for me. Once I really buy an apartment, it means I cannot easily quit my job any more, nor can I buy things I like without much hesitation. I am so anxious being a *dagongren*.
(*Yinliao*, Apr 8, 2021)

Or in other cases, while the post builds the in-group belonging complaining that "wherever we work — in Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, or Hong Kong — we are all *dagongren* alike," she yet quickly turns to compare her work in Hong Kong with other jobs in mainland China, stressing that she has higher salaries and more relaxing working schedule. There are also some other posts directly asking group members to compare two or three job offers to decide which one to choose. These posts typically begin with greetings like "Hello *dagongren* friends" or "I am about to become a *dagongren*, please decide for me which offer to accept," thus demonstrating that they are part of the community. However, such comparisons are commonly drawn between companies such as the "big four" accounting agencies. Admittedly, no job offers satisfactory salaries or work-and-life balance, but in picking job offers from the already privileged choices, the flavor of dissent and resistance attached with this term is basically gone.

While there are some objections against the use of *dagongren* in a too widely stretched way, such usages were largely smoothly received in this online community. To borrow Bourdieu's concept of "linguistic market" here, competing ways of speaking gain

different value in a certain field according to unevenly distributed linguistic capital. In this sense, in allowing some voices into this “linguistic market,” it also has the effect of canceling the voices of others (Bourdieu 1991). As more and more voices containing *dagongren* become a way of “humble bragging,” or a nonchalant expression concerned only with picking the best job for oneself, the use of *dagongren* that builds real alliance across different occupational groups based on a shared concern with the basic rights of workers only dwindles away. The sense of a united resistance is getting erased in this “linguistic market.”

Equally contributing to the silencing effect are the usage of *dagongren* linked with subjective feelings of boredom, meaninglessness, anxiety and depression. Instead of being occupied with tons of workload, the young professionals are exhausted precisely because of the emptiness of their jobs. The prevalence of *dagongren*, in this sense, takes place in the context of the rise of a “make-work regime” especially among the white-collar professionals (Graeber 2018). For example, the following post describes the infuriating experience of having to write work reports every day even though having nothing to do:

(16) And the most disgusting thing is that every company I worked for asked us to write daily reports, which makes me very painful. I do not have anything else to do. My direct supervisor either completed all the work by himself or knew too little to assign me any work. I am completely lost.....That being said, I cannot really idle around in my office all day. I must pretend to type on my keyboard for 8 hours every day, even though I have nothing to do from 10 am. Anyway, it is just depressing to be a *dagongren*.
(*Fupodema*, Dec 15, 2020)

Other people complaining about the subjective depression associated with being a *dagongren* may have been torn down not by boredom, but by a lack of purpose regarding the prospect of their work. The association of the term *dagongren* with the actual work conditions, or embodied pain at work, is further played down, leaving only the vicious cycle of psychological misery, such as the post below.

(17) I’ve been so tired being a *dagongren*. I don’t see anything to look forward to in the future. I only see enduring exhaustion. Once I get married and have kids, I have to *dagong* more so that I can earn more money. I feel I’d rather die right now.
(*Huohuoaoasi*, Oct 28, 2020)

The sense of anger and resentment is retained in this usage of the term *dagongren*, although such resentment is more directed at the “spiritual violence” aspect of contemporary work. In a way, this uptake draws an insightful extension from the very original context where this word comes from. While the word *dagong* refers to the act of physically working for the contractor most commonly in a construction site or along an assembly line in the 1980s and 1990s, the derivative word *dagongren* shares the historical traces of an association with such estranged labor, pointing to the conundrum that work becomes only a means of sustaining his physical existence (Marx 1844). In the case of the circulation of *dagongren* among the young educated white-collar workers, the alienating effect of labor does not diminish with the rise of middle-class professionals. To extend Marx’s original argument that wage is nothing but “a necessary consequence of labor’s estrangement,” the respect and generous compensation these educated elite professionals typically enjoy further compound the sense of alienation they are trapped in. We could even argue that there is a trend of the “proletarianization of the professional” (Oppenheimer 1972) in that the development of “self” is impaired being a white-collar worker in a way very similar to the experience of being a physical laborer. Such feelings are also expressed in some metapragmatic comments on

Douban:

(18) To some extent, we are all similarly trapped in tons of repetitive work every day and disciplined into emotionless machines only serving to “moving the bricks,” whether you are a programmer in a giant IT company, a PPT writer in a grid workplace, or a factory worker in Foxconn. This work mechanism deprived us of all our humanity, transformed us into pure commodities, and pushed us into the predicament of self-exploitation.
(*Yangshu*, Jan 9, 2021)

To borrow the distinction Graeber has made between “bullshit jobs” and “shit jobs,” the weird paradox of our society is that those who do meaningless white-collar “bullshit jobs” tend to be well paid and surrounded by honor and prestige, while the those who do blue-collar “shit jobs” are typically in the lower strata of the society, though they are making useful and even tangible contributions as factory workers, security guards, bricklayers and

bus drivers. This paradox, according to Graeber, is derived from the bizarre sadomasochistic dialectic people have invented whereby the generous compensation is to make up for the “self-sacrifice” of knowing the lack of value one produces at work, and the fulfilling feeling of producing something valuable could in turn justify lower pay and worse work conditions. This collectively fosters a political scape where people of different social strata harbor enormous envy and jealousy, and even resentment towards each other (Graeber 2018).

However, the increasing focus of the *dagongren* meme on the mental suffering of the white-collar workers has not only failed to bridge their experiences of pain, but even ends up excluding the very creators of the meme — the physical labors, or the “shit job” holders — from entering the picture, as shown in (19) below. Implicitly suggesting that the factory workers are not *dagongren*, the two ends of the axis of differentiation, or to say, the “us” and “them”, are completely reversed. The sufferings of *dagongren* seem to exclusively belong to the white-collar workers, and the resentment is unidirectional. As a result, it cancels the other side of the story that together gives rise to the paradoxical, urgent problem that our society is now rooted in.

(19) When I finished my interview and came out of the building, those factory workers also were about to get off work. Each of them seemed very happy and relaxed, discussing with each other about playing basketball or video games in the evening. But what about those *dagongren*? All of them seemed so tired after work. I just wanted to go to bed.
(*Zaichoufengliu*, March 23, 2021)

A new kind of differentiation is thus reestablished, with the educated white-collar workers firmly occupying the “us” end as *dagongren*, simultaneously envying and distancing themselves from the new “other” — the physical laborers. In this process, the performative power of *dagongren* from last stage is also reversed: instead of indexing solidarity across workers from different social strata, it is now used by the young white-collar workers to deny the formation of social bonds, to refuse to align themselves with physical laborers, and to

conceal the bizarre paradox and the mutually resenting political scape that need to be brought forth.

Moreover, the word *dagongren* is used in association with a kind of “new distinction” (Bourdieu 1984). In the face of underemployment where cultural capital does not promise the social reproduction of high social status, some of these young white-collar workers turn to lifestyles and tastes to put themselves in a higher hierarchical position vis-a-vis physical laborers. The pursuit of “new distinction” is obviously manifested in a comment-and-reply interaction in (20) below. This interaction takes place under a post titled “The Working Class” in the group “*Dagongren* Gathering Place.” A member named *Nanyi* posted a collection of her photos, claiming to show her new outlook at the workplace. In these photos, she wears plain work uniforms that assembly line workers often wear, but with delicate make-up, exquisite earrings and fashionable hairstyle. Her intentional dressing as a factory worker is more of a gesture to negotiate her in-group belongingness as a *dagongren*, than an ingenuous willingness to side with the typically exhaustive and sweaty factory workers. Other members in this group tacitly understands and accepts this use of *dagongren*, passionately commenting things like “you’re such a beautiful *dagongren*,” “aren’t you a star,” etc. Among all these comments and replies, one interaction is of particular interest:

(20) A: Does *dagongren* belong to the working class? No.
B: Exactly.
(*Nanyi*, Oct16, 2020)

This interaction is a more explicit effort to point out the distinction between those who identify themselves as *dagongren* in this online group, and the physical blue-collar workers who fit more into the public’s perception of “the working class.” Through creating a new pastiche that decouples the workers’ suit with the stereotypical views of coarseness and vulgarity it is usually associated with, they are in effect claiming a distinctive personal style that values creativity and middle-class taste. The solidarity promised at the previous stage is

severed, and the labor issues of either the white-collar or blue-collar workers at stake were also obscured with the reestablishment of new differentiation and distinction.

Beyond Liberating/Reifying: An Uncertain Identity-in-the-Making

At this stage, one may be tempted to conclude that the circulation of the *dagongren* meme reaches a stage where it is no longer serving as an impetus to social action. The changing language ideology underlying the young white-collar workers' uptakes of the word eventually reifies the pre-existing social institution and maintains the conventional order for workers across different social strata. After all, this conclusion is in line with most other studies on the potential for political activism of the Chinese middle class. According to them, while the middle class may be an important driving force for democratization in western countries, in China the middle class is not yet ready to be a source of political change (Li 2010). The reasons are manifold — their vested interests in their material gains, their close ties with the state, their fear of being threatened by the politically active working class, etc. (Dickson 2010; Cai 2005). Generally speaking, they constitute more of a conservative force than a progressivist one, favoring the status quo than an uncertain future (Dickson 2010). From this perspective, it is expected that the *dagongren* meme cannot maintain its liberating promise once it is picked up by the young white-collar workers.

Yet I want to argue that it is not altogether the case. For one thing, the language ideologies within these young educated white-collar workers are also heterogeneous and inconsistent. The argument above assumes too simplistic a scenario that a refusal of alignment with the physical laborers would necessarily lead to a lean towards the state — multiple in-between possibilities are out there for these young people to take. For another, the changes in the meanings of a term are always open-ended. Considering the drifting ideologies

of the young educated white-collar workers' group, what *dagongren* actually does is yet to be pinned down.

The following transformation nicely exemplifies this point. As the *dagongren* meme becomes increasingly popular among the young generation, many of the state media — including *Xinhua Net*, *People's Daily*, *Beijing Youth Daily*, *China Youth Daily*, etc. — also join the public discourse in taking up this term, “learning” to use it while secretly changing its meaning as well. Through their usages, the word *dagongren* delivers the affective promise of responding to the appeals from a united group of workers without really doing it (Ahmed 2012). By further associating the word with the upkeep of one's morale at work, *dagongren* could again be used as an indoctrination of self-enterprising rationale, and become the very “soft authoritarian toolkit” that confirms the state's authority (Edward Schatz 2009).

(21) We need to notice that implied in the *dagongren* memes and jokes are the workers' perseverance under the circumstances of hardships, their struggles in the face of unsatisfying conditions, and their pursuit in everyday ordinary life. It carries more of a flavor of optimism. The workers and salary earners are not only the main part of the structure of the labor force, but also the mainstay of the operation of the society. *Dagongren* need genuine support and care so that they can march towards a promising future with unrelenting hard work.
(*Xinhua Net*, Oct 28, 2020)

However, this ideological move receives a harsh backlash from the young educated white-collar workers. Some find it abominating in that “a term for self-mockery is now officially used by the state to tease the people on their suffering,” while some others are more indignant about the state's implicit manipulation on the difference between *dagongren* and “the proletariat.”

(22) A: You don't even think to call me the proletariat.
B: This word is too sensitive. It will be deleted.
(*Xiaoshisituan*, Dec 24, 2020)

A clever reappropriation of the famous line in the movie *Godfather* “you don't even think to call me Godfather,” this comment exposes the subtle fact that the state's uptake of *dagongren* is an intentional way of distancing this popular discourse from the revolutionary

meaning that “the proletariat” is associated with. As mentioned before, the proletariat in China has always been the protagonist of historical progress in Maoist ideology, as indicated in the socialist slogan *gongren jieji shi xin zhongguo de zhurenweng* ‘The working class is the master of the new China.’ In contrast, the word *dagongren*, derived from the meaning of “selling labor” and used by physical workers as a way of accusing the lack of legal protection and the blockage of social mobility, has never been associated with such an assurance of individual value and social significance. To willingly accept the designation as *dagongren* by others is to turn over the control of the meaning of this word, as well as the control of their identity. It thus signals an outright passivity, a relinquishment on the quest of how to situate work as a component in shaping the “self.”

The young white-collar workers clearly reject the incorporation of the word by the state discourse. In doing this, they are also rejecting the status quo, where they could nevertheless retain their relatively advantaged position with their “promising futures” backed by the state. However, as shown in the last section, these young educated white-collar workers also refuse to form a collective identity with the physical laborers. The *dagongren* meme becomes a way for them to drift their ideological work in different contexts to achieve different effects. In this sense, I argue that the word *dagongren* becomes a “floating signifier,” or a signifier with ever-changing indexicalities, thus susceptible to multiple or even contradictory uptakes (Buchanan, 2010: 173). To be specific, the meme allows the young white collar workers to form collective identities with other groups under certain circumstances; but more importantly, it allows them to draw boundaries and signal their “non-belonging” to any existing group, or any prescribed position in a conventional hierarchical social strata under the state rule. Instead of a clear notion of “what *dagongren* is,” the young white collar workers rather use *dagongren* to indicate “what they are not” as a way of self-identification.

The popularity of the *dagongren* meme as a “floating signifier” coincides with an increasingly uncertain sense of “self” among these young educated elites in the current economic anxiety. Besides the heavy status frustration caused by underemployment, the subjective meaninglessness of their work, as pointed out in their “complaint genre,” is no less powerful in disintegrating a previously solid identity. As Graeber argues when discussing the psychological suffering of white-collar professionals, people fundamentally enjoy the “pleasure of being the cause,” that is, the ability to “cause a certain effect” (Graeber 2018). However, the rise of neoliberal market ideologies paradoxically gives rise to a rapid multiplication of nonsensical managerial and administrative positions. In the Chinese context, the proliferation of such positions is only exacerbated by the continuation of the political regime of make-work jobs in the public bureaucratic system under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. This leads to a situation where people either feel that their work has no practical social influence at all, or that they see nothing “in the future of the work” except for the purpose of barely sustaining a family. This could especially be a problem for those who have received years of elite liberal education, for they tend to define authenticity and self-actualization as the most salient dimensions of an ideal self (Lamont et al. 2000), and try to make a difference through their work (Blenkinsopp et al. 2015). As a result, the denial of the “pleasure of being the cause” among these educated elites eventually leads to the “trauma of failed influence” (Broucek 1979). According to Graeber, this traumatic experience could directly break down the very foundations of the sense of “self” (Graeber 2018).

The emergence of the *dagongren* meme at this time thus allows the discursive convergence of these young educated individuals who, confronted with the “loss of an ideal self,” do not share a clear view of their positionality in the society. At the very least, the “floating” nature of the word *dagongren* creates a new mode of belonging, one that “offers a kind of comfort in not-being something” (Harris and Gandolfo 2013). Both their desire for

differentiation from the physical laborers and their refusal of conforming to the state discourse constitute new referents for them to reposition their identities. Admittedly, the connections they make and remake during this process may only be a “temporal phenomenon” (May, 2016), but self-naming as *dagongren* nevertheless serves as a strategy for them to cope with their confusion and insecurity, where the mechanism of “anchoring” is always at work (Grzymala-Kazlowska, 2018).

But we can expect the word *dagongren* to do more than that. By identifying a semantic space sufficiently flexible, the *dagongren* meme provides these young educated individuals with the freedom to “fill an aggregate frame with their own meaning” (Colleoni, Illia & Zyglidopoulos 2021). In this way, *dagongren* fosters an identity-in-the-making. It should be noted that this identity-in-the-making does not have to be about negative identifications, or about “non-belonging,” but can be about positive assertions as well. Although to date these young educated white-collar workers have far more contentions than agreements, the identity-in-the-making nevertheless propels an exploration of “the way out” when traditional systems, once a source of security and pride, were no longer valued.

(23) I see it in this way: *dagongren* is actually not about self-mockery or self-enterprising, but about an increasingly clear and persistent pursuit of what we really want It compels us to ask: what is the meaning of a person’s life if his identity as some employee for a company is erased?
(Yangshu, May 28, 2021)

Similarly, people are actively seeking mutual support and advocacy by asking in the online group on *Douban*: “what can we do for a living if we quit being *dagongren*?” The post receives a heated response, with people sharing suggestions like being self-employed, becoming a creator on Youtube, or starting their own micro-enterprises. Notably, one reply points out one crucial dimension of the “quitting:”

(24) A: Just find a direction and dig really deep into that.
B: Yeah, and it has to be related to your true passion.
(Xiongbenshixiong, April 30, 2021)

In this sense, *dagongren* is used as a destined “thing of the past” seen from the perspective of the future. It is invoked as a transitional phase, after which these young educated white-collar workers will proceed into becoming *anti-dagongren*, whatever that means for them. This uptake of *dagongren* thus further serves as an incentive for projecting their “ideal self.” Although *dagongren* is insufficient in organizing a united resistance and drives social action on solving labor conflicts, it still retains some resilience for these young white-collar workers, with the potential of fostering a more coherent and innovative collective identity in the future.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis examines the changes of language ideologies underlying the circulation of the *dagongren* meme, and exhibits how different groups take up the term to “do things” in the face of their own political and economic conundrums. Specifically, for the physical workers among whom the term was first coined and circulated, the *dagongren* meme was used in such a context that frequently emphasized overt class antagonism. The physical laborers intentionally invoke the historical voices surrounding *dagong*, and turn the supposedly serious and rationalist state voices into a parodic appropriation through manipulation of the intertextual gaps. As a result, the word *dagongren* serves the function of bringing forward the critical labor issues and questioning the mainstream state discourse about social mobility.

When the young college-educated white-collar workers take up the term for self-reference, they at first use it to unite their identities with the physical workers by the encompassing fractal of equating their own work with manual work. However, this discursive solidarity is soon dismantled, with these young seeking to reestablish their differentiation and distinction from the physical labor in the complaint genre, and even excluding the latter from

being part of the “us” as *dagongren*. While this move is anticipated by many scholars who conclude that *dagongren*, just as some other initially subversive Chinese memes, will eventually end up reifying the conventional order, I instead argue that *dagongren* neither constitutes a united resistance nor an outright submission for these young educated white-collar workers. Feeling lost with the trauma of failed influence, they rather use *dagongren* as a floating signifier to project and foster an identity-in-the-making. In this way, they retain certain resilience in confronting underemployment and mental suffering of contemporary work.

The paper contributes to the literature on the role of media discourses, especially the meme culture, in negotiating the social conflicts under the authoritarian rule of the Chinese state. While previous research has primarily attributed a binary role to memes, regarding them either as a revolutionary or a reifying force (Wallis, 2011; Du, 2014; Mina 2014; Kow, Kow and Gui 2017; Pearce and Hajizada 2014, etc.), this paper sees the *dagongren* meme as possessing a more indeterminate power, capable of achieving different effects in different contexts. Incorporating the theories from linguistic anthropology and especially the concept of “floating signifier,” I exhibit the drifting language ideologies surrounding the circulation of a word, and demonstrate the contradictory, moderate, yet potentially promising power in creating a new identity and changing the status quo.

The paper also speaks to sociology of labor and occupation, specifically to research on how people deal with their subjective feelings of mismatch in the face of underemployment. Cultural narratives are constantly proposed as a mechanism for meaning-making under such circumstances (Ayala-Hurtado 2021; Ashforth et al. 2007; Vough et al. 2015; Fernando and Patriotta 2020). However, the perspective of relevant language variation has not been explored. This paper enriches these discussions by focusing on the innovative ideological work underlying language variation in dealing with structural anxiety.

Finally, I want to note that *dagongren* is one of a set of buzzwords — including *shechu* ‘corporate slaves,’ *neijuan* ‘involution,’ etc. — that young educated people and professional workers in recent years have come up with in face of various labor issues in contemporary China. All these buzzwords, as well as words and memes on other issues, form a part of China’s vigorous and playful Internet culture that could “simultaneously challenge and reinforce conventional norms” (Szablewicz 2014; Wei 2017). Considering that “words are key resources for thought and action, central players in theory and in politics” (McConnell-Gine 2002: 158-159), the foregoing study is not just to investigate the development and transformation of a single word, but ultimately to ask what prospective performative power we can expect from such popular discourse. As my study shows, it still remains to be seen what new words and memes can do, and what future transformations can take place. Anyway, the meaning of a word is never fixed, and it is this open-endedness that can always harbor political promises (Wong 2005).

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