

Empirical puzzle:

The buzzword *da gong ren* was coined in last September in China, and went popular across many social groups as a way for self-reference in a short period of time. Note that the *da gong ren* discourse was coined by a relatively disadvantaged social group and was originally referring to the “laborers,” why did it get spread across such heterogeneous social groups, lose its original meaning, and finally become part of the popular culture? How has the meaning of the new word changed during the spread?

Theoretical alternatives:

1. The spread of the term *da gong ren* reflects a relatively endogenous and collective response to the overall deterioration of working relations by different social groups.
2. The spread of the term *da gong ren* is the result of different ideological moves taken by different social groups through successive uptakes of the word, which reflects their own positions, perspectives and ways of instantiation of different person types.

General and specific research questions:

GRQ 1: Where does the word “*da gong ren*” come from? What did it mean when it was first coined?

SRQ 1: Who was the first to invent the word “*da gong ren*,” and what were the associated catchphrases, slogans and memes at the beginning of the spread?

SRQ 2: What are the pre-existing linguistic resources deployed in the first stage of spread of the *da gong ren* discourse, and how were they in an intertextual relationship to each other?

SRQ 3: What new meanings emerged out of this recontextualization, and how was that different from the *da gong* discourse in the 1980s and 1990s?

GRQ 2: How has the discourse of *da gong ren* changed in terms of the social groups and its meanings at different stages of the spread?

SRQ 1: What are the different stages of the spread of the *da gong ren* discourse?

SRQ 2: What are the different uptakes of the word *da gong ren* by different social groups, such as the young educated elites and the state media?

SRQ 3: Are the different uptakes of the word by different groups in contestation with each other? How does the later uptake marginalize, control or compromise the uptake at the previous stage?

GRQ 3: What are the political implications of the popularity and the change of the *da gong ren* discourse during its spread?

SRQ 1: What possible change of working relations is this discourse referring to among different social groups in China?

SRQ 2: How does this new linguistic practice shed light on the broader political relationship between the educated young elites, the working class, and the state?

Controlled vocabulary:

Sociolinguistic theories and concepts

- Linguistic variation: regional, social, or contextual differences in the ways that a particular language is used.
- Indexicality, indexical meaning: the context-dependent nature of language and language use.
- Recontextualization: People take some fragment of discourse and quote it anew, making it seem to carry a meaning independent of its situation within two now distinct contexts.
- Metapragmatic discourse: the discourses in which social actors state their own, probably controversial, understandings of the social meanings of this new linguistic practice.
- Interdiscursivity: the aspect of a discourse that implicitly or explicitly relates it to other discourses.
- Identity, persona: the social role that one adopts.

Sources of linguistic resources:

- Working class: comprises those engaged in waged or salaried labor, especially in manual-labor occupations and industrial work.
- Migrant worker: a person who either migrates within their home country or outside it to pursue work. In China, migrant workers began to appear after sudden marketization of labor relations in the 1980s.
- Maoist worker: an ideal model work in the Maoist era, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly characterized by patriotism, the pride in their identity, and a “iron spirit.”

Possible change of working relations:

- Underemployment: an inferior, lesser, or lower quality type of employment.
- (Chinese) College graduates: a person who has received a degree or diploma on completing a course of study, as in a university, college, or school (in China).
- Proletarianization of the profession: White collar workers in the upper strata of professional employment is undergoing proletarianized conditions of work and developing working class consciousness because of the change in bureaucratic organizational structures.

Primary sources:

- State media: media for mass communication that is under financial and editorial control of the Chinese government.
- Social media: interactive Web 2.0 Internet-based applications where most content are user-generated. Major social media in China include *Weibo*, *Douban*, *Bilibili*, etc.
- Private blog: articles written by private bloggers that are not under financial and editorial control of the Chinese government.

Note about the primary data for textual analysis:

The current structure of the data for my textual analysis is as follows: the first category is the young educated group’s *everyday discourses* containing the new term “*da gong ren*” or associated slogans, catchphrases or memes. This is for the analyst, as an outsider, to examine the social meanings of this term in everyday online conversations (i.e., posts and comments). The second category is the *metapragmatic discourses* of the young (posts under the Weibo tag “Why is *da gong ren* getting popular”), the state, and some other private bloggers. These sets of data

show their own stated, probably controversial, understandings of the social meanings of this new linguistic practice. They might contrast with my analysis of the first category of data, but it will nevertheless contribute to the understanding of this new phenomenon.

Four minianalysis proposals:

1. A timeline of the spread of the term *da gong ren*. I will especially focus on the following questions: who first invented this term and when was that? when did it become popular among the young people? And when did the state media pick up this term?
2. A preliminary textual analysis of the posts on *Douyu* and relevant short video platforms, where the *da gong ren* discourse first started. I will focus on how the grassroots group creatively coined the new word and assigned to it new meanings, which could serve as the basis for later transformation.
3. A preliminary textual analysis of the posts on Weibo, Douban and the articles published by the state media on the spread of the word *da gong ren* and relevant slogans and memes. I will try to tease out the patterns of themes and connotations, and some linguistic features that are related to the two historical discourses on Maoist workers and migrant workers.
- 4.. A preliminary of the major linguistic resources contained in the historical discourses on Maoist workers and migrant workers. I will draw on primary resources from newspapers and secondary resources on this issue to have an overview of how the personae of Maoist workers and migrant workers are likely to be reappropriated.

First MA: A timeline of the spread of the *da gong ren* discourse.

The term *da gong ren* was first coined by an online celebrity “@抽象带篮子,” a vlogger on the short video platform *Douyu*, which is known for its overall characteristic of challenging the mainstream and elite culture. On Sep 22, 2020, this vlogger posted a video in which he, with a frown on his face (for humorous effect mainly), said, “friends, it makes sense if you feel tired. Comfort is reserved for the rich. Good morning, *da gong ren*!” (“朋友们，觉得累就对了，舒服是留给有钱人的。早安！打工人！”)

The vlogger “@抽象带篮子” does not belong to the “well-educated” group or work in any traditionally elite industries. He 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. He was explicitly hostile towards people graduating from elite universities and has started a number of quarrels with his followers when one of them claimed to have graduated from a 985 or 211 university (which are among the top universities in China). Yet at the same time, he also explicitly aspired to be among the upper class. One of his other famous slogans is that “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 working for us!” (“大专人，大专魂，大专人才是人上人。985，211 毕业的将来都是给大专人打工的！”)

The term *da gong ren* soon got spread to other platforms and picked up by other social groups. Its origin got covered up, as demonstrated by media articles that most often juxtapose this term with “white collars,” “IT industry,” and the high pressure demanded by the 996 working schedule. The online community “Gathering Place of *Da Gong Ren*” was created on Oct 11, 2020 on *Douban*, a platform originally intended for discussion of books and movies and known for its relatively high percent of well-educated users. I could not find the date when the hashtag “Good morning, *da gong ren*” was created on *Weibo*, a twitter-like microblogging platform in China, but a search on related posts suggests that there were already online discussions under this hashtag at least before Sep 30, 2020. The trends of the popularity of this term calculated by *Weibo* shows that though fluctuating at times, there are still an average of 1

million participation rates (calculated based on the number of posts, comments, views and other interactions) on the discussion of the term per day.

As shown in the graph provided by *Baidu Trends* that calculated the search interest of the term “da gong ren,” there was a clear spike of media discussion and media reports surrounding this term around the end of last October and the beginning of November. Note that this calculation only includes media articles but not other community discussions. As indicated above, discussions on this term, especially among the youth group, well preceded the end of October. Nevertheless, this trend shows that all kinds of media did have a role in promoting the popularity of this term.



This was also the time when the state media began to pick up the term and join the discussion, including *CCTV News*, *People's Daily*, *China Youth Daily*, *Guangming Daily* and some others. A typical example is the review “Good morning, *da gong ren*” published by *People's Daily* on Oct 26, 2020, in which “*da gong ren*” was interpreted as representing the “hard-working spirit and an optimistic attitude towards life” among the young people even though they encounter difficulties from time to time. This review immediately aroused heated public response on *Weibo* and *Zhihu*, with most of the criticisms focusing on the point that the self-mockery among the young people more or less pointed to a degrading working relationship, and to interpreting it as “hard-working spirit and an optimistic attitude towards life” was to ignore this controversy and even to transfer the attention. Yi Pan, a sociologist at HKU, also commented on this term that behind the self-mockery is the “hidden anger among the young people.” “There is some deception working behind the current mechanism. Everyone wants to be the elites, to be among the middle class. But the reality is that the white collar workers have

access to no more labor protection than blue collar workers today because of the exploitative working environment.”

Around the end of January and the beginning of February 2021, there was a following turn of the connotations of “*da gong ren*” used by the state media. The state media began to seemingly show empathy towards the workers and side with them in saying that “let all the *da gong ren* have an enjoyable lunar new year after a whole year of hard work.” It is worth noting that this new manipulation of the term was accompanied with the state media’s call for the workers not to return to their hometown due to Covid concerns, which met strong objection from the public. The apparent sympathy might ease the conflict, which indicates that the state media has already incorporated the previously political-sensitive term into its own discourse.

Professor Yiwu Zhang at Peking University commented on the overall spread of “*da gong ren*” that “It’s hard to say there is no media hype at all since the word spread so fast. But at the same time, any media hype must also remain relatively faithful to people’s actual experience, or any manipulation would just be useless.” To me it seems like there is both evidence for and against the term as an active response among the young workers because of their frustration at work, and as a kind of media hype. Regarding the latter, it might be interesting to further examine the detailed consecutive uptakes of the term and manipulation of its meaning by different social actors.

Second MA: Delineation of the spread of the *da gong ren* discourse at different stages, and a preliminary textual analysis of the first and second stages.

As analyzed in my last interim report, the spread of the word *da gong ren* and related discourses can be roughly divided into three stages. The beginning of each stage is characterized by a typical event, though different meanings and usages of the term could potentially be carried into the next stage.

First stage: Sep 22, 2020 – Sep 29, 2020

This word was coined by an online celebrity @抽象帶籃子, a security guard graduating from a vocational college, on a grassroots-dominated live streaming platform *Douyu*. The term and slogans then circulated largely within this grassroots group, with many of the users also recognizing themselves as vocational college graduates.

Second Stage: Sep 30, 2020 – Oct 26, 2020

The term spread to other social media platforms, including *Weibo*, a Twitter-like microblogging site with more diversified users, and *Douban*, a platform originally intended for discussion of books and movies and known for its relatively high percent of well-educated users. The beginning of this stage was marked by the creation of the hashtag “Good morning, *da gong ren*” on *Weibo* at the end of September. The discussions were largely restricted within online communities, with few media outlets reporting this phenomenon.

Third Stage: Oct 27, 2020 – present

The state media took up the term and joined the discussion, including *CCTV News*, *People’s Daily*, *China Youth Daily*, *Guangming Daily* and some others. There also appeared a clear spike of media discussion from both private and governmental media outlets. The popularity of this discourse at this stage far exceeded the previous two stages, and the meanings of *da gong ren* got further blurred with a wider range of social groups taking it up.

First stage: Sep 22, 2020 – Sep 29, 2020

The usage of *da gong ren* in the original videos posted by @抽象帶籃子 and related comments and replies was characterized by three main features: explicit class antagonism, the

self-realization rationale, and a pedagogical tone. I will explain the intertextual relationship between these characteristics and the “*da gong* literature” in the 1980s and 1990s.

First, the discourses around *da gong ren* at this stage explicitly showed a hostile attitude toward the rich, the highly educated and the urban elites. For example, in one of the most well-known posts shared by @抽象带篮子, he was drawing a clear demarcation line between *da gong ren* and the rich, calling for *da gong ren* not to envy the “easy life” that the rich enjoy: “Friends, it makes sense if you feel tired. Easy life is reserved for the rich. Good morning, *da gong ren*!” (“朋友们，觉得累就对了，舒服是留给有钱人的。早安！打工人！”) In another video post, he was comparing *da gong ren*, i.e., people who sell their physical labor to others, with people who established their own companies: “Laboring people, laboring spirit, it is impossible for *da gong ren* to become his own God. Open a company, pay others salaries, you will become Steve Jobs sooner or later.” (“打工人，打工魂，打工永远难成神。开公司，发公司，迟早成为乔布斯。”) This latter slogan was formally parallel to his other famous catchphrase, with each of them in an intertextual relationship and potentially reminding his followers of the other one: “We are vocational school graduates with vocational school spirits, and we are cream of the crop. Those graduating from 985 or 211 universities¹ only end up working for us!” (“大专人，大专魂，大专人才是人上人。985, 211 毕业的将来都是给大专人打工的！”) Considering his own academic backgrounds as a vocational college graduate, this slogan can be regarded as also adding to the hostile connotation attached with *da gong ren* discourse especially towards the young highly educated group.

One could easily argue that the voices of this grassroots online celebrity just retained the registers of typical migrant workers when talking about their *da gong* experience, which does not seem surprising. In some of the scholars’ analyses of the *da gong* discourse by migrant workers in southern China in the 1980s and 1990s, they too repeatedly mentioned the contrast with the rich, “who succeed, who are happy [and] who are able to fulfill their ideals and those like himself, who fail and are left with the bitterness of *da gong*” (Florence 2007). Yet the other two

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.

characteristics of *da gong ren* discourse at this stage — the self-realization rationale and the pedagogical tone — would cast this conclusion in doubt.

As shown in interviews with migrant workers in the 1980s and 1990s, they did not internalize the self-realization rationale automatically. That is, they seldom mentioned any self-affirmation or pride with their current status, or any unrealistic ambitions about social mobility. Rather, the word *da gong* most frequently appeared with other words and phrases like “tired,” “tough,” “bitterness,” such as in the sentence “tasted enough of the bitterness of *da gong*” (“吃了打工的苦”). Or, they described *da gong* as a passive choice when there were no other options left for them, for example in the sentence “could not help but to leave the village for *da gong*” (“不得不出来打工”). Even when migrant workers themselves showed a subjective willingness towards *da gong*, they tended to depict *da gong* as a chance “to see the world” (“见世面”), “to try one’s luck in the world” (“闯一闯世界”), rather than asserting an ambitious determination to become “cream of the crop.”²

The self-realization rationale shown in the grassroots group’s online videos is closer to the “*da gong* literature” selected and edited by the *da gong* magazines, which was a quite prosperous genre from the 1980s to the early 2000s. Even though these magazines claimed to have collected original submissions of biographies, novels and poems from migrant workers, they nonetheless preferred stories that showed the success of migrant workers who climbed up the social hierarchy through hard work in *da gong*, thus strengthening the social norms championed by the state. The repeated emphasis on “getting up early on 5 in the morning” and the admonition not to be afraid of the hard work in the videos are such clear examples of the internalization of the self-realization rationale by focusing on individual endeavor as the way towards becoming the upper class. Also, the frequent incorporation of the aphorism “three-hundred-and-sixty industries” (“三百六十行”), which is usually cited as an encouragement for making the most of people’s current conditions and becoming a talent in his/her own industry in Chinese culture, is also one of the prominent features of the “*da gong* literature” style.

The pedagogical tone adopted by this grassroots group is an even more salient sign of the “*da gong* magazine” register. For example, by saying words like “To those who do not get up at

² From migrant workers’ letters in Florence’s studies (Florence 2007). I will collect more diaries, letters and relevant resources from migrant workers to confirm this pattern.

5 in the morning, you are not taking your life seriously!” (“五点没起床的人哦，你根本没把自己生活当回事儿！”), or “Friends, it makes sense if you feel tired” (“朋友们，觉得累就对了”), this grassroots online celebrity was in fact establishing himself as a “model migrant worker” and advocating for such a way of self-discipline among his followers.

While the pragmatics of the newly-coined term *da gong ren* seem to suggest that the grassroots group’s voices echoed those of the “*da gong* literature”, the meanings of *da gong ren* cannot be fixed by the content alone. On one hand, metapragmatic signs, such as tones and gestures, can frame the meanings differently than the semantic meaning. On the other hand, as Wortham argues, one has to examine the way utterances come to position speakers in particular ways by looking at the dialogic context (Wortham 2001). That is, meanings are accomplished in the interactional process. From these two perspectives, the analysis of discussion around the grassroots online celebrity’s video posts can yield new insights. For one thing, the former security guard deliberately adopted the “northeastern (*dongbei*) accent” in his videos, which brought with it a humorous effect considering that this accent is usually indexical of the earthy but sometimes awkward northeasterners who were frequently depicted in sketch comedies. Also, while the security guard pretended to be serious at the beginning of the short video, very often he could not help but end up laughing at himself at the end. For another, his followers do not altogether take his words seriously, as told from their replies. There are indeed many followers who identify themselves as vocational college graduates and engage in serious debates on the educational credential gap they are suffering from. However, more often than not the followers would ridicule the guard by saying “such back luck to run into you today (“见到你真晦气”), or they would just create new slogans by imitating the words from the videos as a re-creation of the original content. All of these signs cast doubt on the intended effects of adopting “*da gong* literature” register — while this register generally carries with it an internalized rationale in achieving social mobility through individual hard work, the actual meaning might be reversed here, signaling an implicit disbelief in the possibility of social mobility instead with the attached humor and sarcastic comments.

Second Stage: Sep 30, 2020 – Oct 26, 2020

While the discourse of *da gong ren* originated from a grassroots group, its popularity on *Weibo*, *Douban* and some other social media platforms suggests that it soon got picked up by

more diversified social groups, among whom the young educated elites are the focus of my interest. Online discussions quickly associated the word *da gong ren* with a set of other buzzwords in recent years that this relatively privileged group has adopted to describe their anxiety or depression, such as “involution” (“内卷”) and “corporate slaves” (“社畜”). On one hand, this group continued to re-create the slogans and catchphrases, leading to a surge of more sophisticated and nuanced expressions that differed from the more primitive slogans in the first stage. On the other hand, this young educated group also incorporated the word *da gong ren* in their everyday discourse, where new meanings of *da gong ren* emerge out of their interactions. Both of these two kinds of data are collected from two online communities on *Douban*, “Losers from 985 Universities” and “Gathering Place of *Da Gong Ren*.” In this minianalysis, I will first try to tease out some features of their re-created slogans and catchphrases. While the authors of these slogans can hardly be found, the fact that they were circulated widely in this highly-educated group should indicate that this group find themselves resonated with these particular slogans rather than some others.

First, the antagonism between the uneducated and the highly educated, as well as between migrant workers and white-collar workers, is clearly played down. Some slogans even explicitly mention that those who get a master’s degree, or those who work in IT industries, are also *da gong ren* no less than migrant workers. For example, one slogan says “Sharpening your axe will not delay your job of chopping wood, getting a master’s degree will not prevent you from being a *da gong ren*” (“磨刀不误砍柴工，读完硕士再打工”). Another similar slogan says “Laboring people, laboring spirit. Staying up late to do computer programming, we are all cream of the crop” (“打工人，打工魂，熬夜敲代码，都是人上人”). What is retained is the conflict between *da gong ren* and “the rich,” especially those owners of the capital (I am not sure whether I should call them capitalists in the Chinese context). An example in point would be the slogan “as long as we work hard enough, our boss could get the life he wants to live. Good morning, *da gong ren*!” (“只要我们足够努力，老板就能过上他想要的生活。早安，打工人！”) Susan Gal would regard this change as a process of “encompassment” (Gal & Irvine 2019). This also explains why the previous differentiation between the migrant workers and the white-collar workers were erased at this stage — as a kind of ideological change in the

successive uptakes of the previous word, those who are more privileged are in a more powerful position to dominate the change of discourse.

Second, the newly created slogans by the educated young group **share more intertextuality with other genres**, meaning that they could strategically bring the “voices” imbued in the previous into their own discourse, probably through some active transformation (Briggs & Bauman 1992). There are several genres involved. For example, poems especially on themes such as pursuing one’s dream are common linguistic resources for manipulation in this process. One of the most popular new slogans is such an imitation of the poet Beidao’s piece *A Visitor from Poland* (《波兰来客》): “Back then, we had dreams / About literature, about love, about traveling around the world / Now I am working in a factory/ With machine components clashing each other/ All echoed the sound of the broken dreams / Good morning, *da gong ren*!” (“那时我们有梦，关于文学，关于爱情，关于穿越世界的旅行。而今我在厂里上班，零件和零件碰到一起，都是梦破碎的声音。早安打工人！”)

Among the various genres involved at this stage, one deserves particular attention — the voices emphasizing the perseverance and the deserved high status of workers in an exaggerating tone, usually heard from the state media’s celebration of “model workers.” This register is characterized by words such as “glory” (“光荣”), “iron will” (“钢铁般的意志”), “comrade” (“同志”), “devotion” (“奉献”), “creating the bright future” (“创造美好的未来”), etc. An example is “‘Going to work’ sounds like we are coerced, while ‘*da gong*’ sounds like we are going to create a bright future with our dedicated efforts and an optimistic vision. Good morning, *da gong ren*!” (“说上班就感觉像是为生活所迫，不情不愿。说打工，就像是带着美好的憧憬，用努力和汗水去创造未来。早安，打工人!”). While the state media’s discourses are often regarded as “empty talks” especially by the young generation, I would argue that there is a second order of indexicality attached with this genre — that is, rather than simply signaling the speakers behind the voices, it further signals an untruthful attitude that ignores people’s real experience. In this sense, the deliberate incorporation of this genre in the discourses among the educated young group exactly imply their disbelief in the words they say.

Plans for the next step:

In this minianalysis I analyzed some patterns emerging from the discourses of the grassroots group and the educated young elites. While I've already got some preliminary findings, there are actually more work to do to back up my conclusion. Especially, I need to find more literature about the discourses of the state media and the migrant workers to establish the link between the discourses of *da gong ren* and historical voices. Also, I have not analyzed the everyday discourses of *da gong ren* among the young educated group, as well as the later taking up of the term by the state media. For the third minianalysis, I want to focus on how the young educated group further diversified the meaning of *da gong ren* in their everyday discourses.

Third MA: A further preliminary textual analysis of the second stage of the spread of *da gong ren* discourse, where the educated young graduates incorporated *da gong ren* in their everyday discourses, which include much more than slogans and catchphrases.

My third minianalysis examines the use of *da gong ren* in everyday discourses (i.e., not only as slogans or catchphrases) by the young educated graduates. I will primarily focus on how this usage diverges from the use by migrant workers, especially on the question what new meanings and contexts are involved. As in the last minianalysis, I will look the posts and comments together to try to pin down the meanings.

First, it is worth noting that the educated elites also complain about the work conditions and the constrained social mobility in their use of *da gong ren*, but there are slight differences between them. In terms of work conditions, the most frequent conundrum that they are pointing at is either the compulsory 996 working schedules or the lack of legally promised insurance and benefits. For example, a graduate from one of the 211 universities with a major in architecture was complaining about being a *da gong ren* in the architecture design industry because of the “long working hours, sometimes till 11 pm, and the huge work pressure that could drive me crazy.” He even mentioned that would rather work at a bubble tea shop. One of the comments echoed his complaints, adding that “with an apparent high salary with over 10,000 CNY per month, we are only doing tedious, meaningless and repetitious work. Our hourly rates are horribly low.” Another young graduate complains about that no companies abide by the state rules to provide “five social insurances and one housing fund”³(五险一金) for employers. He further incorporates the adapted well-known slogan in his narrations, “as long as I sacrifice my life and health to become a *da gong ren*, you can help your boss live the life he wants, buy bigger houses and more expensive cars.”

One thing to note about these complaining sentiments associated with *da gong ren* is that rather than indexing the original sense of precarity that migrant workers are suffering, both 996 working schedules and the lack of legally promised insurance and benefits are pointing towards a

³ The five social insurances include endowment insurance, medical insurance, unemployment insurance, employment injury insurance, and maternity insurance. The one housing fund is the Housing Provident Fund.

more “privileged” level of insecurity that grassroots groups might not even have the chance to be concerned with. As many labor scholars have noted, due to the flexibilization of working conditions, many workers are worried about working too little rather than working too much. While both the concerns of the grassroots group and the young educated graduates need to be acknowledged, it would be interesting to further investigate how, if at all, one voice erases the other and dominates the change of discourse.

Second, a more radical divergence from the original meaning of *da gong ren* is that the young educated graduates sometimes use it as a way of implicit bragging. This commonly appears when people post his/her job offers and ask advice for choosing one. For example, a graduate student holding a bachelor’s degree from a 211 university and a master’s degree from one of the top five universities in the UK is asking advice about two offers from a tech company and a high-salaried education company respectively. While admitting that “the pay and benefits are not bad” (公司工资福利都还可以), she nevertheless describes both jobs as being a *da gong ren*. Some people have captured this connotation in the comments, accusing her of bragging while others are worried about “real” issues such as wage payment delays or the lack of labor protection. Another typical case of implicit bragging is the discussion over “what it feels like to be a *da gong ren* in Hong Kong.” Workers in Hong Kong generally enjoy higher salaries and better social benefits than those in mainland China. However, after delineating some of the advantages of working in Hong Kong, the post goes on saying that “wherever you work, in Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen or Hong Kong, we are all *da gong ren* alike.” The word *da gong ren* serves as a rhetoric strategy to bring up some sense of solidarity against the capitalists, potentially meant to play down the condescending tone. The meaning of *da gong ren* in this case seems to be both inclusive and exclusive — it is inclusive in that it is inflated to include all of those who are not self-employed but are working for others, with the middle class being a major part of them; it is exclusive in that *da gong ren* is implicitly manipulated towards those white-collar workers in big cities such as “Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen or Hong Kong,” while the other workers at lower socioeconomic statuses are ignored.

The third major discovery of the difference between the use of *da gong ren* by the grassroots group and the educated young graduates is their attitudes towards social mobility.

While both groups are skeptical of it, the grassroots groups are more concerned with the possibility of moving upward the social hierarchy, while the educated young graduates are more worried about the difficulty in keeping their current social status with/without the return of education. Many have also indicated in the posts that they are entering a lower social status than their parents, such as the comment that “I cannot even get into the job that my father is now occupying in my hometown.” Some have even called out that “I pray every day that I can find a job and become a *da gong ren*, because otherwise I would have to leave the city and return to my little village to lead a hopelessly tedious life.” In this case, to be a *da gong ren* may not be satisfying, but is actually the only choice that these young people have in order to avoid lagging behind. *Da gong ren* is thus caught in a tension between the depression from the exploitation of work and the last possible chance of getting into/remaining in the middle class. i.e., between the impossibility and the possibility of living a satisfactory life. In this case, it would be worthwhile to discuss the specific language practices of the middle class in China and how the educated young graduates are linguistically approaching the ideal of middle class in the case of *da gong ren*.

In conclusion, my third minianalysis analyzes three ways the use of *da gong ren* among the educated young graduates differs from that among the grassroots group. Since it is a quite sketchy analysis, more need to be done to fit this part into my second minianalysis, especially how everyday uses of *da gong ren* could connect with the more dramatic, slogan-like use. I will finish this part during the spring break.

Changes in Research Design

The major changes I made in the ten weeks are recorded as follows:

1. A change in my empirical question. I initially focused only on the use of *da gong ren* among the young educated graduates. My empirical research question at that time was:

“The well-educated young college graduates have been increasingly using words and phrases that were previously associated with the working class for self-reference, such as “*da gong ren*” (roughly translated to laborers). Why is the discourse of the educated young people shifting in this way? How and why does this change of discourse getting increasingly popular?” (My original crosswalk can be found in appendix.)

After I finished my first minianalysis, I realized that *da gong ren* discourse is not limited to the educated elites, but originated from a grassroots group. Also, the data on the popularity of the term over time suggests that its spread was more of a media hype rather than something totally controlled by any single group. Therefore, I decided to change my empirical question to the following one:

“Why did the *da gong ren* discourse, coined by a relatively disadvantaged social group, get spread across such heterogeneous social groups, lose its original meaning as referring to the “laborers,” and finally become part of the popular culture?”

2. Shift of theoretical explanations. At first, I was seeking to explain the new phenomenon with a much broader theoretical perspective, e.g., the role of language in mediating the discrepancies subjective and objective reality. I was also looking for structural explanations, such as the theory of underemployment, and later the “proletarianization of the profession.” As I go through the modification of research design, I decided to focus more specifically on concepts and theories in sociolinguistics, such as recontextualization, indexicality, erasure, interdiscursivity, etc. This change also prompted me to look for new secondary materials for literature review.

3. Changes in filing. I’ve been continuously creating new folders and subdividing old folders as I find necessary. For example, I have reorganized my secondary source folder when I reframed my question. Previously the three subfolders were all independent folders as “sociolinguistics” or “discursive history.” As I find that the importance of labor structure and work relations might not

be as much as I had thought, I combined the three folders into a larger one so that I can focus more on the other folders.

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Research Log:

Week	Research Done
Before Jan 18	Searched for articles on “underemployment,” teasing out its definition (both objective and subjective) and related research in the US. Sketchy information on the career outcomes of college graduates in recent years in China, including the structural mismatch of supply and demand in the labor market.
Jan 18 - 24	Done literature review on the expectations imposed on young graduates especially in the Chinese context. Redefined the social group I am studying as the educated young graduates. More statistics on graduates’ labor outcomes from the Ministry of Education and MyCos 2019 Chinese College Graduates' Employment Annual Report.
Jan 25- 31	Searched for articles on “proletarianization of profession.” Searched for articles on “recontextualization.” Read articles on “linguistic indexicality” in terms of gender, class or regional identities.
Feb 1 - 7	Collected primary sources on <i>da gong ren</i> discourse from Weibo and the state media. Read articles on “linguistic variation.” Read articles on “interdiscursivity.”
Feb 8 - 14	Searched for literature on <i>da gong</i> discourse in the 1980s and 1990s. Searched for literature on the construction Maoist worker in Mao’s era.
Feb 15 - 21	Done crosswalk on current materials. Collected metapragmatic discourses about “da gong ren” by young college graduates on Weibo. Searched for media articles about similar US cases. Done a wrap-up of Discursive History of “Gong Ren” and “Da Gong.”
Feb 21 - 28	First MA: A timeline of the spread of the <i>da gong ren</i> discourse.

	<p>Searched for the biography of the person who first coined the word <i>da gong ren</i>.</p> <p>Searched for data on the popularity of the word <i>da gong ren</i>, and determined that it was more of a media hype.</p>
Mar 1 - 7	<p>Reframed my empirical question and alternative theories to the following:</p> <p>“Why did the <i>da gong ren</i> discourse, coined by a relatively disadvantaged social group, get spread across such heterogeneous social groups, lose its original meaning as referring to the “laborers,” and finally become part of the popular culture?”</p> <p>Preliminary analysis of the three stages of the spread of the <i>da gong ren</i> discourse and its major characteristics.</p>
Mar 8 - 14	<p>A clearer description of three stages of the spread of the <i>da gong ren</i> discourse.</p> <p>Detailed analysis on the first and second stages to examine the different patterns emerging from the discourses by grassroots group and by the young educated.</p>
Mar 14 - 21	<p>Detailed analysis of the everyday use of the word <i>da gong ren</i> (i.e., including not only slogans and catchphrases but also longer online discussions and reflections) by the young educated graduates.</p>

File Structure:

The master folder:

- To do: summaries of comment posts from all group members and my reaction posts every week
- To be filed: all documents, including new primary and secondary sources, new writing drafts, to be filed later
- Advice: advice on my research from different professors, as well as the list of suggested readings

Research design folder:

- Proposal: all versions of research proposal done before the Found Data class
- DD post: all versions of DD post

Logs:

- Research log: list of research tasks I have completed

Primary data folder:

- Douyu: video screenshots, recordings of words and comments from short videos on *da gong ren* on Douyu platform
- Weibo
 - ordinary: screenshots of posts and comments under the hashtag “good morning, *da gong ren*!”
 - metapragmatic: screenshots of posts and comments under the hashtag “why is *da gong ren* getting popular”
- Douban
 - 985 losers: selected posts and comments on *da gong ren* in the online community “Losers from 985 Universities” on Douban
 - *Da gong ren* gathering: selected posts and comments on *da gong ren* in the online community “Gathering place of *da gong ren*” on Douban
- State media: selected articles on *da gong ren* discourse from the state media
- Other media: selected articles on *da gong ren* discourse from other popular media

Secondary data folder:

- Labor and work relations

- Labor statistics
- Underemployment: literature on underemployment
- Proletarianization of the profession: literature on proletarianization of the profession
- Sociolinguistics: literature on sociolinguistic theories and methodologies
- Discursive history
 - Da gong: literature on the discursive history of the migrant worker discourse in the 1980s and 1990s
 - Gong ren: literature on the discursive history of the Maoist workers in Mao's era

Analysis and writing folder:

- Minianalysis: all minianalyses I have done.

Open Research Leads:

- Find more literature (and ideally also primary data) about the discourses of the Maoist workers and the migrant workers to establish the link between the discourses of *da gong ren* and historical voices.
- A textual analysis of the uptakes of the word *da gong ren* by the state media, and how it differs from the previous two stages.
- Focus on how the uptake by the state media marginalizes, controls or compromises the uptakes at the previous stage, and how the uptakes by the educated young graduates probably have done the same to those by migrant workers.
- Consider how everyday uses of *da gong ren* could connect with the more dramatic, slogan-like use.

Surprising Things I Learnt:

- The most surprising thing I have learnt is an open attitude towards changes of research design. I have previously thought that a study would be considered a failure if it cannot answer the question it asks. However, in this course I realize that difficulties happen quite commonly. Rather than stick to the original question we should also sometimes recognize the limitations of our ability and try to ask the questions we can answer instead.
- The insistence on having two or more alternative theories is also a surprise to me. It pushes me to consistently question the validity of my explanation so that I can make my study more robust.
- I also find the comparison between the controlled vocabulary and keyword indexing very helpful to me. I did not know about the disadvantages of keyword indexing before.
- Regarding my own research, I am surprised that I had been holding the wrong assumptions that the spread of the term *da gong ren* was primarily promoted by the young educated group, while the data told another story. I am thankful for the idea of conducting some minianalyses first, because in this way I got to reframe my research question in time.

Appendix: Original Crosswalk

	Ministry of Education of the PRC statistics	MyCos 2019 Chinese College Graduates' Employment Annual Report	Yearbook of Labor Statistics of the PRC	Posts and Comments from Weibo under the tag “Good morning, <i>da gong ren</i> !”	Posts and Comments from Weibo under the tag “Why is <i>da gong ren</i> getting popular”	Articles from state media (e.g., People’s Daily, CCTV News or China Youth Daily)	Articles from private blog posts on <i>da gong ren</i>
What is the employment rate and industry choices of college graduate students in China in recent years?	√	√	√				
How is the supply and demand gap in the labor market changing in these industries?			√				

How is the pay and working condition of these industries?			√				
Who is the first to invent the word “ <i>da gong ren</i> ,” and how does this term and its associated catchphrases, slogans and memes spread to other groups?							√
What are the pre-existing linguistic resources deployed by the educated young graduates in their online discussion of work, and how are they associated with the two distinct groups of the working class?				√	√		

What new meanings emerge out of this transformation, and what new identities are these young elites constructing?				√	√		
What is the state's and other social actors' uptake of this new term?						√	√
How does this new linguistic practice shed light on the change of working relationship and the broader political relationship between the young educated, the working class, and the state?				√	√	√	√

