Becoming a New Laborer, or Not: The Discursive Production of Complex Subjectivities in Precarity Politics

Abstract

This article examines the role of language variation and circulation in forming 'complex subjectivities' under post-Fordist employment precarity. Previous research has explored the performative power of language in identity formation; this article extends this literature by exploring the discursive enactment of certain neoliberal personhoods that cut across traditional social differentiation axes. Drawing on Berlant's concept of 'intimate public', this study examines how the emergence and reappropriation of the *dagongren* discourses on major social media sites in China establish a discursive solidarity between white-collar workers and physical laborers, while simultaneously enabling the former to negotiate their attachments to pre-existing social distinctions. In so doing this article brings to light the 'countercurrents of subjectivity' underlining the language practices of either the dominant or nondominant group and provides a 'dominant discursive repertoire' for understanding the reflexivity of the newly emerged cultural consciousness in response to the precariousness and alienation in contemporary workplace.

Keywords: complex subjectivity, language variation, floating signifier, intimate public, precarity, post-Fordist employment

Introduction

This article explores the discursive making of new class subjectivities in the context of post-Fordist employment precarity through a case study of the wide circulation of the *dagongre*n discourses in China. In late September 2020, a hashtag named 'good morning, *dagongren*', literally meaning 'good morning, laborers', became a trending topic on several social media

sites in China. While the term *dagongren* was first coined by a local security guard as a reappropriation of the *dagong* discourse surrounding migrant workers in the 1980s and 90s, this memetic expression soon proliferated among heterogeneous social groups. Particularly, many young and highly educated white-collar workers have joined the re-creation of the discourse and adopted the term as a means of self-reference, forming an intimate public, to borrow Berlant's (2008) concept, with physical laborers regardless of their disparate class and occupational backgrounds.

The seemingly affective identification with the physical laborers among these white-collar workers coincides with a growing trend of economic anxiety in contemporary China with the recent departure that relatively well-paid and highly educated workers have been drawn into employment precarity (Gill & Pratt 2008; Wang, Li, & Deng 2017). On the one hand, China has been dramatically pushing for the trend towards mass higher education since the reform and opening up, making it one of the world's largest higher education systems (Yang 2018). This has given rise to a 'new generation' of young and college-educated graduates who nevertheless do not see themselves rewarded by their higher human and cultural capital because of the increasing mismatch between supply and demand in the labor market (Brint 2001; Madrazo & van Kempen 2012). While being a widespread phenomenon across many countries (Feldman 1996; McKee-Ryan & Harvey 2011; Bell & Blanchflower 2013), employment precarity is particularly exacerbated for these young graduates in China because of the institutional barriers (e.g. the household registration '*hukou'* system) to citizenship they encounter in large cities, which trap them into a 'sandwich class' between the very rich and the very poor (Wang et al. 2017). On the other hand, intrinsic to post-Mao Chinese governments has been a rapid expansion of neoliberal ethos seeking to cultivate new citizen-subjects characterized by 'individual responsibility, entrepreneurship, and self-improvement' (Yu 2017: 44). This neoliberal set of discourses, despite retaining certain

socialist legacies (Yu 2017), stands at the forefront of a global rise of post-Fordist work ethics that contribute to new shifts in the cultural politics of class and subjectivity (Lin & Zhao 2020).

This study thus examines the formation of 'complex subjectivities' under precarity politics among both physical laborers and young white-collar workers by looking into the circulation and reappropriation of *dagongren* discourses on two major social media platforms in China. In so doing this study not only provides us with a 'dominant discursive repertoire' that is currently considered lacking in studies of subjective meaning-making of contemporary workplace precarity and alienation (Potter 2015), but also contributes to the discussions on the role of languages in enregistering identities that cut across traditional class differences and enabling flexible, sometimes contradictory subjectivities. The rest of the article proceeds as follows: I will begin with a theoretical interrogation of the enregisterment of new class subjectivities in contemporary workplace culture and the performative power of languages in forging belongings especially in a digital space. After introducing the data and methods of the study, I will examine the physical laborers' and young educated white-collar workers' reappropriation of the *dagongren* discourses respectively. While we recognize that the circulation of *dagongren* creates an intimate public among workers from heterogeneous backgrounds, where employment precarity is democratized and a discursive solidarity appear to be forged, the affective space remains for the more privileged workers a place for critically reflecting on the labor conditions while holding onto their social distinctions. By highlighting the 'countercurrents of subjectivity' afforded by the open-endedness of language ideologies, this study proposes that *dagongren* embodies the complexity and reflexivity of the newly emerged cultural consciousness, which nevertheless serves as the ground for questioning the post-Fordist working environment within which contemporary workers are embedded.

Employment Precarity and the Enregisterment of New Class Subjectivities

Recent decades have seen a growing transformation of work relations in contemporary society, reflected in discussions of post-industrialization, precarious employment, and the rise of the post-Fordist work ethic (Bell 1973; Gill & Pratt 2008; Kalleberg 2009; Weeks 2011).The neoliberal trend in economic and political governance, coupled with the rapid development of information and communication technologies (Standing 2012; Gill & Pratt 2008), has led to a decrease in employment opportunities, falling pay rates, involuntary part-time work, and heavy status frustration among the workforce (Dex, Willis, Patterson, & Sheppard 2000; Feldman 1996; Standing 2012). Even individuals from relatively well-paid middle classes, who have historically been insulated from economic crises, are experiencing employment precarity more frequently than they used to (Gill & Pratt 2008; Emmenegger, Häusermann, Palier, & Seeleib-Kaiser 2012). Concomitant with the 'proletarianization' of white-collar work (Del Re 2005) is the implicit requirement for individuals to regard work as a realm of self-actualization and passion commitment while navigating the unpleasant working relationships (Farrugia 2021; Skeggs 2005; Kelly & Harrison 2009). This has resulted in the emergence of a 'work society' in which working has become an ethical scenario for constructing identity and achieving meaning, which forms the core of post-Fordist work ethics (Skeggs 2005; Weeks 2011). Given the prevalence of precarity and the political struggles against the intensification of the subjectification of work, traditional studies of social stratification are insufficient to account for contemporary workers' class identification, particularly in the context of cultural politics (Farrugia 2019). As scholars suggest, the rise of the 'precariat' may signal the formation of potential new subjectivities capable of embracing solidarity despite disparities in class, power or wealth (Gill & Pratt 2008).

These broader shifts in the young people's experience of employment raise the question regarding the role that language plays in the formation of potential new identities in relation to their work. Instead of regarding workplace identities as essentialized constructs that exist independent of discursive expressions (LaPointe 2010), this study subscribes to the conceptualization of language as capable of reconfiguring the reality it purports to describe (Woolard 1998). The connection between the performativity of language and the formation of one's identity has been examined extensively in studies of gender, race, class and other social contexts (Austin 1975; Butler 2011; Hall; 2012; Agha 2005). Butler, for example, famously argues that the word 'queer' has the effect of interpellating the subject into being. Naming is a part of what contributes to the formation of one's identity, rather than vice versa (Butler 2011). The rise of precarity politics, in our case, provides new opportunities for researchers to revisit this theoretical perspective, since the enregisterment of certain 'neoliberal' personhood through language practices might give rise to identities that cut across traditional axes of social differentiation. Given the diversity of groups involved in the precarity movement, including but not limited to factory workers, security guards, creative and intellectual workers, programmers, freelancers, etc., this study intends to investigate the potential for language as a vehicle to 'articulate' (Gramsci 1971), i.e., to build solidarity while at the same time respecting the specific interests of those involved (Gill & Pratt 2008).

While workers' attitudes and perception of their precarious working relations have received much scholarly attention, there are currently very few studies addressing the potential role of languages, as well as its contingencies and limitations, in mobilizing the workers into a common identity as part of the 'extra workplace resistance' (Thomas & Davies 2005). Past research indicates that the 'post-class ideologies' arising against the backdrop of neoliberal capitalism create cultural discourses that embrace more, though subtler forms of, class distinctions than solidarities (Thurlow 2021). Studies on the 'career' narratives as a

shared way of expressing youth identities also suggest that the inherent notions of self-realization and authenticity only serve to reinforce the post-Fordist imperative and personalize the responsibilities of navigating the precarious labor market (Farrugia 2021). In addition, scholars suggest that there is currently a shortage of 'dominant discursive repertoires' among contemporary workers regarding their ways of handling the crisis of workplace precariousness and alienation (Potter 2015). While some existing research on this topic considers the issue of workplace precarity as a basis for united political action, the findings tend to be restricted within certain professions, such as photography, academia, fashion designing, etc. (Patrick-Thomson & Kranert 2021; Thorkelson 2016; Hayes & Silke 2019). In this light, the *dagongren* discourses provide us with such a dominant narrative device through which we can understand the negotiations of self and work in the emerging precarious social order.

Language Circulation and the Creation of the Digital Intimate Public

Before proceeding to the empirical part, I would like to elaborate a bit further on the circulation and variation of language in the digital space and how it might serve to produce an 'intimate public' (Berlant 2008) for massive affective belonging. To begin with, the word *dagongren* and its related slogans and pictures effectively constitutes an Internet meme, the 'remixed, iterated messages that can be rapidly diffused by members of participatory digital culture for the purpose of satire, parody, critique, or other discursive activity' (Wiggins 2019: 11). As Internet memes, one of their inherent features is the rich possibility of 'recontextualization' (Bauman & Briggs 1990) during the process of reproduction. As Bakhtin (2013) argues, when a particular word transfers from one context to another, it 'does not forget its own path and cannot completely free itself from the power of these concrete contexts into which it has entered'. People can deliberately manipulate the intertextual

relations by maximizing or minimizing the intertextual gap between the text and the previous discourse to establish different forms of authority (Bauman & Briggs 1992). The manipulation of intertextual gaps during the circulation of memes is thus inherently entangled with ideological moves that could change the axes of differentiation associated with their meanings. Since the differentiation process is open-ended and creative (Gal & Irvine 2019), the indexical meanings of linguistic features are also fluid, with different potential meanings likely to be activated in different contexts (Eckert 2008).

As Internet memes often consist of multimodal signs including texts, images, and even videos, their 'intense resemiotization, productivity, and recognizability' further make them more efficient and creative in large-scale communication, thus also more susceptible to constant redefinition and reappropriation (Varis & Blommaert 2015). Given the multiple instances in which the *dagongren* word has been reappropriated for self-reference among diverse groups, we here argue that the meme has become a 'floating signifier' (Buchanan 2018), subject to ever-changing and sometimes even conflicting uptakes. However, it is also worth noting that 'floating signifiers are never entirely free-floating anyway' (Thurlow 2021). A certain form of hierarchical power relations is involved in the ability to transform the axes of differentiation associated with ideological moves in linguistic variation (Gal & Irvine 2019). While different groups are struggling over the meaning of a term, it always has a 'partial fixation', with potentially real-world, hegemonic consequences (Laclau & Mouffe 1985).

One of the real-world consequences of the circulation of a 'floating signifier' is the creation of an 'intimate public' which, on the one hand, fosters vague belonging 'with porous boundaries allowing complex identification' and cultivates fantasies of democratic expression, and on the other hand, invites desire for normativity (Berlant 2008). While the concept was originally intended as a critique of the circulation of film and literary texts,

recent research shows that social media has been playing an increasingly prominent role in facilitating the formation of digital intimate publics, not only because it allows wider circulation of texts, but also because the affordability of platforms fundamentally shapes how intimacies are enabled as well as constrained (Dobson, Carah, & Robards 2018). Either way, the affective register that articulates mass-mediated forms of belonging, often embodied as the 'complaint genre', paradoxically enables an optimistic attachment among the audience so that they could feel disappointed but not disenchanted by the current conditions of injustice. As a result, people can pass with an overall sense of 'okayness' in inhabiting the social distinctions with 'the privilege of unknowing the social costs to others' (Berlant 2008). It is also worth noting here that Berlant's intention is not to regard all intimate publics as eventually reifying the existing system, but rather to highlight the complex consciousness enabled by this vague belonging that simultaneously embodies transformative promises and normative desires. In other words, it is the always multi-layered subjectivities that produce and seek meanings at the heart of either the dominant or nondominant group that is worth shedding light on (Ortner 2005). All these discussions are key to understanding the formation of belonging to a collective *dagongren* identity under post-Fordist employment precarity. It invites us to consider what political possibilities, if any, the *dagongren* discourses might offer in terms of engaging in a political process where individuals are able to act on and challenge the subjectification and alienation of workplace neoliberalism, even as they are being acted upon by it.

Data and Methods

Data for this study were drawn from two major sites, corresponding to the two stages of the circulation of the dagongren discourses respectively. The data on the emergence of dagongren were collected on Bilibili, a Chinese live streaming platform. Starting up as a live

streaming platform for animations, comics and games, Bilibili has now extended its service to users from various other industries, but it still retained its overall characteristic of challenging the mainstream and elite culture. The word *dagongren* was first coined by a grassroots vlogger (hereinafter referred to as Chen) on this platform, who graduated from a vocational college and became a factory security guard. This study collected his eight short dagongren-related videos for analyses, along with all the comments under these short videos.

The data on the young educated white-collar workers' reappropriation of *dagongren* were primarily collected in the online group '*Dagongren* Gathering Place' on Douban, an interest-based social networking platform. While the *dagongren* memes were also circulated on other digital platforms, Douban, a community originally intended for discussion of books and movies, is notable for having a higher percentage of well-educated young users. The group I was studying was founded on Oct 10, 2021. Until the end of May 2021, it had more than 15,000 members, with an active daily output of meme-related discussions. The discussion board in this online group is divided into five sections: a "welcoming" section, where new members publish their first post to greet the old members; a "memes collection" section, where re-creation of *dagongren* memes are shared; a "daily life" and a "after work" section, where all kinds of matters on and off work are posted; and finally a "job hunting" section, where members ask advice for applying for or picking a job position. Besides the posts in this group, I also analyzed some comments under the hashtag 'what do you think of the "*dagongren*" culture?' on Douban, where the educated young elites expressed their own perceptions of the meanings of *dagongren*. These comments provided metapragmatic discourses regarding their uptakes of this meme, allowing me to take advantage of this naturalistic data (Potter 2002), i.e., data produced without the intervention of researchers, when looking into the changing language ideologies behind the circulation of the *dagongren* discourse and the formation of this intimate public.

The approach adopted in this study is informed by netnography (Kozinets 2015), which stresses the importance of observing in an unobtrusive and non-intimidating manner and building theories based on the cultures derived from the online communities studied (Costello, McDermott, & Wallace 2017). Studies suggest that this approach is helpful in identifying the genre that the community members co-produce with each other (Patrick-Thomson 2021). As will be shown in our analysis below, although most contributions on both sites are seemingly stand-alone posts, the fact that some may be inspired by prior comments suggests that they form a relation of 'intertextual dialogicality' with each other (Aslan & Vasquez 2018). Also, the 'imagined audience' on both sites plays a crucial role in the production of these conversations. Although the exact class background of each contributor could hardly be identified, the experiences as a *dagongren* on the two sites are nevertheless achieved discursively through self-expression that depends on certain assumptions about 'who we are in relationship to memes as a cultural commodity and to each other' (Wiggins 2019: 112). The visibility of Chen as a security guard with a low degree of education attracts followers from similar educational or vocational backgrounds. In contrast, many members of Douban self-identify as professionals in financial, IT, or other white-collar industries. The circulation of *dagongren* on the two platforms is thus regarded as uptakes by different social groups.

The Emergence of *Dagongren* from Historical Voices

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

flooding into cities, especially into the pearl river delta in China (Sun 2010). The word *dagong* was imported from Cantonese at this time, containing a capitalist flavor where labor is commodified and exchanged for wages (Pun 1999). *Dagong* workers are typically shiftless and poorly educated physical laborers, most of whom remain in the inferior status throughout their life. They suffer not only from economic insecurity, but also from residential restriction policies (e.g. hukou system) and political differentiation (Sargeson 1999).

Before we dive into exploring how the word *dagong* is appropriated by the grassroots vlogger Chen to create the meme-like videos, it is worth noting that historically, two kinds of voices — the 'subaltern voices' and the 'state voices' — have pervaded the discourses surrounding *dagong*, forming two distinct genres. The former refers to the endogenous and self-ethnographic expressions from the disadvantaged *dagong* community (Sun 2010), and the latter was most common in the mainstream newspapers and magazines 'published for, not by, migrant workers' (Florence 2007). While the 'subaltern voices' usually constituted a 'speaking bitterness' ritual, crying out their sufferings and denouncing the cruelty of the system (Sun 2012), the 'state voices', in contrast, often adopted a pedagogical tone vis-a-vis *dagong* workers, aiming at cultivating 'self-enterprising, self-responsible and self-developing' subjects (Qian & Guo 2019), who could accommodate themselves to the neoliberal rationale of the state (Peck 2016). The frequently recurring words associated with the two voices were different as well. Most commonly, in the 'subaltern voices' the word dagong appeared with words like 'tired,' 'tough' and 'bitterness'. Migrant workers usually described dagong as a passive choice, or simply a chance to *chuangyichuang shijie* 'try one's luck in the world,' with little ambition of achieving a great leap in their social status. However, in the 'state voices,' *dagong* was associated with *jiaotashidi* 'earnest and pragmatic,' *qinfen* 'industrious,' *jinqu* 'make progress' and especially *yuanmeng* 'fulfilling

one's dreams,' which emphasized the achievement not only of wealth, but also of an equal standing with other people (Florence 2007).

Chen shared many of the similar precarious working conditions with the *dagong* workers, but unexpectedly, he was not invoking the 'subaltern voices', but the 'state voices' in his mass-circulated slogans, albeit in a parodic way. As shown in (1) and (2) below, Chen draws a clear distinction between *dagongren*, a term he reserves for himself and his 'friends', and the rich, pointing out an insurmountable barrier faced by *dagongren* to achieve upward class mobility. Education, wealth and status are also seen as in alignment with each other, as shown in (3), where the elite university graduates are regarded as 'them' against 'us'. However, the typical 'speaking bitterness' ritual with words like 'tough' or 'tired' is nowhere to be found in Chen's slogans. Rather, in many cases Chen's voices are characterized by a hyper-ambition towards success through hard work. In other words, he is seemingly establishing himself as a 'model migrant worker', advocating for self-disciplining among his fellow workers and internalizing the self-realization rationale by focusing on individual endeavor without questioning any structural limitations to his access to social mobility. Yet the *dongbei* 'northeastern' accent he adopts in his videos, which is usually indexical of the awkward Chinese northeasterners frequently depicted in sketch comedies, suggests the opposite interpretation. His utterances were framed by this accent, as well as other metalinguistic signs such as his frequent laughter, as an intentional effort to bring about comical effects. They constitute an incongruity with the supposedly serious and rationalist meanings of his words, thus making them a parody, which in turn distance himself from, or even 'denigrate the source of that voice' (Hill 1993: 149-150). While the state voices contain a rationale in achieving social mobility through individual hard work, the actual meaning of dagongren is reversed here, signaling an implicit disbelief in this possibility.

(1) *Pengyoumen, juede lei jiu duile! Shufu shi liugei youqianren de. Zaoan, dagongren!*

'Friends, it makes sense if you feel tired. Easy life is reserved for the rich. Good morning, *dagongren*!'

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

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

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

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

Some replies under the short videos further provide a crucial interactional context for us to examine the way utterances come to position speakers dialogically (Wortham 2001). Interestingly, some replies intentionally play with the language by re-splitting *dagongren* into *da* and *gongren*, which, combined together, would mean 'hit the workers.' (4) below is such an example of the response to the most popular slogan 'good morning, *dagongren*'.

(4) *Gongren zuocuo le shenme, weishenme yidazao jiuyao dagongren.*

'What's wrong with being a worker? Why do you hit the workers early in the morning?'

It is worth noting that the word *gongren* carries the historical baggage from the Maoist era, with a specific political connotation denoting the highest-class position (Pun 1999), as stipulated in the Constitution of the party-state *gongren jieji shi xin zhongguo de*

zhurenweng ‘The working class is the master of the new China’. In this sense, the implicit pun of *dagongren* points out the physical laborers' multifarious precarity, resulting not only from job losses and wage delays, but also from potential violence by their contractors, security guards, or even the state. While these conundrums faced by physical laborers are hardly discussed by the public because of the censorship by the state, the emergence and spread of the *dagongren* memes constitute a participatory effort in venting their dissent on labor conditions and challenging the current regime of class inequality.

The Young White-collar Workers' Appropriation of *Dagongren*

The Democratized Precarity: A Discursive Solidarity

The strong sense of class antagonism between the shiftless physical workers and the rich and educated that is inherent in Chen’s use of the word *dagongren* is quickly dissolved as the latter group joins in the discourses and subsumes themselves under the larger ‘us’. As shown in (5) and (6) below, those who have received a master’s degree, or those who are working as a professional high-salaried computer programmer, have no hesitancy in self-identifying as *dagongren* and discursively erasing the differences between the previous two contrasts. This constitutes a process of encompassing fractal, ‘bring[*ing*] the original sets together as against something else’ (Gal & Irvine 2019). In this way, a seeming ‘intimate public’ is created between the educated white-collar workers and the physical laborers. To quote a comment under the hashtag topic ‘what do you think of the “*dagongren*” culture?’, the popularity of *dagongren* ‘marks the first time in decades that the urban petty bourgeoisie and part of the middle class united with the working class in a counterattack against the bourgeoisie in public opinion’.

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

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

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

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

The formation of this digital intimate public is a result, in part, of a growing trend of employment precarity in the Chinese labor market (Wang et al. 2017) that have ‘democratized’ the depressing working conditions and enabled a wider range of social strata to share an affective belonging, sometimes characterized by feelings of insecurity and embitterment. An objective mismatch between labor supply and demand interweaves with the subjective mismatch between individuals’ human capital, their expectations, and their job characteristics, easily leading to the young generation’s frustration at work (Kalleberg 2008). The rewards of social status previously presumed to be brought by educational investments is no longer promised, and the youth is suffering from powerful status frustration as they can only participate in ‘what is little more than a lottery for jobs’ (Standing 2012). In this context, their discursive alignment with the physical labors is indicative of some common concerns they share with the latter, such as overwork and unsatisfying salaries. For example, one post directly describes his work as ‘suffocating’ because he could ‘only sleep for 4 or 5 hours every day this month’. Another post similarly writes:

(7) Every day of dagong I feel drained of energy like a walking dead. I only have a salary of 3,000 CNY per month, but I must spend 3 hours each day commuting to work. Only when I am in the toilet can I feel the most relaxed.

Yet deteriorating conditions alone are not sufficient for fostering an intimate public; it takes a significant amount of discursive work to make the word seem a natural label for all the young educated workers with heterogeneous backgrounds, who nonetheless do not share

a consistent experience of 'precarity' in terms of either degree or manner. The arbitrary formation of a collective identity is achieved, in our case, with the facilitation of one essential characteristic of meme communication — 'meme antagonism'. Due to the anonymous nature of online communities, memes are especially efficient in forming 'an organic and classless "us" bound together by existential antagonisms against a nebulous "them"' and bringing together heterogeneous actors that do not necessarily commit to the same agenda (Tuters & Hagen 2019). In this sense, the *dagongren* meme becomes a 'floating signifier', capable not only of adapting itself to different designations for different people, but also of interpellating this heterogeneous crowd into a unified existence. This process is clearly manifested in the recruitment of group members enabled by a specific communication ritual. As shown in the example below, newcomers are 'hailed' as 'comrade' into the community through a mere exchange of the most popular *dagongren* slogans composed in ways that are mutually recognizable to each other. The open access to the use of this meme makes it possible for virtually everyone to participate in such an interaction, facilitating the encompassing of the previous contrasts and the formation of a digital intimate public.

(8) A: *daying wo, ni yao yigeren qiaoqiaode dagong, ranhou jingyan dao suoyou laoban*. B: *Zaodian shuijiao, shui haole, you jingshen le, mingtian cai nenggou rang laoban gengkuai de guoshang ta xiangguo de shenghuo.* A*: Wo liuxia le yanlei. Zhaxin le gongyou*.	A: Promise me. You will quietly *dagong* all by yourself, and surprise the rest of all others. B: Go to bed. Only if you have a good sleep and feel in high spirits tomorrow can you help your boss live the life he wants. A: I am about to cry now. It hurts, my comrade.

The affective belonging shared by *dagongren*, however vague, seems to build up the collective emotion necessary to challenge the current structurally unjust labor relations in China. The young white-collar workers in the Douban community '*Dagongren* Gathering Place' even participate in and enrich the parodying of the state's voices surrounding its celebration of 'model workers' along with the physical laborers, staging an apparently unified resistance. As can be seen below, these Douban community members engage themselves in numerous creative adaptations of the socialist posters in the 'creation of the heroes' propaganda in the 1950s and 60s (Butterfield 2012), dubbing them with slogans characterized by words such as *guangrong* 'glory', *tongzhi* 'comrade', *fengxian* 'devotion', *chuangzao meihao de weilai* 'creating a bright future', etc.

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

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

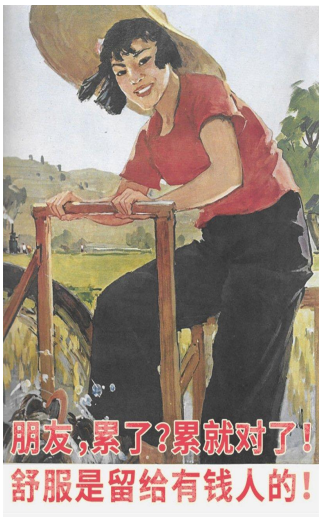

Figure 1. A *dagongren* meme adapted from a socialist poster, with the caption saying 'friends, it makes sense if you feel tired. Easy life is reserved for the rich'.

Figure 2. A *dagongren* meme adapted from a socialist poster, with the caption saying 'as long as I *dagong* hard enough, my boss will be able to live the life I want'.

Since the Party's voices have largely been considered a failure 'to identify with the Chinese audiences in its presentation of socialist role models' (Zhang 2000), this propagandist genre, including its highly politicized slogans and stylized posters, becomes indexical of an untruthful attitude. In this sense, the deliberate incorporation of the state's propagandist genre into the *dagongren* memes implies their disbelief in the words they say. These text-picture combinations create a 'semantically and formally interrelated sign repertoires' (Stöckl 2004: 9), simultaneously pointing to a historical era in which the exaggerated tone emphasizing the high status of workers was regarded as a natural return for their perseverance, and the current society which has fallen short of this 'ideal'. The circulation of the *dagongren* meme becomes a mediation through which both white-collar workers and physical laborers can recalibrate their experience in order to feel included in the mass intimacy where there are promises of solidarity and recognition against the disappointing system.

Examining the Complaint Genre: The Differentiated Intimacies

Under the hashtag topic 'what do you think of the "dagongren" culture?', one comment is particularly worth noting:

> (10) When *dagongren* has been turned into a self-deprecating term by white-collar workers, is it causing harm to those real *dagongren*, i.e., those low-wage workers in manual/catering services?

As a space for negotiating subjective likeness among otherwise internally antagonistic individuals, the functioning of an intimate public hinges upon some of its members' 'privilege of unknowing the social costs to others' (Berlant 2008). The mastery of the vernacular easily allows people with distinct, sometimes even mutually conflicting appeals, to refract their differentially placed selves into the general (Tuters & Hagen 2019). Yet it is also likely to favor ongoing forms of domination because of the unevenly distributed linguistic capital in the 'linguistic market' (Bourdieu 1991). This is especially evident in the proliferation of the 'complaint genre' that evolves from the circulation of the *dagongren* meme. What beings as a promise of transformation through which subordinate populations are recognized as candidates for political inclusion might eventually cancel their voices, while the more privileged white-collar workers are relieved of the responsibility for the social distinctions they are inhabiting.

Concerns about pay rates, among others, constitute one prominent arena where members of the *dagongren* intimate public do not share the same level of consensus as their discursive intimacies suggest. The complaint of those relatively better paid may sound like humble bragging to others, as in (11) below. Or in other cases, while one group member negotiates its in-groupness by asserting that 'wherever we work — in Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, or Hong Kong — we are all *dagongren* alike', she yet quickly turns to compare

her work in Hong Kong with other jobs in mainland China, stressing that she has higher salaries and more relaxing working schedules.

> (11) I earned 8,000 CNY a month for my last job for two years, and I quit in March. My current company pays me 10,000 CNY a month with no additional benefits …… My mom asked me if I wanted to buy an apartment this year, but the mortgage is too much for me. Once I really buy an apartment, I cannot easily quit my job anymore, nor can I buy things I like without hesitation. I am so anxious being a *dagongren*.

Equally contributing to the making of a 'biased' intimate public is the usage of *dagongren* linked with subjective feelings of boredom, meaninglessness, and depression, as in the two posts below. Instead of being occupied with tons of workload, the young professionals are exhausted precisely because of the emptiness of their jobs. The prevalence of *dagongren*, in this sense, takes place in the context of the rise of a 'make-work regime' especially among the white-collar professionals (Graeber 2018). The imperative of the post-Fordist work ethic that valorizes self-realization and passion commitment at work further makes the alienation of such 'make-work regime' an ever more acute form of 'spiritual violence' (Skeggs 2005). In a way, this uptake of *dagongren* draws an insightful extension from the very original context where this word comes from. While the word *dagong* refers to the act of physically working for the contractor, the derivative word *dagongren* also shares such historical traces associated with estranged labor (Marx 1964). However, as with many other 'floating' meanings of *dagongren*, this usage isolates workers from varying social strata rather than articulating their differences. To borrow the distinction Graeber makes between 'bullshit jobs' and 'shit jobs', the weird paradox of our society is that those who do meaningless white-collar 'bullshit jobs' tend to be well paid and surrounded by honor and prestige, while the those who do blue-collar 'shit jobs' are typically in the lower strata of the society, though they are making useful and tangible contributions as security guards,

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

> (12) And the most disgusting thing is that every company I worked for asked us to write daily reports. My direct supervisor either completed all the work by himself or knew too little to assign me any work. I am completely lost…That being said, I cannot really idle around all day. I must pretend to type on my keyboard for 8 hours… Anyway, it is just depressing to be a *dagongren*.
>
> (13) I've been so tired being a *dagongren*. I don't see anything to look forward to in the future but enduring exhaustion. Once I get married and have kids, I have to dagong more so that I can earn more money. I feel I'd rather die right now.

This increasing focus of the word *dagongren* on the mental suffering of the white-collar workers has not only failed to bridge their experiences of pain, but even ends up depriving the very creators of the meme —or the 'shit job' holders — of their legitimate membership of their institutions of intimacy. As shown in (14) below, implicitly suggesting that factory workers are not *dagongren*, the 'us' and 'them' established at the initial stages of the word's circulation are completely reversed.

> (14) When I finished my interview, those factory workers also were about to get off work. Each of them seemed happy and relaxed, discussing with each other about playing basketball or video games. But what about those *dagongren*? All of them seemed so tired. I just wanted to go to bed.

A new set of injustices has therefore been brought to the forefront of the affective register — not those related to the asymmetry between individual endeavors and wealth, but rather those related to asymmetry between individual endeavors and inner fulfillment. In other words, the new *dagongren* intimate public is not criticizing the post-Fordist imperatives that are to blame for today's precarity politics, but the insufficient thoroughness with which post-Fordism is actualized by failing to link the moral dimensions of work with conventional senses of social hierarchies. This produces their complaint as a register at the same time for critical reflection of contemporary work and for negotiation of their attachments to social distinctions they are unwilling to discard.

The implicit desire of 'maintaining some fidelity to the world of distinction …[*that*]... produced such disappointment in the first place' (Berlant 2008: 2) is further exhibited in the usage of *dagongren* associated with middle-class lifestyles and tastes (Bourdieu 1984). In a post titled 'The Working Class' on *Douban*, a member posted a collection of her photos, claiming to show her new outlook at the workplace. In these photos, she wears plain uniforms that assembly line workers often wear, but with delicate make-up, exquisite earrings and fashionable hairstyle. Through creating a new pastiche that decouples the workers' suit with the stereotypical coarseness and vulgarity it is usually associated with, the post is in effect signaling more of a gesture to negotiate her in-group belonging as a *dagongren*, than an ingenuous willingness to side with the exhaustive and sweaty factory workers. Other members in this group tacitly accept this use of *dagongren*, passionately commenting things like 'you're such a beautiful *dagongren*', 'aren't you a star', etc. Under the disguise of the emotional solidarities that register the disappointment of their failed desires are those deeply fractured intimacies which nevertheless police the long-lasting social distinctions, as one set of interactive comments critically observes:

(15) A: Does *dagongren* belong to the working class? No.

B: Exactly.

The Half-truth of Belongingness: The Making of Complex Subjectivities

The foregoing analysis demonstrates the potentially normalizing consequences behind the ostensible emotional solidarities of the *dagongren* 'public' — a 'public' that is built upon common discontent with the neoliberal working conditions but at the same time rejects a total disenchantment of certain social differences that this system creates. At this point, one may be tempted to conclude that the subjectivities as *dagongren* shaped by the supposedly all-encompassing post-Fordist labor eventually elides its radical potentials in unionization and contestation. Admittedly, the Chinese educated middle-class workers, unlike their counterparts in western countries, are regarded by many scholars as a conservative force rather than a progressivist one for reasons of their vested interests in their material gains, their close ties with the state, and their fear of being threatened by the politically active working class (Dickson 2010; Cai 2005). The *dagongren* complaint in which white-collar workers have been active participants may well be a further expression of their preference for 'stuckness' over political democratization.

The article cautions, however, against the simplistic dualist view that sees their affective belonging as altogether hegemonic, reifying an existing social system without seeking to redefine it. For one thing, the formation of subjectivities engages 'complex structures of thought, feeling, reflection, and the like', a collection of which do not entirely align with the socioeconomic positions that social beings occupy (Ortner 2005). The porous boundaries of the *dagongren* intimate public, as discussed previously, further foster complex identifications that could transcend well-defined class belongings, informing conscious and reflexive struggles rather than undifferentiated ideologies. For another, the circulation of the word *dagongren*, along with the changes in its meanings and performative power, is always

open-ended. The drifting nature of language ideologies is indicative of the ongoing process where people are always active agents in generating and regenerating their subjectivities (Geertz 1973), without pinning down their usages of *dagongren* as a force exclusively for maintaining or challenging the status quo.

The article hereby argues that the emergence of the *dagongren* intimate public witnesses the formation of what Ortner (2005) calls the 'knowing subjects' — those who do not fully embody the dominant or nondominant culture, but are constantly self-aware and consciously 'monitoring the relationship of the self to the world'. Behind apparently dominant cultural formations it is always possible to find 'countercurrents of subjectivity'. The following twist in the circulation of *dagongren* nicely exemplifies this point. As the *dagongren* meme becomes increasingly popular among the young generation, many of the state media — including *Xinhua Net, People's Daily, China Youth Daily*, etc. — also join the discourses, 'learning' to use the word as the very 'soft authoritarian toolkit' (Schatz 2009). As can be seen from the excerpt below, their usage, on the one hand, delivers the affective promise of responding to the appeals on employment precarity without addressing the problem (Ahmed 2012), and on the other hand, reaffirms the rationale in sticking to the status quo through the indoctrination of a self-enterprising, path-dependent promise of success.

> (16) Implied in the *dagongren* memes are the workers' perseverance under the circumstances of hardships and unsatisfying conditions… It carries a flavor of optimism. The salary earners are not only the main part of the labor force, but also the mainstay of the society. *Dagongren* need genuine support so that they can march towards a promising future with unrelenting hard work.

This state-led ideological move receives a harsh backlash from the young white-collar workers. Some find it abominating in that 'a term for self-mockery is officially used by the state to tease the people on their suffering', while others are more indignant about the state's

implicit efforts to detach the popular discourse from the radical potential associated with the working class, commenting that 'you don't even think to call me the proletariat'. To willingly accept the designation as *dagongren* — a symbolic move through which they could have retained their relatively advantaged position with their 'promising future' backed up by the state — nevertheless signals an outright passivity, a relinquishment of the quest of situating work in shaping the 'self'.

The *dagongren* intimate public becomes a space for articulating the multi-layered cultural consciousness of the emerging new generation of workers, heterogeneously composed as they are, faced with an economic climate marked by increasing insecurity and confusion. And it is exactly the complexity and reflexivity of their subjectivities that 'constitute[*s*] the grounds for questioning and criticizing the world in which we find ourselves' (Ortner 2005). Either the creative reproduction of the *dagongren* meme or the complaint genre produced by the white-collar workers only tells a half-truth: instead of aligning with any other existing groups or social order, the word *dagongren* allows these young white-collar workers to draw their boundaries and signal 'non-belonging', thus 'offering a kind of comfort in not-being something' (Harris & Gandolfo 2014). By identifying a semantic space sufficiently flexible, it also provides them with the freedom to 'fill an aggregate frame with their own meaning' (Colleoni, Illia & Zyglidopoulos 2021), thus propelling an exploration of 'the way out' when traditional systems of employment, once a source of security and pride, were no longer valued. In the douban community '*Dagongren* Gathering Place', people are actively seeking mutual support and advocacy by asking 'what can we do for a living if we quit being *dagongren*?'. The post receives a heated response, with people sharing suggestions like becoming a YouTube creator or starting their own micro-enterprises. As one comment summarizes:

(17) *Dagongren* is not about self-mockery or self-enterprising, but about an increasingly clear and persistent pursuit of what we really want…… It compels us to ask: what is the meaning of a person's life if his identity as some employee for a company is erased?

Partially internalizing the class normativity that circumscribes people's identities at work, while partially reflecting upon it, the white-collar workers in China are circulating the self-reference term *dagongren* as a self-conscious articulation of their complex belongings and subjectivities in face of the post-Fordist working conditions. While admittedly it might be insufficient in organizing a united resistance across workers from all social strata or driving social action on solving labor conflicts, it still serves as an incentive for projecting their *anti-dagongren* ideals that react against the current circumstances in which they find themselves.

Discussion and Conclusions

The foregoing analysis examines the role of language circulation in the formation of an intimate public among heterogeneous individuals in terms of classes and occupations, and the subsequent emergence of new complex subjectivities in response to the totalizing precarity politics of post-Fordist employment. Specifically, while the *dagongren* meme, arising from the historical voices surrounding *dagong*, initially constitutes a critical revelation of the unsatisfying labor conditions and the lack of upward mobility among the physical laborers, the white-collar workers soon reappropriate the term to subsume themselves under the *dagongren* identity. Through the construction of a complaint genre that seemingly democratizes the anxiety, insecurity and meaninglessness associated with contemporary work, the floating signifier *dagongren* establishes a discursive solidarity among workers from different social strata. However, as the white-collar workers are better placed at mobilizing their linguistic capital to rework *dagongren* complaint genre to their own advantages, the

dagongren intimate public gradually becomes an affective space simultaneously for critical reflection and for negotiation of their attachments to social distinctions they are unwilling to discard. In this way, *dagongren* embodies the complexity and reflexivity of the newly emerged cultural consciousness, which nevertheless serves as the ground for questioning the post-Fordist working environment in which people find themselves.

This paper contributes to the literature on language variation and subjectivity formation. While extensive research has examined not only the indexicality of language but also its performative power in interpellating certain identities into being (Butler 2011; Hall 2012; Agha 2005), this study extends this previous line of research by exploring how new language practices under the pervasive precarity politics forster complex subjectivities that cut across traditional social differences of class. By bringing into discussion Berlant's concept of 'intimate public' (Berlant 2008), this study demonstrates how the new self-aware consciousness can be a reifying and revolutionary force at the same time, allowing flexible identifications for people to navigate the confusion and anxiety and explore 'the way out'. Compared to past research that often treats internet meme discourses under an authoritarian state either as embodying the subversive intents of the grassroots society (Wallis, 2011; Du, 2014; Mina 2014), or as enacting already-established social institutions (Hachigian 2002; Wei 2017), this study calls into attention the 'countercurrents of subjectivity' that underline either the dominant or nondominant group (Ortner 2005).

This paper also speaks to the discussions on the cultural politics of neoliberalism, especially on the role of cultural narratives as mechanisms for meaning-making under the unprecedented employment precarity in the post-Fordist era (Ayala-Hurtado 2022; Ashforth & Mael 2007; Fernando & Patriotta 2020). While existing literature on subjective handling of increasing insecurities and alienation at work tend to be restricted within certain occupations (Patrick-Thomson & Kranert 2021; Thorkelson 2016; Hayes & Silke 2019), the circulation of

the texts surrounding *dagongren* provides us with a 'dominant discursive repertoire' (Potter 2015) that articulates the experience of contemporary workers from heterogenous backgrounds. It is worth noting that *dagongren* is one of a set of buzzwords — including *shechu* 'corporate slaves,' *neijuan* 'involution,' etc. — that the young generation in China has come up with in face of the post-Fordist labor conditions in recent years. All these buzzwords form a part of China's vigorous Internet culture that 'simultaneously challenge[*s*] and reinforce[*s*] conventional norms' (Szablewicz 2014). In a way, the findings from this study reiterates the critical observation from previous research that post-Fordist work conditions give rise to 'an intensification of the subjectification function of work' in that not only social mobility but also self-realization become natural expectations from jobs (Farrugia 2019; Weeks 2011). However, this study also suggests that the subjectification process is inflected with differentiated, and sometimes mutually antagonistic, cultural identifications, which may interact with the classed history of work prior to the post-Fordist era (Farrugia 2019). The unequal distribution of linguistic capital between different classes thus has major influences on which kind of subjectification process is brought forward, while which might fade into the background. Considering that 'words are central players in theory and in politics' (McConnell-Gine 2002: 158-159), it remains to be seen the prospective political promises that such open-ended cultural discourses ultimately harbor (Wong 2005).

Notes

[1] Project 985 is a project for founding world-class universities initiated by the Chinese government. In the initial phase, 9 universities were included in the project. The second phase expanded the program to include 39 universities. Project 211 is the Chinese government's new endeavor aimed at strengthening 112 institutions of higher education. 985 and 211 universities thus represent the best universities in China.

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