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"Let's Go, Baby Forklift!": Fandom Governance and the Political Power of Cuteness in China

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Abstract

This article describes how the Chinese state borrows from the culture of celebrity fandom to implement a novel strategy of governing that we term "fandom governance." We illustrate how state-run social media employed fandom governance early in the COVID-19 pandemic when the country was convulsed with anxiety. As the state faced a crisis, state social media responded with a propagandistic display of state efficacy, broadcasting a round-the-clock livestream of a massive emergency hospital construction project. Chinese internet users playfully embellished imagery from the livestream. They unexpectedly transformed the construction vehicles into cute personified memes, with Baby Forklift and Baby Mud Barfer (a cement mixer) among the most popular. In turn, state social media strategically channeled this playful engagement in politically productive directions by resignifying the personified vehicles as celebrity idols. Combining social media studies with cultural and linguistic anthropology, we offer a processual account of the semiotic mediations involved in turning vehicles into memes, memes into idols, and citizens into fans. We show how, by embedding cute memes within modules of fandom management such as celebrity ranking lists, state social media rendered them artificially vulnerable to a fall in status. Fans, in turn, rallied around to "protect" these cute idols with small but significant acts of digital devotion and care, organizing themselves into fan circles and exhorting each other to vote. In elevating the memes to the status of celebrity idols, state social media thereby created a disposable pantheon of virtual avatars for the state, and consolidated state power around citizens' voluntary response to vulnerability. We analyze fandom governance as a new development in the Chinese state's long history of governing citizens through the management of emotion.

Keywords

When China began its massive mobilization against the novel coronavirus in January 2020, no one could have imagined that a little yellow forklift would come to embody the nation's hope. Nevertheless, by the end of the month, "Let's go, Baby Forklift!" had become a collective rallying cry, as millions watched an army of construction workers erect emergency hospitals in Wuhan, the pandemic's epicenter. In this article, we show that the little forklift could carry the burden of a nation's fears because it was not just any construction vehicle. The collective efforts of an adoring public and the guiding hand of Chinese state social media had transformed it into a much more powerful kind of *symbolic* vehicle: a celebrity idol. As an idol, it could command devotion not through strength alone, but also through vulnerability (Pritzker, 2020)—a quality that made it cute. How did a burly machine become cute and why did cuteness make it

such a potent national symbol during a moment of crisis? In answering these questions, we show how construction vehicle memes came to figure into the Chinese state's ongoing efforts to harness the iconography and interactional forms of Chinese internet fandom for political purposes.

For decades, scholars have been tracking the evolution of the Chinese state's strategies of managing public information and influencing opinion alongside the rapidly changing

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digital affordances of the social mediascape (Brady, 2002). During the 2003 SARS outbreak, it deployed what Lagerkvist (2008) called "ideotainment," sending out messages and images of heroic figures to individual mobile phones across China to assure the public that the state had the crisis under control. In intervening years, the state has developed a vast apparatus of paid social media monitors—the "Fifty-Cent Army"—to shape public opinion, while also fomenting "voluntary" networks of nationalistic content-producers (Han, 2015a). Han demonstrates that resulting social media influence campaigns are not, however, a "centrally coordinated process in which the state acts as a monolithic rational actor." Instead," he continues, "multiple party-state agencies at different levels and in different sectors as well as individual officials are involved, each with different incentives and priorities" (Han, 2015b, p. 109). They can, in turn, learn from, adopt, and adapt each other's innovative strategies.

COVID-19 put the function of this propaganda and censorship system on stark display, while also revealing some of its limitations. During the first months of the pandemic, regional governments used sophisticated microwork platforms to coordinate what may have amounted to "hundreds of thousands" of commenters and social media monitors tasked with posting original content, sharing links, and flagging negative comments (Zhong et al., 2020). In this article, we offer an archival ethnography of a digital "media event" (Pink et al., 2015) that unfolded within this social media ecology, at the intersection of state influence and public participation. At a time when much of China was under quarantine and the country was convulsed by anxiety about the novel coronavirus, we show how Chinese internet users playfully embellished images of the hospital construction broadcast online by state-run social media, producing memes that were, in turn, assimilated back into state-run social media feeds in an emergent cycle of cultural co-production.

It is important to stress at the outset that millions of social media users were directly and indirectly involved in generating the memes we analyze. We do not and cannot claim to directly understand their intentions, nor to accurately gauge the involvement of paid influencers. Social media platforms, Christopher Kelty (2020) writes, make it possible "to participate in something and be given signs and signals of the outcomes of that participation" (p. 257), offering "a set of scripts and games intended to spread participation as widely as possible" (p. 261). Thus, what we study here is how memes function as publicly visible *signs of participation* in a game-like sequence where participants signal involvement by responding to each other's "moves" and making their responses available for others to scrutinize and incorporate into their own subsequent moves. In developing our analysis, we drew upon one co-author's firsthand knowledge of these memes, which began popping up in her social media feeds as the events described here unfolded. We constructed our corpus by taking pivotal hashtags—signs of participation that contributed to shaping the "eventfulness" of this episode—as

focal ethnographic objects (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015), guiding the collection of publicly available content. Finally, in interpreting the complex sociocultural knowledge embedded in linguistic and visual signs, we elicited additional feedback from Chinese ethnographic respondents.

This approach enables us to identify how Chinese state social media accounts actively mobilized the game-like repertoire of celebrity fandom to produce public consensus through seduction rather than coercion. As W. Zhang (2016) argues, the Chinese entertainment industry relies on social media infrastructure that seductively stages the passionate participation of "fandom publics" as an integral part of celebrity idols' allure. That infrastructure includes ludic modules such as ranking lists that organize fans into games of voting competitively for their favorite idols and provide real-time participatory feedback (Yin, 2020; Q. Zhang & Negus, 2020). We show how Chinese state social media accounts deployed such game-like features as scripts to enlist fandom publics around the construction vehicles and make fans' collective performances visible. We demonstrate how ludic modules for managing fans became tools for governing citizens-as-fans, as the state used them to generate viral "positive energy" across internet platforms during an overwhelmingly dark time. Our analysis focuses solely on social media content and strategies, not the state's policies to contain COVID-19.

We combine insights from social media studies with cultural and linguistic anthropology to offer a processual account of the semiotic mediations involved in turning vehicles into memes, memes into idols, and citizens into fans. In particular, we focus on cuteness as the crucial semiotic resource in the co-construction of seductive memetic idols and an adoring public of devoted fans. Few people would describe any state as "cute," and the vastly powerful Chinese state may seem particularly un-cute. Nevertheless, in the events we analyze, cuteness emerges as a dominant motif in Chinese citizens' engagements with the state, and in the state's engagement with citizens. We argue that cuteness, in conveying qualities of dependency and diminutiveness, can constitute a counterintuitive form of power: the power to inspire affection and to engender play (Abidin, 2016; Hiramoto & Wee, 2019; Silvio, 2019). In tracing how Chinese internet publics and state-run social media accounts interactively mobilized signs of cuteness during a national crisis, we offer an account of both the power of cuteness and the cuteness of power in contemporary Chinese society.

In our case study, Chinese internet users playfully manipulate imagery from a state-run livestream during a pandemic to produce memes in ways that might, at first blush, seem irreverent or subversive. However, we argue instead that playfulness is part of an emerging pattern of *ludic governmentality* in state-run social media influence campaigns. By "governmentality," Foucault (1991) points to forms of social control exceeding the bounds of "government" in the strict sense of political institutions. Anthropologists have shown

that the regimentation of play can be a profound manifestation of governmentality (Walker, 2013). With the notion of ludic governmentality, we point to a relationship, on necessarily unequal terms, between state and subjects as playmates. It is commonly assumed that authoritarian regimes derive power through monologic control over the stable meanings of political discourse and national symbols. While it follows that playful memetic content can be a powerful form of resistance (Johnson, 2015), we show how the calculated introduction of framing scripts—here as a form of play-based governance—can generate a controlled polyphony that reinforces state authority.

In the episode we analyze, by capitalizing on cuteness to engage internet users in online play, official accounts strategically shifted discourse about an unfolding crisis. As we demonstrate, when internet users acknowledged state social media's effort to engage with them in play, they interpreted it in contradictory terms. Where some saw benevolent care and paternal affection, others saw crass pandering and inappropriate manipulation. This divergence reflects the way play itself ambiguates structure and agency (Sutton-Smith, 1997), particularly when participants freely elect to follow arbitrary rules set by someone else. Focusing on critiques of the construction vehicle memes in the final section of this article, we explore the kinds of risks—slippages in meaning, divergent interpretations—the state runs when deploying the ludic repertoire of social media fandom as a mode of governance.

From Spectators to Supervisors

Following the initial appearance of COVID-19 in Wuhan in December 2019, rumors about the virus—and criticisms about the official response—circulated widely on Weibo, WeChat, and other social media platforms (Weinland, 2020). Wuhan residents posted videos showing the city's hospitals overwhelmed and ill-equipped to deal with the pandemic, provoking outrage about mismanagement within the Red Cross, a humanitarian organ of the Chinese state (Yuan, 2020). With reports of the first casualties and cases appearing in other provinces, the central government intervened to assert control over the flow of information (Wang, 2020). On 23 January, it placed nearly 50 million people in Hubei province on lockdown, creating what international observers heralded as "the largest quarantine in human history" (Ang, 2020). That same day, the government began constructing two emergency field hospitals in Wuhan: the 1000-bed Huoshenshan (火神山, Fire God Mountain) and 1600-bed Leishenshan (雷神山, Thunder God Mountain). In a stunning display of efficiency, they would be operational in just over a week (Qin, 2020).

On 27 January, the internet video platform Yangshipin (央视频), which is under the control of the Publicity Department of the Chinese Communist Party, announced that it would offer a round-the-clock livestream of the construction project, inviting internet users to "witness" (见证) the colossal undertaking for themselves. As construction workers toiled day and night, rapt citizens logged on by the tens of millions to watch aerial views of colorful construction vehicles bustling back and forth. Viewers posted supportive comments that scrolled beneath the video in real time. As signs of engagement, these comments helped turn mass viewing itself into a spectacle of participation (cf. Cao, 2021). In an apparently sui generis display of playful involvement, some of the commenters began referring to themselves as "supervisors" (监工). "Henan supervisor has arrived," one announced. "Local Hubei supervisors are here to take over. Colleagues, go eat," another chimed in. Within 24 hours, commenters were describing themselves as "internet supervisors" (网络监工) and "cloud supervisors" (云监工). After CCTV's Weibo account began using the hashtag #InternetSupervisors (#网络监工#), "remote supervision" became a widespread trope in posts about the livestream from internet users and governmental agencies alike, amplifying publicity. By 30 January, the livestream had already received 190 million views and 77,000 comments.

Livestreaming the construction project may have been a relatively straightforward way for state social media to counter a crisis of public confidence with a meta-message of transparency. However, by shifting the idiom of viewership from "witnessing" to "supervising," commenters introduced a more active model of participation that ultimately opened the door to fandom through play. As we will show, this humorous online banter was the first in a series of "play signals" (Bateson, 2000) that catalyzed increasingly ludic forms of interaction and mobilized a detached public into devoted fans, whose visible participation was central to the spectacle's appeal. In the course of several days, these "remote supervisors" produced elaborate memes based on the personification of construction vehicles that they anointed with cute and humorous names. Ultimately, state social media would deploy games and scripts that created the conditions for remote supervisors to organize themselves into fan groups supporting these idolized heroes, who came to serve as embodiments of the nation.

The livestream of the hospital construction project brought into relief Chinese citizens' wholesale dependence on the state. As Ang (2020) notes, after years of intensified centralization had gutted civic sectors, the hospital construction project dramatized the kind of mass mobilization possible *only* under the auspices of the national government. Yet this staggering spectacle of state efficacy came to derive much of its power from dialogism: internet users' active engagement as not just patriotic citizens—but also playful supervisors and devoted fans—would make their participation a crucial component of its propagandistic appeal. This is symptomatic of the Chinese government's increasing investment in what Repnikova and Fang (2018) call "a more participatory form . . . of official persuasion online" (p. 770). By tracing the genesis of playful memes against the backdrop of a crisis, we show how the cultural repertoire of participatory fandom intersected with propagandistic state social media to

create user-generated, nationalistic content: "participatory propaganda" (Asmolov, 2019). Just as fans' devotion cannot be mandated but must be given voluntarily, the most effective forms of propaganda are not manufactured by the state, but generated in a participatory fashion by citizens themselves.

Conceptual Framework: Fandom Governance

Scholars of the Chinese internet have charted the convergence of social media fandom and cyber-nationalism in what Liu (2019, p. 141) calls "fandom nationalism." Recent scholarship has focused on its manifestations in outward-facing foreign "campaigns" or "expeditions," in which Chinese internet users employ the tactics of Chinese fandom communities to coordinate social media attacks against political adversaries. For instance, in 2017, internet nationalists using the feminized moniker "Little Pink" inundated Tsai Ing-wen's Facebook page with pro-China slogans in an event now called the Diba Expedition (帝吧出征), catapulting fandom nationalism to widespread attention (Fang & Repnikova, 2018).

There are several ways of understanding how the Chinese state foments and benefits from fandom nationalism, broadly conceived. On the simplest level, authorities can enlist internet users to generate online distractions that drown out disapproved topics (Moskowitz, 2019). Guobing Yang points to a more subtle way in which the state cultivates the tenor of online discourse. Besides "repressive" forms of censorship that remove offensive content from circulation, Yang (2019) notes that it also engages in "productive" approaches by encouraging user-generated expressions of nationalism and amplifying them whenever possible (p. 9). Similarly, in our case study, state social media's amplification of the construction vehicle memes appears to drown out dissent with coordinated, politically productive content (Roberts, 2018).

Building upon this scholarship, we draw attention to what we call *fandom governance*. We study how, during a moment of national crisis, state-run social media adopted a strategy of governing citizens-as-fans by borrowing registers (Agha, 1999), scripts, and games (Kelty, 2020) from Chinese internet culture around reality television talent competitions. In doing so, we investigate state-run social media's role in setting the terms of participation on social media platforms (Gorwa, 2019) to promote worshipping the nation according to the conventions of worshipping celebrity idols (Liu, 2019).

Fandom governance fits into China's "longstanding history" of concern with "the effective harnessing of emotions for the sake of governance" (Steinmüller, 2015, p. 3): from Imperial China to the Communist Era, the Chinese state has long used filial piety toward patriarchal figures as a model for subjects' devotion to rulers. More recently, as postsocialist Chinese families have come to value loving intimacy over

formal hierarchy, the state also aspires to make itself loveable: as "love becomes a common language available to the private sphere, . . . it is also elevated to the level of propaganda in order to encourage and strengthen people's devotion to the regime" (Guo, 2020, p. 48). In our case study, we see modalities of both filial and intimate devotion, with the critical addition of cuteness as a resource in the state's productive management of emotion.

We extend prior genealogical mappings of Chinese cultural models of devotion and affect management by drawing attention to the notion of *meng* (萌), an adjective meaning "cute" that originated in the Chinese internet slang before spreading into common usage (de Seta, 2014). It is a loanword derived from the Japanese *moe*, which refers to affection, possessiveness, and protectiveness of the sort that fans feel toward animated characters or pop culture icons. As a vernacular form of East Asian cuteness cultures detailed by Abidin (2016), *meng* remains closely associated with the subculture of Chinese internet fandom from which it emerged, and has spawned compound words describing the practices of fans and idols. The verb *menghua* (萌化), literally "to cutify," means making someone or something cute so that it can be adored or even idolized. The verb *maimeng* (卖萌), literally "to sell cuteness," means passing oneself off as cute to inspire adoration, leading us to opt for a more liberal translation: "playing cute." Within the playful arena of internet fandom, fans and idols engage in co-constitutive moves: fans cutify idols and idols play cute. A fan's vulnerability to *meng* is linked to the inherent paradox of neoliberal agency: the assertion of individualistic selfhood by succumbing to the entertainment industry's consumerist desires (see Ngai, 2012; Rofel 2007).

We demonstrate that the assimilation of the field hospital construction project to the culture of internet fandom hinged on the affective potential of *meng*: remote supervisors cutified (*menghua*) construction vehicles; state social media, in response, played cute (*maimeng*), connecting fans' affection for the vehicles with the state's desire for citizens' affection. By tracing manifestations of *meng* in the construction vehicle memes, we provide an ethnographic account of this powerful new principle of relational intimacy in contemporary Chinese culture. In the episode we analyze, *meng* functioned to create "scalar intimacies" (Pritzker & Perrino, 2020) by associating different types of relationships—parents and children, fans and idols, and citizens and the nation—through verbal conventions of interpersonal affection. As remote supervisors evolved into fans, they were able to enact these connections across multiple scales thanks to a broader communicational "infrastructure of intimacy" (Wilson, 2015) encompassing social media platforms such as Weibo and the state-run social media accounts that leapt in to capitalize on the opportune emergence of cute memes with patriotic shadings. Although endemic to the arena of entertainment, the playful sociability associated with *meng* proved wildly extendible: cutification was a means of constituting the

vehicles as celebrity idols, while playing cute was a means for the state to court adoration.

This episode figures into the Chinese state's ongoing efforts to successfully harness the power of cuteness and its potential to politically engage fandom publics through social media. As early as 2013, a Weibo account personifying the Chinese space agency's lunar rover as a cute bunny (萌兔) attracted almost a million followers. The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) official media outlet called upon other government agencies to follow suit by "playing cute" (*maimeng*): personifying themselves, titillating emotions, and capitalizing on signs of public engagement (Wu, 2016)—precisely the playbook that unfolds in our case study. However, a number of later attempts to manufacture idols proved futile. A 2019 propaganda anime series commissioned by the CCP presenting a svelte young Marx as an idol met with mixed reviews (Douban, 2019). A year later, the CCP Youth League's personifications of itself as two "virtual idols"—the girl Tender Country (江山娇) and the boy Blazing Flag (红旗漫)—proved a flop and were taken down within hours due to social media backlash (Phoenix Media, 2020). The contrast between these successes and failures points to a central feature of fandom governance. While the CCP has long been attuned to the potential of marshaling fandom for political mobilization, being able to do it successfully seems to require allocating fans themselves some measure of what Kelty (2020, p. 14) terms "contributory autonomy": opportunities for participants' involvement in creative co-production.

Linguistic anthropologist Teri Silvio (2010) influentially theorizes the participatory investment fans make in popular East Asian characters as a form of "animation." For Silvio (2010), animation is "the projection of qualities perceived as human—life, power, agency, will, personality, and so on—outside of the self, and into the sensory environment, through acts of creation, perception, and interaction" (p. 427). As a way of thinking about how personified characters at the heart of anime, manga, and gaming industries come to life, this framework is generative on multiple levels. First, it highlights that these characters are the "creations of collectives" (p. 428), involving a complex division of labor between professionals with a variety of interlocking skills. Perhaps more importantly, "fans, and many scholars, often . . . sense that these characters have lives of their own . . . arising from their re-creation in numerous media and styles by hundreds, thousands of fans" (p. 428). Given the power of this framework for mobilizing emotional investment, Silvio argues, it has spread from the realm of entertainment; now corporations, nations, and even religious movements seek to brand themselves with cute mascots capable of inspiring devoted followings (Silvio, 2019). We build upon Silvio's insights, showing how the co-created animation of the construction vehicle idols draws upon the cultural logic of fandom. It hinges on an incompleteness that state social media might seek to canalize but can never fully control.

In the following sections, we examine how an incipient fandom takes shape around the field hospital construction vehicles through the process of animation. We focus on the personifying practices of naming the construction vehicles, visually depicting their identities, and mobilizing them as interactants. We note that because this process of animation is collective and distributed across myriad animators with distinctive perspectives, the personified vehicles have multiple names and protean identities. We show that, as animated vehicles took on life as the objects of remote supervisors' adoration, Chinese state social media accounts channelled the outpouring of emotion into the participant framework and digital infrastructure of Chinese fandom culture. In capitalizing on the popularity of the construction vehicles and consolidating interpretations around themes of national unity through fandom governance, the state became an active participant in the animation process.

Animation Through Naming

On the second day of the livestreaming, the participant structure of remote supervision coalesced alongside the animation of construction vehicles as personified figures. Naming was central to the process of animation, individuating the vehicles and contributing to their portrayal as characters. In the comment section under the livestreams and in posts on Weibo, remote supervisors began referring to the vehicles using affectionate nicknames in the way one might address a child. Nicknaming may have begun spontaneously, but it eventually became an activity in its own right, and a form of verbal play. "Chinese nicknames have as their primary function the creation or validation of a sense of casual, good-natured fun," explains Moore (1993, p. 75). The kinds of affectionate diminutives remote supervisors gave to the construction vehicles were analogous in structure and function to childhood "family nicknames" (小名, literally "little name") that "define membership in the kinship group" by expressing "affectionate intimacy" and "a very strong sense of family loyalty" (p. 80). Thus, diminutive nicknames served to simultaneously "key" (Goffman, 1974, p. 43) not just play per se, but the particular kind of playfulness associated with domestic intimacy. This intimacy is reflected in the remote supervisors' comments. "I'm watching Huoshenshan Hospital grow up," one wrote. Here, the character for "watch"—*kan* (看)—conjoins different modalities of care. It refers at once to witnessing as a concerned spectator, monitoring as a remote supervisor, and looking after one's children as a parent. From the use of diminutives and explicit reference to child care and rearing (看着长大), fictive kinship emerged as a vital element in the transformation of this event into an instance of fandom nationalism highlighting shared membership in a "national family" (国家).

Some remote supervisors formed diminutives by conjoining the prefix "Little" (小) with the vehicle type, as in Little Forklift (小叉车), or with a distinguishing color attribute, such as Little Yellow (小黄, a mechanical digger) or Little Green (小绿, a dump truck). The reduplication of the diminutive could add an extra-cute effect: Wee Little Yellow (小小

黄). Closely related terms of endearment featuring the prefix "Big" (大) also appeared in the comments, for instance, Big Yellow (大黄, a pump truck). In Chinese, such augmentative nicknames function according to a logic similar to diminutives: the prefix "little" conveys the same affectionate intimacy toward status subordinates as the prefix "big" toward status superordinates. Generally speaking, all these terms of endearment were mechanisms of *menghua* that enabled remote supervisors to animate the vehicles as personae, imbue them with qualities of cuteness, and express affection toward them.

In a pattern that merits particular attention, remote supervisors formed additional nicknames by appending "baby" (酱, *jiang*)—an ACGN (Anime, Comics, Video games, and pulp Novels) internet slang suffix deriving from the Japanese diminutive "-chan" (ちゃん)—to some distinguishing attribute of a particular vehicle: Baby Forklift (叉酱), Baby Tractor Shovel (铲酱), Baby Red (红酱), Baby Green (绿酱), and so on. For added cuteness, some even combined both a diminutive prefix and suffix, for example: Baby Little Red (小红酱) or Baby Little Green (小绿酱). Pointing indexically to both the Japanese ideal of *kawaii* cuteness (Hiramoto & Wee, 2019) and the Chinese internet fandoms that draw upon that cultural repertoire, suffixation with *jiang* conveys endearing infantilization, which is why we gloss it as "baby." Consequently, the diminutive appellations formed with this suffix suggest a feminized form of affection—the type of care and concern one directs to an infant—while also evoking the feminized subculture of fan circles (饭圈), where it is commonly used to create discursive intimacy with idolized characters and celebrities. Underlining this association with internet fandom, a popular cement mixing truck earned the appellation Baby Mud Barfer (呕泥酱, *ounijiang*), which sounds like an affectionate Japanese term for "big brother" (お兄さん, *oniichan*), widely used among young Chinese participants in ACGN online subcultures.

Because these names emerged spontaneously from the engagement of an incipient fandom, many vehicles received multiple names, sometimes with strikingly different connotations. Despite the prevalence of diminutive nicknames drawing on the feminized idiom of cuteness, remote supervisors also coined nicknames evocative of a masculine, warrior ethos. Several names were homophones for the titles of historical figures, especially emperors. Besides Baby Mud Barfer, remote supervisors called the cement mixer Emperor Who Sends Dust (送灰宗), a homophone for of Emperor Huizong (宋徽宗) from the Song Dynasty. They came to call a blue-colored mechanical digger Emperor Who Always Works (勤史皇), a homophone for the first emperor of a unified Imperial China, Qin Shi Huang (秦始皇). A vehicle involved in electric welding earned the appellation Welding Emperor (焊舞帝), a homophone for the powerful Emperor Wu (汉武帝) of the Han Dynasty. As we show below, these historic nicknames—in contrast to the cutesy nicknames—enabled different interactions between remote supervisors and the idols they worship.

These ingenious homophones draw on the playful use of sound-alike terms in Chinese internet culture, and particularly humorous memes. While homophones are otherwise often associated with flouting state censorship (Miltner, 2018; Zidani, 2018), here they index powerful male protectors and progenitors from Chinese history to create provocative analogies between past and present. As Moskowitz (2019) writes of the place of historical allusions in Chinese internet culture, "slamming history and the present moment together in this fashion is a profound revisualization of both historical events and the contemporary era," creating both playful juxtapositions and serious evocations of an inspirational tradition (p. 20). Thus, one remote supervisor posted a comment describing historical homophones as "the upgraded (升级) versions" of the cute terms of endearment that initially appeared in comment threads. These "more high-end and magnificent" (高大上) names, the comment continued, "give us a feeling that our ancestors from every dynasty are protecting us." Significantly, this comment very clearly distills the paternalistic model of ancestral worship of patriarchal protectors and implicitly extends it to the contemporary Chinese state.

It is striking that two paradigms of nicknames emerged drawing diametrically on the domain of kinship, one inserting the vehicles into the role of small children who need parental protection, the other positioning them in the role of ancestors protecting living descendants. By the time remote supervisors began circulating compendia of vehicle names 2 days after the start of streaming, some vehicles had multiple nicknames based on different naming conventions. For instance, the digger named Emperor Who Always Works (勤史皇) could also be called Little Blue (小蓝) or Lan Wangji (蓝忘机), a homophone for the hero in China's then most popular television series, *The Untamed*. The multiplicity of names points to a key feature of playfulness in internet culture: creation is always partial, incomplete, open-ended, and available for remix (Miltner, 2018; Moskowitz, 2019; Phillips & Milner, 2017). The names thrive on polysemy and associations across cultural strata ranging from Japanese ACGN, ancient imperial history, to contemporary television shows.

These cute nicknames also drew intertextually on other recent Chinese memes, notably those associated with fandom nationalism. In 2019, participants in a social media campaign against Hong Kong protestors proclaimed their intent to defend Older Brother A-Zhong (阿中哥哥), a personification of the Chinese nation in the form of a celebrity idol (Initium Media, 2019). Moreover, the construction vehicle nicknames came to figure centrally into a pattern of giving cute nicknames to other inanimate entities associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, in online discourse, the virus itself became Little Corona (阿冠) and Cute Sister (萌妹), a charming but dangerous seductress. Wuhan also garnered two novel nicknames: Little Fool (小笨蛋), for its ignominious role in the pandemic, and Hot-Dry Noodles (热干面), a famous regional dish.

Figure 1. Weibo post from Yangshipin sharing a curated gallery of vehicle nicknames and memes.

Figure 2. Image macro meme anthropomorphizing "Baby Mud Barfers whispering together."

Figure 3. Baby Forklift "burden of life" meme.

Animation Through Visualization

Weibo users added to the identity of each vehicle by producing image macro memes (Miltner, 2018; Mina, 2019) with vehicles' nicknames superimposed on screen grabs from the video feed. Individual users and state social media accounts widely circulated these memes separately and in curated galleries. For instance, Figure 1 shows a gallery featuring several images of the cement mixer Baby Mud Barfer, with memes depicting its various nicknames: Emperor who Sends Dust, Big White Rabbit (大白兔, which is also the name of a favorite children's candy), and White Chubby-Chub (白滚滚). Some of these image macros added an additional layer of animation by personifying vehicles' behavior. For instance, the meme in Figure 2 shows two of these cement mixers parked together with their cabins angled toward each other. The caption reads "Baby Mud Barfers whispering together" (窃窃私语的呕泥酱). Animation here is not just a matter of imputing personalities to the construction vehicles, but also playfully positing storylines that suggest social interactions and ongoing relationships between them.

Personifying the vehicles was also a means of identifying with them: in the meme depicted in Figure 3, an especially popular vehicle, Baby Forklift, carries two gargantuan bent pipes. The superimposed text reads "the burdens of life" (生活的重担), a catchphrase used in Chinese social media to joke about everyday hardships. Intertextual references like these establish associations with Chinese internet culture, and generate humor by creatively redeploying familiar laugh-lines. Memetic humor presumes virtual relationships based on shared sentiment: memes "promote a specific form of internet literacy that is embedded in virtual social networks and geared towards the affective response of laughter—a

Figure 4. Fanart anthropomorphizing Baby Mud Barfer as a "soft" male idol.

social practice of laughing with, as well as laughing at" (Rea, 2013, p. 171). Thus, the proliferation of playful memes and humorous content around the construction vehicles reflects a virtualized form of collective effervescence based on shared recognition of cultural and subcultural intertexts, and shared experiences of pleasure (Shifman, 2013). This event clearly corroborates Coates's (2017) observation that the effervescent virality of memes in Chinese social media reflects local "understandings of sociality as spreadable, seductive, and affective" (p. 163).

In addition to generating and circulating image macros, other participants contributed to the visual personification of the vehicles through extraordinary pieces of original artwork. Figure 4 is an image personifying Baby Mud Barfer in the style of *doujin* (同人, an ACGN genre often associated with fanart). Although the vehicle's nickname is splashed across the background, the cement mixer itself is only partially visible. The artist has personified the vehicle in the figure of its driver, portrayed according to the aesthetic conventions of "soft masculinity" (Jung, 2010). Closely associated with East Asian pop idols and celebrity boy bands, this kind of masculinity emphasizes male beauty and emotional sensitivity. Soft masculinity is manifest in several ways here, beginning with the driver's fashionable and futuristic attire, which is immaculately clean. With large, lachrymose eyes, he is a study in melancholy. Moreover, note the juxtaposition between his slight, androgynous frame and the strength of his workmanly hands. Overall, the image evokes a conceptual contrast between individual human frailty and the weight of historical

Figure 5. Fan-drawn poster depicting construction vehicles as "hard" masculine heroes in an epic battle.

responsibility, doubly personified through the paired figures of Baby Mud Barfer and its driver. The depiction of the driver as an object of romantic contemplation according to visual conventions of celebrity idol worship gives the image an almost votive quality.

The images we have described so far all involve aspects of cutification. With no overt reference to the context of the pandemic, they soften the seriousness of the vehicles and turn them into objects of play and affection. Other user-generated imagery, however, embellished the martial associations reflected in the historical nicknames, foregrounding traditionally "hard" masculinity. The artwork shown in Figure 5 offers one vivid example, drawing heavily on the visual vocabulary of anime and manga. It shows some of the most popular construction vehicles, Baby Forklift in the lead, wearing surgical masks and arrayed heroically in front of one of the construction site's white-colored temporary buildings, with each of their nicknames written overhead. The Gods of Fire and Thunder, for whom the field hospitals are named, tower above them, menacing immortals with rippling muscles. The words at the middle of the picture (捍武大帝) are homophones for

the title of one of ancient China's most powerful Emperors, "The Great Conqueror King of Han" (汉武大帝). The substituted first character (捍) means "protect," suggesting a new signification for the second character (武) "Wu(han)," and yielding a new meaning: "Great King Protector of Wuhan." Images like this animate the cute vehicles through the patriarchal idiom of ancestral worship. In doing so, they position the accelerated construction of hospitals as continuing the dynastic tradition of safeguarding the Chinese state and its people, lending an air of historicity and monumentality to the vehicles.

From Memes to Idols: Animation Through Fandom Governance

Naming and visual depiction were crucial parts of animating the vehicle memes as characters, but elevating them to the status of celebrity idols involved "scripting" (Kelty, 2020, p. 261) participants as fans. By introducing ludic modules that channeled remote supervisors' adoration into systems of voting and ranking, state social media made their contributory involvement visible as idol worship. In the context of Chinese fandom, symbolic exchanges between fans and idols are public displays of devotedness that culturally magnify the idol's persona. Ultimately these "parasocial" interactions can take the form of "parakin" relationships that require fans to "protect" and "support" their idols like family members (Yan & Yang, 2020). Interacting with idols also creates "scalar intimacies" (Pritzker & Perrino, 2020) as fans interact with each other in fan circles. In this way, remote supervisors came to socialize both *with* and *through* the construction vehicles, using cuteness as a resource for constituting intimacies through playful forms of involvement.

Viewers of the construction livestreams made comments that clearly connected the forms of affectionate care that supervisors show their workforce and that fans show their celebrity idols. For instance, a Weibo user posted, "Baby Tractor Shovel goes to bulldoze, supervisors follow you forever. To cheer on Little Yellow shout #GoForItWuhan." Another Weibo user posted:

> Although I have to stay at home during the spring festival, I still have a job to do. As a remote supervisor, I will support and supervise workers and be grateful for their contribution. [. . .] Baby Red, Baby Green, Baby Tractor Shovel, Baby Little Red, Baby Little Green, let's do it.

Comments such as these reveal the interactive premise of animation: the cuteness of the idols engenders protective "support" that brings them to life as participants in symbolic exchanges and parakin relationships with fans.

State social media took an active role in amplifying the conceptualization of viewership as "remote supervision" by encouraging its rapid evolution into a form of fandom. It is not surprising, in the context of a national crisis, that state social media would throw its weight behind online activity generating enthusiastic publicity for a reassuring spectacle of governmental efficacy (see Feng, 2020). In this sense, the spread of memes related to the construction vehicles came to resemble what Palmer (2007) terms a "political fever," when informal signals "sent from above correspond with, open the space for, and amplify popular desire, which appropriates these spaces in unexpected ways, simultaneously complying with, . . . disrupting, and mirroring the projects of state hegemony" (p. 162). State-run social media accounts' advertisement of memes and adoption of popular language used in fan culture was an informal signal, notifying internet users that the state approved and encouraged the playful narrative about the national project.

When the official Weibo account of CCTV News made the post shown in Figure 1 on the third day of livestreaming, it included the following comment alongside the gallery of memes:

> Too cute! #TenMillionCloudSupervisorsIntelligence 😜 Remote supervisors who felt bored but couldn't fall asleep watched the hospital construction livestream and gave names to vehicles in the field: Little Red, Little Green, Little Yellow, Baby Forklift, Baby Tractor Shovel, Baby Mud Barfer . . . Do you know who they are?

This extraordinary post shows the dawning attunement of state social media to the productive political potential of the vehicle memes. CCTV introduced a hashtag here (#TenMillionCloudSupervisorsIntelligence) that naturalized the activity of "cloud supervision," highlighted the massive scale of participation, and celebrated the crowd-sourced creativity of animating the construction vehicles. The hashtag is framed on one end with the interjection "too cute!" (太可爱), and on the other with an emoji conveying a sense of fun and zaniness. With winking approbation, the state recognizes and partakes in remote supervisors' spirit of playfulness. This message is driven home by the challenge to internet users to learn the vehicles' cute nicknames.

A wide coterie of state-controlled social media accounts joined in reposting memes and circulating lists of vehicle names. Besides CCTV, our corpus includes Weibo posts by People's Daily, News China, China National Radio, The China Youth Daily, the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League, and others. The Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council exhorted Weibo users:

> Darlings, wake up, let's continue remote supervision of the construction project. Little Yellow, Little Blue, Big White, Emperor Who Sends Dust, Emperor Who Always Works . . . You need to be familiar with these names, otherwise you will be derided by others in the comment section.

State social media's active promotion of the nicknames was an important step toward consolidating politically productive play around vehicles-as-celebrities.

In the days that followed, state social media took an active hand in transforming these characters into celebrity idols and, ultimately, organizing this play into a form of fandom governance. On 29 January, People's Daily if not solely created, then at least almost single-handedly popularized, a new hashtag #ConstructionVehicleIdolsGroup (#挖掘机天团#), which quickly went viral on Weibo. Using the phrase "idols group" (天团)—a term commonly used to refer to boy bands and girl groups—framed the construction vehicles as celebrity entertainers and remote supervisors, by extension, as fans. The post received more than 279,000 likes, thousands of reposts and comments, and echoes from multiple other state social media accounts. As the hashtag became popular, the livestream soared to over 40 million simultaneous views, and the comment threads were filled with speculation about which vehicles would *chudao* (出道) next. *Chudao* is a term that denotes the debut of performance artists onto the public stage to launch their careers. By employing a term associated with the entertainment industry, internet users further elaborated linguistic associations between the vehicles memes and celebrity idol worship—an indication of their receptiveness to the role assigned to them in the script of fandom governance.

It should not come as a surprise that state social media displayed a high degree of proficiency in mobilizing the participatory frameworks of fandom. In contemporary China, the state is deeply involved in shaping synergies between entertainment, advertising, and politics (Sullivan & Kehoe, 2019). Not only did state-run social media adopt a socioculturally distinctive linguistic register (Agha, 1999) gesturing at Chinese fandom practices, it also introduced participatory modalities that borrowed directly from TV networks' and internet platforms' fandom management playbook. One participatory modality was particularly important in turning the construction vehicle memes into a full-fledged instance of celebrity idol worship: voting systems.

Mirroring the rankings of celebrity idols, Yangshipin, the CCTV affiliate livestreaming the hospital construction, soon incorporated an interactive ranking list for construction vehicle celebrities under its video feed, encouraging remote supervisors to cast votes supporting their favorites (Figure 6). For fans, casting votes to keep an idol at the top of a ranking list is a form of protection against elimination in reality shows and other platforms of visibility (Yin, 2020; Q. Zhang & Negus, 2020). Unlike idol candidates on reality shows, the vehicles' presence on the construction site certainly did not hinge on fans' ardor. Yet by casting these cute memes as idol contestants, state social media rendered them *artificially* vulnerable to descending in status or acclaim. In the process, it created a small and disposable pantheon of virtual avatars for the state, consolidating the power of fandom governance by mobilizing the public's engagement around images of vulnerability. Confirming this point, as construction vehicles entered into the ambit of fandom, this interactive ranking list and other posts made by state-controlled media increasingly employed their cute nicknames, not the patriarchal, historical appella-

Figure 6. Construction livestream on Yangshipin platform with recently introduced voting system for vehicles: Baby Forklift tops the ranking with 189,760 votes, followed by Little Blue and Baby Mud Barfer.

tions—suggesting a deliberate selection of *meng* as a paradigm for fandom nationalism.

Heralding the advent of Yangshipin's ranking list, National Business Daily raved on Weibo that

the Construction Vehicle Idols Group . . . has now officially debuted! The live video stream is so intoxicating (上头) that [internet users] cannot help but indulge themselves. Become a remote supervisor and clock in every day. When you *puff the list* for the idols group, don't forget to pay attention to real-time updates on the epidemic.

This post not only refers to fandom in terms of compulsively intoxicating affective states, but also enacts a verbal register distinctive of fan culture: in their vernacular, fans refer to casting votes to help their favorite celebrities ascend the popularity rankings as "puffing the list" (打榜). This post's gentle nudge to pay attention to the pandemic points to the tension between escapist fandom and the more serious imperative of keeping the public informed.

The level of convergence among state-run social media accounts around this moment of fandom nationalism suggests, if not a concerted effort, then at the very least a deeply shared attunement to fandom's political potential (cf. Han, 2015b). Remote supervisors also reflected explicitly on the state's deep involvement in their online activities. One fandom opinion leader commented that by "opening a ranking list for vehicles," state social media showed that "they really know how to play the game, hahahaha." The notion of "knowing how to play the game" (太会玩了) here can connote both having a good time and, more insidiously, deftly manipulating rules to one's advantage. In the thread below this post, the most upvoted comment stated, "official certification hahahahaha." Another responded, "public officials (官方) work hard so that we won't be bored." Other comments proclaimed that "Papa CCTV (央视爸爸) is comforting children" or that "officials are comforting us, the children who feel bored at home."

In these comments, remote supervisors constitute state social media's deployment of fandom practices as another Batesonian play signal. Participants acknowledge the state for engaging subjects through ludic governmentality—distracting them from their fears, as a parent might do for a child. Yet the use of phrases like "Papa CCTV" highlights the imbalance of power implicit in this relationship, and the signs of laughter in several of these comments lend themselves to a variety of interpretations, ranging from genuine delight to dismissive cynicism. Taken together, these comments display recognition that, in amplifying animation through practices of cutification (*menghua*), state social media was also playing cute (*maimeng*), endeavoring to inspire affection by displaying its ability to engage in play.

The efficacy of state-run social media's adoption of a fandom register and interactive game modules such as the voting system beneath the livestream became evident on the nation's most public platforms. On the day People's Daily popularized the "Idols Group" hashtag, Baby Forklift became the number one "super topic" on Weibo list of fan circle trending topics. Pop idol fans themselves were shocked that a construction vehicle had eclipsed Mandopop singers and other celebrities (Figure 7). "I couldn't imagine the day would come that a forklift would occupy the number one position on the fan circle super topic list," one commented. Fan culture opinion leaders took note. A popular entertainment microblog posted, "Baby Forklift ranks first, followed by Lan Wangji [the blue digger] and Baby Mud Barfer. Construction Vehicle Fan Circle, come vote for the idols."
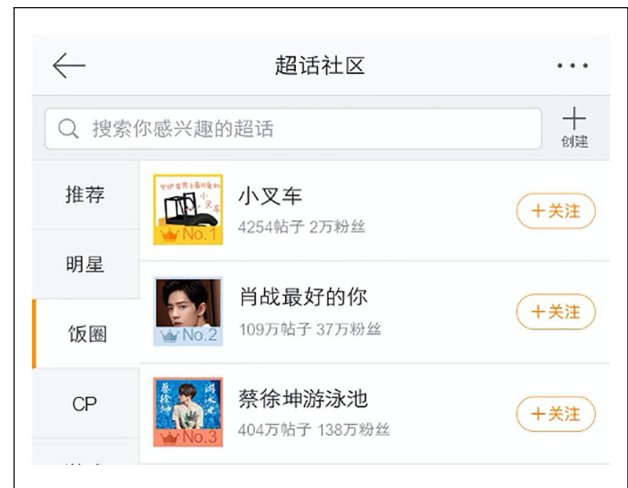
Figure 7. Ranking of celebrity idol topics trending in Weibo fan circles: Baby Forklift tops the list, followed by Mandopop singers Sean Xiao and KUN.

This post takes a significant step toward resignifying remote supervisors as a fandom public, coining the name for a new fan circle (i挖掘机) according to the convention of adding "i," a homophone for "love" (爱, *ai*), to an idol's name—in this case, the Chinese words for excavating machine.

Enacting scripts of fandom—and inhabiting the role of fans—internet users responded to state social media's deployment of ludic modules of fandom management by further embellishing associations between the remote supervision and idol fandom in a number of creative ways. Posting names and images of the Idols Group to a dictionary of internet slang, one commented:

> Produce Huoshenshan/Leishenshan Construction 101. [. . .] Remote supervisors, come and pick your favorite vehicles! [. . . Mine] is the hard-working and attractive Baby Forklift. Our Baby Forklift is the prettiest one in the field! Go for it, Baby Forklift! Wajijiwa, treat our brothers well!

The post bristles with intertextual references to idol fan culture. "Produce Huoshenshan/Leishenshan Construction 101" is a clear reference to "Produce 101," a famous Chinese spinoff of a South Korean reality show that brings together trainees who compete for the opportunity to debut as an idols group. Wajijiwa (挖机机挖), which literally translates as "Dig machine dig," is the humorous nickname that fans gave to the company that managed the construction vehicles. It is a homophone for Wajijiwa (哇唧唧哇), a major Chinese entertainment conglomerate that manages numerous celebrity idols. This comment therefore imagines a fictional scenario with the Construction Vehicles Idols Group inhabiting the commercial spaces reserved for pop icons.

The collaborative resignification of the construction vehicle memes as celebrity idols was amplified by actual celebrities' engagement with the Idols Group hashtag, mobilizing
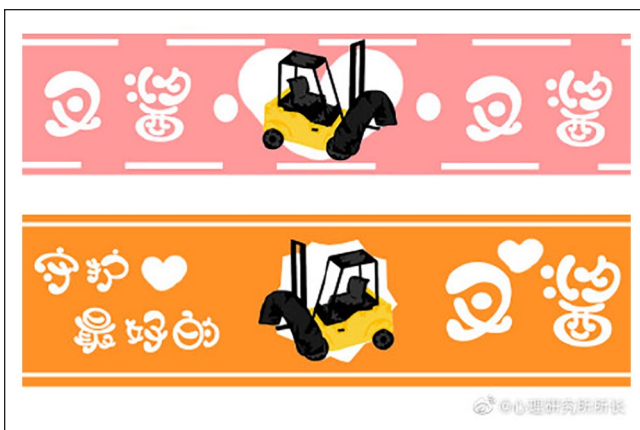
Figure 8. Weibo post of Baby Forklift cartoon with pink text that reads, "protect the cutest Little Forklift in the world."

Figure 9. Baby Forklift fan banners.

further participation from their own circles of fans. For instance, Han Geng, a Chinese Mandopop singer and actor, sent a Weibo post using the Idols Group hashtag, stating, "Here comes a remote supervisor. We are supervising this significant national project together, and protecting the most mighty Baby Forklift together! Go for it, Wuhan! Go for it, Chinese people!" Han's comment received more than 100,000 reposts. It crystallized the symbolic reciprocity between vehicular idols who work on behalf of the nation and the fans who "protect" them through acts of devotion such as voting on ranking lists.

Devotional Artifacts as Participatory Propaganda

In this section, we explore the diversity of devotional artifacts created by members of the fandom public. To an extent, this profusion of creativity is a testimony to state-run social media's success in cultivating and harnessing citizens' devotional affect and investment in these idolized vehicles. In what follows, we focus in particular on Baby Forklift, by many measures the most popular and adored member of the Idols Group (Figure 8). While scholars have noted that participatory media may pose particular threats of "creative insurgency" (Kraidy, 2017) to authoritarian regimes, we highlight how fandom governance offers Chinese state social media a tool for channeling creative expression into participatory propaganda (Asmolov, 2019) without directly enforcing "interpretive domination" (Weller, 1994).

A source of Baby Forklift's perceived cuteness (*mengdian*) was its relatively small size compared with the towering cranes and bulky cement mixers. This helps explain its

special popularity and the particular ardor of its fans. For example, on 30 January, one devotee posted on Weibo:

> Protect the cutest and most hardworking Baby Forklift in the world. Everybody work hard! Let our Baby Forklift debut and take center stage (C位出道)! Baby Forklift you can fly, your Fan Group [i叉] will follow you forever! Let's go, Huoshen and Leishen [Hospitals]! Let's go, Wuhan! Let's go, China!

This comment displays many features indexical of Chinese fandom registers, including specialized cultural references to "debuting and taking center stage" and the identification of Baby Forklift's fan circle as i叉, which might be roughly translated as "Fork Lovers." Moreover, the post contains two speech acts characteristic of fandom: apostrophic words of encouragement directed to the idol and exhortations to fellow fans to engage in additional acts of devoted support and protection. In a symbolic loop, the imaginative construction of Baby Forklift's cute vulnerability subjectifies fans through their own vulnerability to its cuteness, summoning displays of concern and support that ramify "scalar intimacies" (Pritzker & Perrino, 2020) outward in a chain of metonymic associations extending from the hospitals, to the affected city, to the nation itself.

In addition to producing and circulating memes and decorating photos as they might to show affection for celebrity entertainers, Fork Lovers used a variety of other expressive media to materialize affection for Baby Forklift and to augment intimacy with both the idol and other fans. For instance, they generated colorful banners emblazoned with Baby Forklift's image (Figure 9)—something that, in other circumstances, they might print and wave in the air at their idol's live appearances. Another fan created a video depicting Baby Forklift as a three-dimensional avatar inside an imaginary video game called "Let's Go Baby Forklift!" The video featured the plaintive sounds of a child singing, "heart to heart, we are a family," keying the affective bonds of kinship. In the accompanying text, the video's creator stated, "I am just a student, and don't have any money to donate. But I
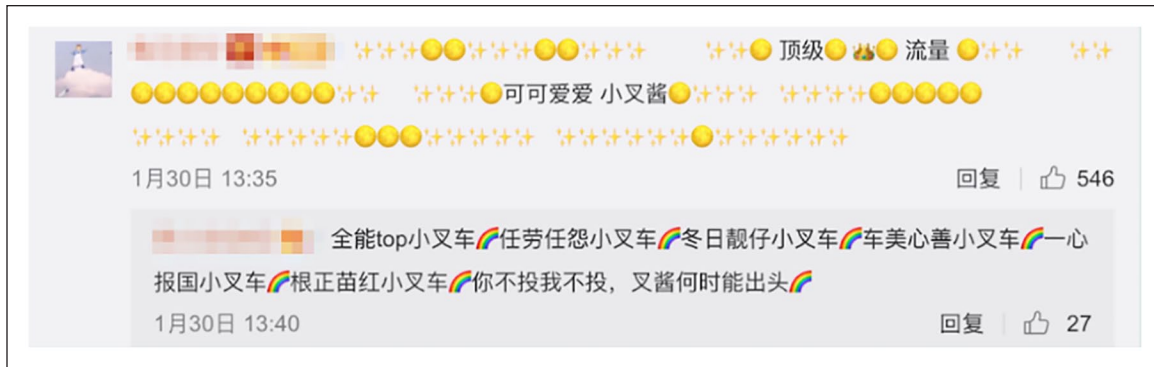
Figure 10. Weibo comments glorifying Baby Forklift through creative combinations of visual and textual elements.

just want to contribute however I can." This comment reveals a key aspect of the devotion *meng* engenders: fans recognize the effort that an idol exerts, and reciprocate with strenuous displays of devotion—these acts are meaningful because, not in spite, of their insignificance. In this sense, vulnerability becomes the basis for agency (Pritzker, 2020), realized through idols' devotion to duty, and fans' devotion to idols. Thus, fan art like these banners or videos served not only to generate emotional involvement with Baby Forklift and other idolized vehicles, but also to enact devotion as an ethical ideal and moral virtue.

Responsiveness in the context of social media goes hand-in-hand with expressiveness. According to Silvio (2019, p. 105), "the cute object induces a kind of mirroring effect, cutifying (and in some sense making abject) the viewing subject." In comments directed apostrophically to Baby Forklift, fans often used a Mandarin baby talk register (Farris, 1992), infantilizing their speech as feminized Chinese caregivers might toward small children. Through the mirroring effect of baby talk, the cutification of the vehicles and cutification of the fans themselves converge in a single cute utterance: "Forky-Forky, charge forth for Mommy" (叉叉给妈妈冲). Adopting the stance of a mother figure toward the idol, as is common in female fan circles (Yan & Yang, 2020), this commenter addresses it with a particularly childish diminutive.

In comment threads, fans graphically rendered effusive outpourings of emotion for Baby Forklift and other idols through paralinguistic features such as interjections, repetitions, punctuation marks (especially exclamation points), and *biaoqing* (表情)—emojis, emoticons, and stickers understood to express emotion (de Seta, 2018) and pragmatically associated with playfulness (Y. Zhang et al., 2020). The most common emojis were hearts and cute animals, but Figure 10 shows a more elaborate example. In response to a People's Daily Weibo post about the vehicles, the first commenter embeds the phrases "top flow" (顶级流量)—meaning "top celebrity who generates the most data flow from online discourse"—and "cutey-cutey Little Baby Forklift" (可可爱爱小叉酱) in a long string of stars and moons (and one golden crown), iconizing the idol's position in the firmament. Decorative embellishment emphasizes devotional intensity.

The next commenter deploys parallelism (a common verbal feature in fan forums), echoing the alternation of key phrases with heavenly emojis, in this case, rainbows. The poetic comment reads:

Well-rounded top (idol) Little Forklift . . . Diligent Little Forklift . . . Pretty guy in winter, Little Forklift . . . Beautiful, kind-hearted Little Forklift . . . Consummately devoted to the country, Little Forklift . . . Born well and raised socialistically, Little Forklift . . . (If) you don't vote and I don't vote, when will Baby Forklift ascend?

Like a magical incantation, this comment imbues the idol with enchantedness by rhythmically repeating its name (Malinowski, 1965, p. 328). Together with the other examples in this section, from the banners to the video game, this illustrates fans' creative use of expressive forms to emotionally involve themselves with Baby Forklift.

Moral Panics Around Fandom Governance

Fans' digital displays of devotion created evidence of participation that amplified the intensity of the Idols Group sensation thereby spreading the reach of fandom governance. The heightened visibility of fandom practices around the vehicle memes also provided an object of discussion for internet users concerned about the COVID-19 crisis but less enamored with the vehicles themselves. In this final section, we examine some of the criticisms Chinese observers directed at Idols Group fandom. Mostly, critics focused on the dissonance between the seriousness of the unfolding crisis and fandom as a mode of creating an entertaining distraction. Many zeroed in on the frivolity of cuteness practices and their role in culturally constructing anthropomorphized objects of fan idolization. Taken together, these comments suggest a fragmentary reckoning with state social media's use of fandom governance as a mode of ludic governmentality.

From 29 to 30 January, the apex of the Idols Group's celebrity, observers on Chinese social media began to voice concerns about the unseemly intrusion of fandom during a national crisis. Among other things, critics worried that the significance of the idolized vehicles as metonymic extensions for the nation had been eclipsed by fetishistic adoration (as reflected, for instance, in the spell-like evocation of Baby Forklift in the previous example). "I disagree with the promotion of anthropomorphism," someone posted on Weibo:

> but, surprisingly, I can accept the behavior of showing support to construction vehicles. I think we are actually showing support to workers sitting inside the vehicles. But don't go too far. No need to puff the list for the vehicles in [fan circles].

Critics posted comments like these on the same platforms and in the same threads that Idols Group fans were using, casting doubts on the validity of emotionally inflamed vehicle fandom as a legitimate form of patriotic expression.

State social media accounts, which were deeply—and visibly—involved in animating the vehicles as idols, at times endeavored to realign fans' emotional expression with more explicitly patriotic concerns. For instance, in one Weibo post, the account of a CCTV subsidiary proclaimed, "the construction site is like a battlefield. Little Green, Big Yellow, Emperor Who Sends Dust, Emperor Who Lifts Things, and many other vehicles have joined the war. Let us pray together." Shifting to the metaphorical domain of warfare, this last sentence enjoins remote supervisors to pray (祈福), as women would have traditionally done for husbands, brothers, and sons off in battle. This injunction could therefore be read as an effort to realign the feminized idiom of fandom with a more traditionally pious female role, relegated to the domestic sphere. Responses to this post in the accompanying comment thread resisted this realignment, highlighting the fundamental intractability of play: "Where is my army of Baby Forklifts?" one commenter demanded. "Don't forget cute Baby Mud Barfer!" responded another. These irreverent responses point to the difficulty of constraining playfulness to the confines of ideologically delimited nationalist projects, and reveal the risk state social media runs of losing control of interpretations as it seeks to capitalize on the polyphony of fans' devotional behavior (Lei, 2017).

Underlining the limits of fandom governance, a number of critics decried the way the Idols hullabaloo was distracting people from the controversy surrounding the Red Cross's mishandling of medical supplies. Some questioned ludic governmentality as a social media strategy, as in the following Weibo comment: "some things are not appropriate for entertainment . . . It is okay for internet users to joke around, but state-run media should not lead people in joking around." This comment makes clear that the state's role in animating the vehicles and stoking the flames of fandom was not lost on observers, who questioned mixing flippant playfulness with serious leadership in a time of crisis. Similarly, Huang

Dianlin, a professor at the Communication University of China, posted an article titled "It is shameful for the media to cutify (*menghua*) the crisis" to his personal WeChat account. "The media is gradually losing . . . the care it should give the public," he wrote. "When everything is personified as cute stuff, there is no humanity. [. . .] The media should not treat crises as entertainment and games, and should not use frivolous and childish expressions to diminish the seriousness of social issues." Recall that some remote supervisors had framed state social media's playfulness as a form of parental care; here, Huang inverts this reading, suggesting that state social media's excessive playfulness and indulgence in *meng* reflects a dereliction of care. Before it was blocked, this post was read over 100,000 times.

Calling attention to the artificiality of treating vehicles like celebrities, some angry comments complained about the flagrant *inauthenticity* of the Idols sensation ("don't use your fake fan speech" or "stop mimicking fan speech in such an awkward way"), pointing to the kind of cynicism the state's social media influence campaigns risk engendering (Han, 2015b). Nevertheless, numerous commentators seized upon the memeification and subsequent idolization of the vehicles as an occasion to articulate moral panics about "fan speech" and the stereotypical types of speakers they associated with it (Jones & Schieffelin, 2009; Miller, 2011). Critics construed emblematic features of fans' verbal and semiotic practices—nicknaming most salient among them—as inappropriate during a national crisis. For these critics, the excesses of *meng* was not just objectionable in the case of the Idols Group sensation, but reflective of deeper generational shortcomings (immaturity, frivolity, imbecility . . .) that the crisis only served to reveal.

For instance, the celebrity Daghe commented that people who think names like Baby Mud Barfer are "cute" (*meng*) display "indecent" (不得体) and "illogical" (没有逻辑) behavior. He called them "behind the times" (很土) and alleged that they have "low IQ" (智商不高) and "a very crude sense of cuteness" (萌点很土，总之不时尚). The allegation of "crude" *mengdian* has the dual connotation that the vehicles lack legitimate qualities of cuteness and that their fans have deficient judgment in discerning cuteness. Endorsing this interpretation, another user responded: "young people in our country, all of them are giant babies, silly kids, dummies. Giving names for vehicles, puffing ranking lists, and scoring points for idols. Calling this brother, that sister, this baby, that kissy-kissy." These comments connect a surfeit of *meng* and a childish desire for intimacy. Making this point more explicit, another commenter complained that nicknaming was "making the whole country childish," and singled out Little Corona as the most egregious example: "people are spoiling (宠溺) [the virus] with affection." In other words, the verbal incorporation of something deeply noxious into a discursive web of familial intimacy represented a childish overindulgence in cuteness.

The following Weibo comment from February 3 distills the essence of these criticisms into one overarching social critique:

> I really don't like personifying everything. I think that it is embarrassing instead of cute. For instance, the forklift in the live video streaming a few days ago, and [the characters] Tender Country, Blazing Flag. Don't use fan culture for everything. I don't know why official Weibo accounts encourage this kind of weird list puffing and gawking. And Older Brother A-Zhong and Wuhan the Little Fool, I'm going to vomit. The thing I dislike is purposefully stirring up emotions. I want to slap the guy who does this. So disgusting.

This comment offers a final reframing of the shifting modalities of visual participation that we have traced in this article. What began with Yangshipin's invitation for spectators to *witness*, and was then redefined in more participatory terms as remote *supervision* and parental *watching over*, is here negatively reevaluated as mere "*gawking*" (围观)—a term connoting the prurient gaze of idle onlookers, captivated by personified quasi-idols. This comment connects the animation of the Construction Vehicles Idols Group with several other parallel phenomena: the CCP's abortive effort to personify itself through anime characters Tender Country and Blazing Flag, the personification of the nation as Older Brother A-Zhong in fandom nationalism, and the proliferation of anthropomorphic nicknames like Little Fool surrounding COVID-19 crisis. It argues that these idol-esque personae arouse misplaced emotions, and questions why state social media would promote them as objects of fan-like engagement.

By generating cute personae that enlist citizen-fans as caring subjects, personification seems to be a vital component of fandom governance in the episode we analyze, as well as other events critical observers associated with it. By and in large, these critics did not reject fandom governance per se. Rather, they dwelled on the obtrusiveness of its emblematic cutified avatars and the diversion that they created from real problems. "Your country is called Brother A-Zhong," wrote one commenter, "the construction vehicle is called Baby Forklift, Wuhan City is called Little Fool. Everything can be personified. However, those workers, peasants, and minority groups who suffer a lot are not considered as real people." In a scathing critique of Chinese neoliberal consumerism, this commenter connected the personification of things according to the conventions of fandom with the dehumanizing treatment of actual persons — persons who toil, suffer, and die — as things. The key grievance about fandom, as both a cultural practice and a mode of governance, that surfaces here is that it distracts. Celebrity idols—be they human entertainers or apotheosized construction vehicles—have the potential to capture attention and transfix the gaze. Through ludic modules like ranking lists that cast idols as vulnerable, state social media harnessed this potential on a large scale; so

much so that it prompted the observers whose comments we analyze here to critically reflect on the place of cuteness in Chinese public life more broadly.

Conclusion: The Cuteness of the State

Recent research on the politics of internet memes has shown that harnessing the creative potential of social media play can empower activists and energize social movements in dramatic ways, for instance the alt-right trolls who helped propel Donald Trump to the U.S. Presidency (Woods & Hahner, 2019). Yet, An Xiao Mina (2019) argues, the power of memes to catalyze protest movements also makes them particularly appealing as tools of social influence for a Chinese state heavily invested in shaping social media dynamics. This paradox points to what Phillips and Milner (2017) describe as the "ambivalence" of the internet, characterized by the capacity of memes to both liberate and oppress, or of social media to both empower participation and constrain it. *Ludic governmentality* is our way of making sense of how Chinese state social media negotiated elements of playful co-production to harness the political potential of memes in a paternalistic form that blended care and control.

Moreover, as all these authors show, because of their open-ended meanings and almost infinite resignifiability, the same memes can be used for different purposes, political or otherwise. Drawing on fandom's register of verbal, visual, semiotic, and interactional practices, internet users "animated" (Silvio, 2010, 2019) the construction vehicles from hospital construction livestreams, rendered them cute, and engaged with them in small but significant acts of symbolic devotion. By playfully embellishing an otherwise straightforward propagandistic spectacle, remote supervisors produced memetic content that Chinese state social media could itself appropriate and channel into a fandom apparatus it adapted from the entertainment industry. Although the Chinese state had suffered several previous failures in attempting to clothe itself in the mantle of cuteness, in this case, by responding to displays of cutification with culturally competent displays of playing cute, state social media accounts successfully harnessed the power of *meng* as a cultural matrix of devotional attachment. Embedding cute memes within modules of fandom management such as celebrity ranking lists, state social media co-produced the ephemeral sensation of the Construction Vehicle Idols group to implement what we have termed *fandom governance*.

Viewing Chinese state social media's co-production of Idols Group as an instance of fandom governance points to new capacities for engaging in playful—hence participatory—forms of ludic governmentality. In this article, we have highlighted how cuteness can be a source of political power—an ability to rally support through strategic displays of vulnerability. The construction vehicles could embody the cuteness of the state because state social media scaffolded

playful engagement with them. Try as it might, the state cannot cutify itself. That requires the voluntary expressive labor of adoring fans, whose visible participation is a crucial part of successfully generating competitive devotion to cute idols. Yet the amount of public bandwidth taken up by these fandom practices in the midst of a pandemic also repelled some observers, who decried the excesses of cuteness and registered their disgust about misplaced intimacies. They were quick to note the performative nature of cuteness: there was nothing objectively cute about the vehicles or anything else associated with COVID-19 for that matter. Against the backdrop of the crisis, they alleged, the virality of the Idols Group was a perverse figment of playful fans cutifying everything and of the state brazenly playing cute.

These negative reactions point to some of the risks and limits of fandom governance. Recall W. Zhang's (2016) argument that visible fan participation can be a key part of an idol's allure. When Chinese state social media routed the construction vehicle memes into the Construction Vehicle Idols Group fandom, its tactics for amplifying fan engagement generated massive participation and publicity. Pitting cutified avatars against each other in ludic modules such as vote-fueled rankings, state social media capitalized on internet users' devotion to these vulnerable cuties. The resulting amplification of fans' emotional involvement fed into a large-scale spectacle of collective devotional behavior being visibly mobilized by state social media. But that spectacle was, in turn, available for Chinese social media users to scrutinize. A number of critical observers saw participation in Idols Group fandom as a sign not of social solidarity and patriotic devotion, but rather of social decay and unruly desire. Because fandom publics lay bare their devices of participation, fandom governance similarly exposes its own operation as a mechanism of social control.

One way of reading the Construction Vehicle Idols Group sensation is that state social media calculatedly embellished the vulnerability of the cute, but ultimately disposable, stand-ins for the state. In that sense, the cuteness of the state might appear to be an inconsequential part of the Chinese government's vast machinery for responding to the crisis and managing public perception of its response. Nevertheless, seeking recourse to the power of cuteness revealed the urgency for the state to make itself loveable at a time of national crisis. When it plays cute, the state reveals a dependence on subjects' devotion akin to idols' need for their fans. By playing the devotional games of fandom governance, remote supervisors were conscripted into protecting not only the manufactured vulnerability of Baby Forklift and the other Idols, but also the symbolic vulnerability of the state itself. Cuteness is power.

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