

Distribution Agreement

In presenting this thesis as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for a degree from Emory University, I hereby grant to Emory University and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive, make accessible, and display my thesis in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter now, including display on the World Wide Web. I understand that I may select some access restrictions as part of the online submission of this thesis. I retain all ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis.

Chujie Qiu

Mar 18th, 2024

On Social Media Humor and Authenticity:
Using the Yi Yan Ding Zhen Meme as an Example

by

Chujie Qiu

Cynthia Willett
Adviser

Department of Philosophy

Cynthia Willett
Adviser

Andrew Mitchell
Committee Member

Dan Sinykin
Committee Member

2024

On Social Media Humor and Authenticity:
Using the Yi Yan Ding Zhen Meme as an Example

By

Chujie Qiu

Cynthia Willett

Adviser

An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of
Bachelor of Arts Honors

Philosophy

2024

Abstract

On Social Media Humor and Authenticity:

Using the Yi Yan Ding Zhen Meme as an Example

By Chujie Qiu

This paper demonstrates how humor functions in the specific context of a meme that went viral on the Chinese internet. Such a meme ridicules someone named Ding Zhen as being inauthentic, and hence, it is also a great starting point to investigate how authenticity is understood in the said context. The thesis's content is thus divided into three different sections. The first section examines the concept of a meme and its connection with humor. In the second section, the idea of a meme is further explored to show its implication for our understanding of authenticity. In the final sections, the implication of memes and authenticity are brought together into the specific context of social media; the analysis thus proceeds to try to provide an explanation of why Social Media might provide such a fertile ground for the memes and culture of individual authenticity.

On Social Media Humor and Authenticity:
Using the Yi Yan Ding Zhen Meme as an Example

By

Chujie Qiu

Cynthia Willett

Advisor

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of
Bachelor of Arts Honors

Philosophy

2024

Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank my adviser, Professor Cynthia Willett, for her help with this project. Without her advice and instructions, I could never have finished this project. I would also like to thank my readers, Professor Andrew Mitchell and Professor Dan Sinykin, for their support. I was greatly inspired by the materials that Professor Mitchell and Professor Sinykin pointed me to. I would also like to thank Professor Ernesto Blanes-Martinez for supporting this project in its early phase and Professor Geoffrey Bennington for explaining the Derrida texts so well to me in our class.

In addition, I would also like to thank my friends, Junyuan Si, Yanlin Huang, Yingzhi Tang, Fangting Gu, Yijin He, Zhuowen Zhang, and Yuting Ying, for listening to my endless talks about this project over the past few months. I am also grateful for your encouragement; it has been great to know that my friends care about my work.

Last but certainly not least, I would like to thank my family: my dog, Tan Tan, my grandparents, my cousins, and in particular, my dad, Qiang Qiu, and my mom, Junting He. If you can read this one day, please know this thesis is for you all.

Table of Contents

Chapter One: General Humor Theory and Analysis of the Meme	8
<i>1.1. That Humor is Necessarily Societal and Conditional</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>1.2. Humor as Philosophical Theory in Practice</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>1.3 The Etymology of “Meme”</i>	<i>20</i>
Chapter Two: The Self as a Meme.	35
<i>2.1. The Etymology of Chun Zhen and the Meme Model.</i>	<i>36</i>
<i>2.2. The Doubled Interior</i>	<i>41</i>
<i>2.3. The Ding Zhen Meme that Preceded the Yi Yan Ding Zhen Meme</i>	<i>48</i>
Chapter Three: The Internet’s Double Movement	54
<i>3.1. How Virtual is the Virtual Communication?</i>	<i>56</i>
<i>3.2. The Not-So-Virtual Internet</i>	<i>61</i>
<i>3.3.The Logic of the Video Game</i>	<i>70</i>
Conclusion	74
Works Cited	78

On Social Media Humor and Authenticity: Using the Yi Yan Ding Zhen Meme as an Example

Tenzing Tsondu, more famously known by his professional name Ding Zhen [丁真], is a Chinese internet celebrity. Born in 2001 and spent his year in Litang [理塘], the young Chinese Tibetan gained fame in November 2020 by accidentally showing up in a 7-second footage. The young man quickly conquered the Chinese internet with his sweet and seemingly untamed smile. With the viral spread of single video footage, the topic “How handsome is a Tibetan Kangba teenager?” came under the spotlight and quickly ravaged over 400 million reading volumes in the span of a few days.¹ A month after his sudden fame, Ding Zhen inspired the creation of over 2.5 million videos on the Chinese internet about him alone (Sun, 9). His sudden fame soon attracted the attention of Chinese authority; Dingzhen signed a contract with the Litang Culture and Tourism Bureau[理塘文旅局], which marked his career as an official ambassador of tourism and the beginning of his tie with the nation’s official narrative (Guan 18).

Ding Zhen’s identity as a pure and idyllic figure was soon established and widely publicized across China. Since Zhen [真], the second character of his name Ding Zhen [丁真], means literally “the true, the truth and the authentic,” he was also often seen as a truly authentic figure uncontaminated by the overly-complicated urban culture and living a life driven his simplistic desire. Ding Zhen often appeared in front of the public wearing Tibetan ethnic traditional clothing and riding a horse on the wide grass plains; it is not an exaggeration to say that he was seen as a perfect symbol of purity, youth, and an ecological

¹ Original text of the topic: “藏族的康巴汉子有多帅?”

lifestyle. He was a figure who supposedly does not participate in any “impure and inauthentic” behaviors, which include smoking, dating, drinking...all sorts of behaviors the urban youth participates in on a daily basis. Unlike these workers who supposedly lost their youthful dream by stepping into modern society, the “sweet wild boy [甜野男孩]” Ding Zhen was seen as someone who maintained his “original heart [初心]” as if he is an eternal youth.

However, just like the old Chinese saying, “The water can carry the boat but can also drown it,” Ding Zhen’s innocent persona was established by his accidental appearance in short video footage, and it was also another similar accident that threatened it. On January 11th of the year 2021, a video of Ding Zhen smoking was leaked on the internet. A netizen with the ID “Zhong Tou Xi [重头戏]”-meaning literally “the highlight of a play” in Chinese-started the topic “#Ding Zhen smokes [丁真抽烟]” on Weibo, which is the Chinese counterpart of Instagram. The topic gathered over 260 million reading volumes over a few days (Guan 33). Since smoking was often seen as a symbol of impurity for teenagers like Ding Zhen, the fact that the nation’s figure of purity and youth, a figure that was established under the help of state authority and its mainstream media, was a slap on the faces of all those who hailed for Ding Zhen’s clean smile. His white and innocuous teeth shown on camera were threatened to be actually tainted with yellow nicotine and tar. Not to mention that Ding Zhen was expected to be a model for all of the state’s teenagers, and smoking was precisely a taboo in the minds of many Chinese parents. Although some netizens were calm enough to say that it is a normal thing for an adult over the year of 18 to smoke, there are still many on the internet that either saw this as an opportunity to ridicule him or to express their extreme disappointment with the young celebrity.

Under media pressure, Ding Zhen's Li Tang Tourist Ambassador studio came up with a response that made it hard to tell whether they were serious or not: "It was not smoking at all; he was smoking an e-cigarette (Guan 33)." This ambivalently laughable response pushed the trend of ridiculing Ding Zhen to its climax. Starting from early 2021 and continuing all the way into late 2022, Chinese netizens started their constant ridicule of this young celebrity, and the internet was filled with memes of Ding Zhen in multiple formats. Some netizens found humor in the biodiversity speech he gave at the United Nations, in which his accented Mandarin led him to pronounce "this is snow leopard²" as "cheese leopard³". Some others found it funny that, during a live-streaming, Ding Zhen misheard the question "Which province are you from?"⁴ as "to whom were you born to?"⁵ and responded with the answer: "I was born to mama,⁶" and some just found his whole figure funny and published videos of Ding Zhen's voice being edited into the tunes of different pop songs all surrounding the same theme: "I smoke e-cigarette."

However, the most famous meme of them all is the Yi Yan Ding Zhen meme⁷. Unlike many memes that have a clear reference at first sight, the meme itself carries a non-sensical undertone that permeates through and through. The term "One Eye Ding Zhen" means simply that one can see that it is obviously Ding Zhen at first sight, yet the term is often accompanied by a picture of Ding Zhen's face—usually then one cropped out from the

² Original text and pronunciation: 这是雪豹 *Zhè Shì Xuě Bào*

³ Original text and pronunciation: 芝士雪豹 *Zhī Shī Xuě Bào*

⁴ Original text and pronunciation: 你是哪个省的? *Nǐ Shì Nǎ Gè Shěng De?*

⁵ Original text and pronunciation: 你是哪个生的? *nǐ shì nǎ gè shēng de]*

⁶ Original text: 我是妈妈生的

⁷ Original text, pronunciation and meaning: 一眼丁真, *Yī Yǎn Dīng Zhēn*, meaning literally "One Eye Ding Zhen"



Figure 1. An Example of the Yi Yan Ding Zhen memes; Source: jinxuanoo. “如何鉴定丁真相关表情包在遇到创作瓶颈后的再突破?” 知乎, 9 Jan. 2023, www.zhihu.com/question/527323332/answer/2672455844.

famous picture of his smile from the early days of his fame—copy and pasted onto any objects imaginable: netizens producing and reproducing these memes has rendered Ding Zhen’s face on the cover of books, on a mountain slide, on the surface of a pond, on a chemical, etc. According to the topic chosen for a given form of this particular genre of the Ding Zhen memes, the term “One Eye Ding Zhen” will also be rendered into a pun associated with the topic. For instance, in Figure 1, Ding Zhen’s face was pasted on a tree; correspondingly, the general format Yi Yan Ding Zhen was also changed into Yi Ye Ding Zhen⁸. While being close to the original phrase in its pronunciation and bearing the same initials in pinyin, the general transliteration of Chinese characters into Roman letters, the term Yi Ye Ding Zhen also means literally Billion Leaves, Ding Zhen. The bottom half of the meme that is typically beneath the Yi Yan Ding Zhen formula is usually a pun that is either a direct or an indirect insult to Ding Zhen. In most of the memes, the insulting pun is signaled

⁸ Original text: 亿叶丁真

by the term “identified as.”⁹ In Figure 1, the pun is that the phrase “chun chun de gui wu,”¹⁰ while meaning literally “the laurel and sycamore of Spring,” which links it back to the picture, is also homophonic to the insult “a pure monster.”

For someone who is unfamiliar with the specific group of young Chinese netizens who is familiar with the meme and its corresponding cultural information, it is difficult to see why anyone would find humor in these repetitive insults, while it is also not very likely for someone who is familiar with the said field to not be amused. Yet even for the latter, it is difficult to explain why the repetitive view of the same face pasted on different objects is funny. In the eyes of most netizens, Yi Yan Ding Zhen memes would be identified as a form of “E’ Gao [恶搞, meaning literally evil-doing],” which is a popular internet term that is used to describe any ridicule of a famous or even authoritative figure. Typical E’Gao could be explained by explaining the exact “point” that is being ridiculed in the figure, but there seems to be an absurd undertone in the YYDZ meme that resists simple explanations. Moreover, since the YYDZ memes are rapidly produced and reproduced online by netizens on a daily basis, the ridicule also expands rapidly, and its humor starts to combine with humor from various fields. Some of the jokes even require professional knowledge for the humor to be completely understood, at which point the technicality makes it difficult to understand why the joke needs to be in the YYDZ format at all. Nonetheless, amongst the youth, the YYDZ memes are still undeniably popular. From mid-2022, a netizen with the ID “SaltyfishLeavesyoung” collected and published over 2000 different Yi Yan Ding Zhen memes (Saltyfish) on the website GitHub. This number is impressive, considering that the owners of the post collected this on themselves and that the collection is still expanding to

⁹ Original text: 鉴定为:

¹⁰ Original text: 春春的桂梧

this very day. One can call the trend absurd in nature, but one can not say that it is not an online carnival for all the people producing, viewing, and disseminating the meme.

Furthermore, the YYDZ meme, like all other memes, is not a trend that can not be explained by people who are familiar with the meme from its beginning. A common understanding of the meme—one that is seen on social media platforms like Zhihu[知乎], Baidu Tieba[百度贴吧], and encyclopedic websites—is that the meme originated in Baidu Tieba, a platform that functions by having different tiebas on different topics¹¹. In these “tieba” s, people often use the term “one eye true [一眼真 yī yǎn zhēn]” or “one eye false [一眼假 yī yǎn jiǎ]” as a simple response to describe the authenticity of certain posts. Since Ding Zhen was seen in the Tieba users’ eyes as inauthentic when his name is homophonic to the term “顶真 Dǐng Zhēn,” which means “maximum truth,” he became a symbol of what these netizens understand as “inauthenticity par excellence.” Therefore, a common explanation for the meme is that although the term is homophonic to “one can see that it is the most authentic as it can be in first sight,” it, in fact, means the exact opposite, “one can see that it is the most inauthentic as it can be in first sight.”

In a social media era that favors people being “authentic” online and constantly expresses its desire for living an “authentic life,” the YYDZ meme could indeed be seen as a contemporary meme par excellence for it captures the concept of authenticity that Chinese netizens and people living in an internet era understand in general. Why are we finding ridicule in Ding Zhen smoking e-cigarettes and starting to see it as a symbol of inauthenticity? Is it because Ding Zhen’s figure is too “inauthentic” from the beginning of his fame, or is it because the “authenticity” we constructed and now demand in social media

¹¹ Original text, pronunciation and meaning: 贴吧, Tīe Bā, meaning literally ‘bars of posts’ in Chinese

culture is really a desire for a rigid consistency that coerces everyone into repetition of some kind of true self that is always alienated from us? My answer in the following chapter will be something that combines both of the arguments, and I will endeavor to show that a double movement of authenticity—first, the active intention to understand everything quantitatively as repetition that signals the absolute absence of intention, and in addition, the valorization of an “authentic” or “original” version that is always alienated from the site of intention—is indeed repeating in multiple discourses including those regarding the memes, the concept “authenticity” and the internet’s own virtuality.

The YYDZ meme thus provides me with an interesting angle from which to approach the internet’s understanding of authenticity. Yet beyond this cultural understanding of authenticity, the very forms of these memes also provide new ground to explore for humor theory. Specifically, these memes provide exciting opportunities for me to investigate how internet humor, those that are seen in this specific meme and memes in general, is distinct from other types of humor and how the internet is related to this distinction. A careful analysis of this very meme, including the “point” of its humor and how it is tied to authenticity and inauthenticity, how its “point” on these concepts is related to the cultural background of the Chinese internet and how it is related to the internet in general, is thus a case study of a specific instance that can be used to demonstrate the reciprocal relationship between internet, humor, and culture in general. Therefore, my thesis will be divided into three different chapters: in the first chapter, I will introduce some general humor theories from Ted Cohen and Simon Critchley that can help us understand how one can find anything humorous at all and how; then, I will investigate the origin of the term “meme” to understand what do we mean when we call something a meme; combining the two theories, I will attempt to categorize the humor of the meme. In the second chapter, I will look into the

concept of authenticity and inauthenticity that the Ding Zhen phenomenon and the meme culture imply; in the final section, I will examine the internet, in particular social media, to identify possible explanations for this change.

Chapter One: General Humor Theory and Analysis of the Meme

Before going into specific theories, I want to further clarify the reason why I need to draw on these theories and my purpose in researching them. As I have introduced in the section above, as a form of internet humor, the meme is not just any specific joke but itself contains a very obvious equation for further production. Furthermore, since the content of the memes is, by nature, multi-faceted and highly fluid in any given group of memes, it is apparent that the productive aspect of the meme comes before any individual example of the meme. Therefore, an analysis of the phenomenon of memes should not just provide an analysis of the content but must also treat the meme as a form of creative behavior. For the YYDZ meme at hand, the underlying behavior is that there is a massive group of anonymous people online who are passionate about creating these formulaic insulting puns and pictures about the figure of Ding Zhen. How should we interpret this behavior as a source of humor? What kind of humor is being described here?

However, such a specific analysis is necessarily based on a theory that has already established a connection between humor and the contents and behaviors through which it is manifested, but to do so, one must understand what humor is. Therefore, I must start with general humor theory that is abstracted from the specific meme of my subject; I must first understand how humor functions in general so that I can prescribe it to the phenomenon at hand.

1.1. That Humor is Necessarily Societal and Conditional

I think an interesting property of humor that can provide us with a good starting point in this journey to try to define humor is its societal and conditional nature. When we tell jokes or try to humor one another, we often see people either “getting” or “not getting the point” of the joke. What we are implying here is that obviously, for each and every joke, there is some information necessary for the “point,” which is the thing that somehow provides the humor effect to come across to the audience. In other words, with each joke and each form of humor comes some conditions to understand the humor. For example, let’s think back to Figure One, where Ding Zhen’s face is pasted on a tree, and hypothesize for the moment that the “point,” the joking matter, of this image alone is that the man’s laughing face is awkwardly transplanted on a tree. The fact that the image can possibly humor us is that we find such a figure funny, for in real life, we usually find a man’s face on his flesh and bones, not a tree and certainly not a laurel. Yet what if there is a planet inhabited by people whose face is indeed planted on a tree? In that case, our funny meme would appear to them as a regular portrait. An image of us with our faces weirdly established on our bodies might appear funny to them instead.

The example above demonstrates how humor always requires some kind of background information against which it establishes itself. In other words, there are always some conditions necessary for the humor to come across to its audience. If the humor is baseless, then it will not be humorous. In his work, *Jokes*, Ted Cohen hypothesizes that there might be theoretically some form of “pure joke” that would be “universal, would get through to everyone, because it presupposed nothing in the audience.” Yet eventually, he concludes

that “it now seems clear to me that there is no such thing as a pure joke. It is a kind of ideal, but it doesn’t exist” (Cohen 12). His explanation for this is that, at the very least, the humor of the joke—since the joke is the subject matter of his book—requires the audience to understand the language of the joke. However, I would argue that even for non-linguistic humor delivered through mediums such as body language, images, and others, there still must be some common understanding necessary among the audience so that they would find it humorous. Humor is not some kind of empty response to our lives; humor is always a reaction to something that we find humorous, even if the “point” of the humor does not always directly come across to us. Therefore, when we find something humorous, we must have at least a vague sense that we understand what the thing is, and against this sense of understanding, we can draw out the form that we call humor.

Humor is, therefore, societal, and the practice of telling a joke naturally includes and excludes people. The ability to get the humor from something establishes a sense of boundary between “us that can get the joke” and “the others that cannot get it.” For Ted Cohen, this societal property of humor creates a form of intimacy that has two constituents; the first constituent is “a shared set of beliefs, dispositions, prejudices, preferences, et cetera—a shared outlook on the world, or at least part of an outlook” while the second is “is a shared feeling—a shared response to something.” In the same passage, Cohen also notes that while “the first constituent can be cultivated and realized without jokes. So can the second constituent”, when humor is involved, this sense of intimacy established through acknowledging that there is a shared response is amplified (Cohen 28). Through the practice of laughing together, not only would people become increasingly aware of the fact that they share this set of beliefs, but the bonds between those who are laughing together also increase. Humor thus begets

humor, and this explains why, in a normal interaction, an act of humor always inspires further response in the spirit of humor if those in the group appreciate the humor.

When we put this societal property of humor alongside the YYDZ meme at hand, we immediately find it fitting to many of the phenomena that we observe associated with the meme. First of all, many of the Ding Zhen memes originate from a group of Ding Zhen “haters” who are typically young and internet-active. Their common response to the Ding Zhen event was that the authority and many of Ding Zhen’s fans portrayed him as a figure of authenticity. This portrayal of him then gave him the benefit of being employed in a state-funded facility and receiving a salary that most of them do not even have the opportunity to earn in their lifetime. Yet to most people, Ding Zhen is merely a pretty face who gets lucky on the internet; the fact that he might get so much attention because the authority deems him a “positive figure” to publicize is a symptom of the imbalance in Chinese society. This sense of imbalance and a division between “the privileged ones” and “the normal people” was further enhanced by an op-ed titled “Why do the ‘exam-doers’ vent all their resentments on Ding Zhen?” published on the China Youth Daily on December 20th, 2020.¹² In this famous article, the regular people, referred to here as the “exam-doers” since most regular Chinese citizens studied assiduously for the highly-selective national exam, gaokao, so that they may get placed into a good university, are being juxtaposed against people like Ding Zhen whose talents, in the words of the author of the article Xinyu Yang, are not measured by the ability to answer question on an exam for “the real world does not function on the same sets of rule as those followed on a campus...the exam-doers must prepared themselves for this as soon as possible” (Yang).

¹² The original text is “做题家们的怨气，为何要往丁真上撒”，“做题家” is a term that I translated as “exam-doer” even though the term literally meanings “question-doing-expert” since the context here is obviously referring to those who participates in the Gaokao exams.

Yet to many people, Yang's words further enrage them, for it seeks to cover up the inequality by claiming it to be the normal status in which the "real world" operates. Therefore, normal people's right to complain about it seems to be taken away by this very narrative. There is, hence, already a sense of underlying conflict that is going on under Ding Zhen's fame; the societal discussion was already somewhat divided into those who praise Ding Zhen based on his authenticity and those who ridicule him based on the fact that he is not as authentic as most claim him to be.

In other words, society was already divided not so rigidly into those who took Ding Zhen seriously and those who laughed at him. In the former category, we would find those who are higher up in the social hierarchy. These people come from a good enough background and, as a result, do not need to labor as hard as others of their peers who really need to conform to societal pressure. They are living in enough leisure to overlook the social ascension that is being gifted to Ding Zhen in his arbitrary rise to fame. As a result, they are willing to believe in the narrative of a young rural Tibetan who conquered the nation's aesthetic attention with his purified smile: the kind of smile that they are privileged to valorize without considering the necessary social pressure that efface these smiles from the face of many other citizens who need to labor hard in order to earn a living. The latter, who come from a relatively more impoverished background, doubtlessly take up a large portion of the population who ridicule Ding Zhen. As a result, they tend to see Ding Zhen's incident as another evidence of social inequality, especially since it reveals an authority that is almost arbitrary in blessing its power onto random individuals such as Ding Zhen. When these people have to work hard from the beginning of their educations to the end of their careers, and maybe even to the end of their lives, Ding Zhen could transgress all of these efforts with a "purified smile" that is valorized by the authority as a result of its propaganda scheme. The

e-cigarette event then ignited this underlying tension and brought out laughter. When the YYDZ meme was established, there was already a group of people—who are perhaps the “exam-doers” described in the article—who were craving a way to ridicule Ding Zhen. The meme then gave them a format through which they could repetitively ridicule this character and also discover a sense of commonality through the commonality in the meme itself. The popularity of the meme seems to be explained by the societal nature of humor in this scenario.



Figure 2. “OoDingZhen, Identified as xx. [Oo丁真, 鉴定为xx.]” *Zh.Moegirl.Org.Cn*, mzh.moegirl.org.cn/Mainpage. Accessed 22 Jan. 2024.

Here, the joke is that while the phrase “identified as authentic[鉴定为真]” is evoked, the character [真] is written in a form that is different from the simplified Chinese [真] that everyone is used to, so that a sense of humor is created.



Figure 3. “What Are the Top10 YYDZ Memes? [「一眼丁真」系列表情图中的哪些作品，堪称综合TOP10?]” 知乎, 25 Sept. 2022, www.zhihu.com/question/528239142.

Here, the joke is that Ding Zhen’s face is photoshopped onto the face of a general who got an arrow in his eyes. So the top part of the caption “Yi Yan Ding Zhen [抑眼丁真]” literally means “Eyes-pressing Ding Zhen”. Yet since the phrase “Nao Zi Jin Shi Le [脑子进矢了, meaning literally that there is an arrow in his brain]” is homophonic to the Chinese phrase that “there is shit in his brain”, the meme thus evokes a rather vulgar sense of humor.

However, it is also important to notice that this association, this narrative of underlying societal anger, can only go so far. As I have already said in the introduction, while it is true that certain participants and experts of the memes, such as SaltyfishLeavesyoung, tend to explicate this meme on the basis of societal disparity or even see it as a ridicule of societal inauthenticity, most samples of the memes do not really fit into this revealing purpose. It is, of course, tempting to valorize the YYDZ meme as a unified movement against an authoritative narrative that seeks to describe inauthenticity as authenticity, but that valorization only goes so far. Most of the memes from this genre do not actively participate in this irony against a nationwide propaganda schema; most of the memes read like personal insults directed toward Ding Zhen. For instance, while the most famous and the original YYDZ meme, according to numerous internet sources, depicted in Figure 2 above, does play with this duality of authenticity and inauthenticity, countless other derivations of the original, such as Figure 1 and Figure 3, do not have this dimension and could be considered as mere ridicule.

Superficially, what we are dealing with here seems to be two different phenomena. If we would adhere to the “original” meaning of the meme as a ridicule of the apparent inauthenticity of Ding Zhen, then the meme provides, as we have anticipated before, an incision through which we can examine what authenticity is understood to be the Chinese internet. Yet, if we look at how its reproduction across the internet prompted another form of memes to come to the forefront, we would then have to explain how such a distraction is made possible by the specific platform that the internet provides. However, as I will clarify in later chapters, these two are, in fact, two sides of the same coin. In other words, it is precisely a specific understanding of authenticity—which is often understood as a rigid reenactment of a so-called original—that is at work in this meme, yet the fact that a sense of “original

meaning” is eventually deconstructed in the reproduction of this meme is both *an effect and a rebuttal* in itself of this popular understanding of authenticity. As will be made clear in later parts of this work, in laughing at Ding Zhen’s authenticity, the netizens chose a mode of ridicule—meme production—that bears the logic of the very authenticity they are laughing at in two axes, both in the meme itself and in the meme’s own mode of production as a meme.

Before conducting a specific analysis of the nature of the meme, what we still need is an even more general analysis of what humor is beyond the fact that it presupposes a shared belief. We now know that humor operates on such a base of commonality and can, in fact, further enhance this commonality, but we do not understand what operation causes humor to be humor. There are countless other practices that also presuppose a set of shared beliefs—*theoretical analysis*, for instance— but what exactly creates that point of laughter that is unique in humor? Without a proper answer to this question, it is impossible for us to identify the humor of the YYDZ meme in its complicated double layers.

1.2. Humor as Philosophical Theory in Practice

We have already discovered in the last section that humor engages itself with a shared belief or a shared understanding, and now we would have to clarify this mode of engagement to understand the nature of humor. In other words, once humor reveals the underlying motion in our thoughts, what is humor doing to these underlying understandings that make us laugh? In his work *On Humor*, Simon Critchley examines this revealing function of humor. To him, humor first starts as a form of detachment from the world or a “surrealisation of the real” (10). He then clarifies himself by equating the ability to find humor in our common lives with philosophical reflection: “Humour is an exemplary practice because it is a universal human

activity that invites us to become philosophical spectators upon our lives. It is practically enacted theory” (Critchley, 18). Humor, then, seems to be a force of revelation that displaces the sets of common beliefs so that we do not see it as something that is “naturally real” but is instead suspicious of being the work of active construction. In this interpretation of Critchley’s definition of humor, humor is rendered optimistically as a motivation to “indicate how those practices might be transformed or perfected, how things might be otherwise” (Critchley 16), as Critchley seems to argue in numerous sections of his work.

In Critchley’s rendition, humor is thus initially a force of deconstruction in the sense that humor reveals the underlying construction of “real” belief. Moreover, like the work of most deconstructionists, the revelation that humor performs on these beliefs is not purely for the purpose of negating these beliefs. Rather, humor shakes the absoluteness out of the foundation of these concepts and re-inscribes them into a context to make it funny. Critchley thus defines humor, or what makes us laugh at this condition, as “the return of the physical into the metaphysical, where the pretended tragical sublimity of the human collapses into a comic ridiculousness which is perhaps even more tragic” (43). In humor, we were thus detached from our physical being and assumed a metaphysical stance; in that position, all that seems so utterly related to us was rendered ridiculous. In the laughter, all that was held as physical necessity was counteracted by humor into theoretical constructs; as a construct, the belief in these seeming necessities or authentic truths was revealed to be a practice of dogmatic imitation.

Therefore, what seems to initiate humor, what seems to persist across all forms of humor, is a sense of passivity. Since humor always participates in the work of revealing what feels to be truth to be the result of our rigid imitation, these beliefs it responds to must first feel thrown toward us. Humor stems from our *thrownness* in this world, to borrow

Heidegger's notion of Dasein's thrownness from *Being and Time*. In other words, humor is always reacting toward things that seem to befall us; innate to the spirit of humor is thus a deep sense of powerlessness that we are trapped in the world, which forces us to not be authentically us. In his work, Critchley brought the idea of thrownness to a more personal level and summarized it as a "failure to coincide with ourselves." he thus asks rhetorically: "Does not our identity precisely consist in a lack of self-identity, in the fact that identity is always a question for us —a quest, indeed —that we might vigorously pursue, but it is not something I actually possess? It is this situation that is suggested by my epigraph: I most certainly am, but yet I do not have myself" (Critchley 43). To him, our identities are situated by these communal beliefs or exterior conditions that either tell us or imply to us who we are as individuals. It is these exterior conditions that provide an original copy for us and tell us who we should be. Therefore, I do not "have myself," for I do not have the right to define what this original copy looks like. Yet I am most certainly trapped in this position where I have to imitate the societal model that prefigures an image of me before I have any say in it; I most certainly "am" myself.

In a humorless environment, these conditions that make up our identities are taken for granted in a sublime position. Yet, with humor, we expose these conditions and ideologies and laugh at them; this act means that out of the powerlessness comes the human's ability to draw some distance from their own standings. Whilst the demigods of Greek Tragedy struggle and complain about predestination, the spirit of humor reveals everyone as mindless apes obeying constructions that seem so ridiculous when viewed afar. Humor then also carries a connotation that seems to be the opposite of powerlessness: it is precisely an expression of power, a freedom to ridicule even the things that we usually hold to be most sublime to us. Even though the situation we are in surrounds us in totality, we do not have

that situation fully at our grasp to the extent that one could say we do not have ourselves. We laugh at these conditions that make us not us, but that laughter itself is a sign of our struggle for authenticity. The opposite also works since humor can also reinforce these inauthentic or exterior beliefs, and we could be laughing at those individuals who strive to surpass these conditions.

Humor is thus drawn from two sources, and neither of them wrests full priority from the other; it thus comes from humans' paradoxical condition of being thrown but has the ability to metaphysically reflect on these conditions. Since humor is, to Critchley, essentially a deconstruction of our world, what we are essentially laughing at, to him, is the discovery that what we held significant is actually not that significant, yet we nevertheless hold this intention to view it as significant. Therefore, humor expresses power in the background of passivity. Humor indicates the irreducible absence in our presence in the world through revealing our repetition, yet precisely because of humor's possibility or the possibility of us making humor out of such a repetition, humor simultaneously reminds us that such an absence does not mean the absolute absence of intention but precisely that we are stuck between presence and absence. In the fashion of a deconstructionist—if we would permit ourselves to indulge in the term 'deconstructionist'—we must say the actual difference between our absence and presence is differed in our existence, and humor is a result of such a differ^{ance}. Humor, or the possibility of humor, through revealing our repetition, thus deconstructs inherently the metaphysical understanding of presence as the pure presence of intention; and simultaneously humor deconstructs the quantitative model that reduces everything as mechanical and thus advocates the absolute absence of intention in our existence.

Just like the deconstructive aspect of humor that we have identified above, humor reveals but does not seek to absolutely negate, yet it most definitely is not a dogmatic insistence in these previous conditions. To Critchley, humor distances people away from their conditions, but it eventually restores people back to their positions by revealing that they are inflicted on these conditions by themselves. Therefore, even when a subject that humor is directed against is exterior to the audience, appreciating humor is technically a reflection of the audience. The appreciation of humor is essentially self-reflection; therefore, when we find humor in others, what necessarily needs to occur is a recognition of affiliation: whatever seems humorous to them indicates something about ourselves that is equally laughable. The process of humor can go on and on when the one who is laughing at can be laughed at, and the one who is laughing at the laughing one can reciprocally be laughed at as well...and since nothing is truly essential, such a process can go on and on. Humor entails the possibility of self-humor through going on with this endless game of revelation. “You think this is true? Well, I the spirit of humor will show you that it is not true but only a dogma on your side”, says the jester, and the other jester responds and says: “well, you think you are true by showing my imitative quality? Well, I will show you that you, too, do not command yourself even in exposing my own imitation!”...and ideally, the process will go on ad infinitum. Whenever dogmatic insistence on a belief oppresses and represses people, the spirit of humor will be there to counteract and replace it, only to await its own turn of being humorized.

Now that we have determined this reciprocal structure of humor—that the appreciation of humor occurs when it is revealed that the one who is laughing is essentially laughing at themselves—we should impose this onto the YYDZ meme to see if this humor defined by Critchley could describe the meme’s laughter at Ding Zhen. Yet before jumping into that, I think it is best if we define what meme is in general.

1.3 The Etymology of “Meme”

Nowadays, when we say that something is a meme, the immediate implication is that it is something that went *viral*—and this biological language is something to be noted—primarily through the internet, especially on social media. Yet, what exactly should qualify as a meme? What do we mean when we use the term? To fully understand this, we must first go back to the term’s origin and understand from whence the words entered into our language. For their current status, as will be revealed in this investigation, they do not deviate far from their original usage.

Just as the biological undertone suggested, the general agreement of the origin of the term “meme” is that it was first coined by the biologist Richard Dawkins in his work “The Selfish Genes.” In this book, Dawkins proposes to think of human culture as a new set of conditions that is analogous to the biological notion of environments and is hence subjected to Darwinian natural selection. Just as in natural selection, we have the *replicating* unit “genes” as the fundamental agent of information transmission. This analogy between culture and nature requires the former to be a fundamental unit that also replicates like genes. Therefore, Dawkins selects the term “memes”—which he creates from the Latin term “mimemes”—as the name for this single unit for cultural transmission (Dawkins 192). To further ensure the symmetrical nature of this analogy, Dawkins even says this term should “rhyme with cream” to sound like “gene” (Ibid).

At this very first level of analogy, we should note that the memes are here portrayed as single units of totality that replicate themselves. In a biological sense, a sort of self-stability is first asserted; it is as if each meme in its creation, first of all, was already a found object that has an essential value that makes it possible to be identified as a singular and

simplistic unit, second of all, that very identity perpetuates through each generation of the meme so that the meme itself is also recognizable and last but not least, that the sole purpose of the meme is therefore, to carry on this essence of itself. The meme is thus a virus, for they are infiltrators from the exterior into the interior. The sole purpose is to turn its hosts into *machines* of their own *reproduction*. At this very first level, the biological analogy between nature and culture already denies any space for intentional activity such as creative endeavor.

Nothing could more obviously indicate this attempt at alienation of humans from culture than Dawkins's own metaphor of memes' transmission:

“Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. If a scientist hears or reads about a good idea, he passes it on to his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and his lectures. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain. As my colleague N. K. Humphrey neatly summed up an earlier draft of this chapter: ‘... memes should be regarded as living structures, not just metaphorically but technically.* When you plant a fertile meme in my mind, you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme’s propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell” (Dawkins 192).

Memes, thus, first of all, propagate themselves through the means of imitation, and, in the broader sense, they imitate merely to imitate. Therefore, when a meme enters into the mind, it is considered a parasite; as a parasite, it dominates the hosts and turns the hosts into a “vehicle.” In this whole process, the host is passive, for the host’s only participation is that they provide—like how actual animal hosts to the actual parasites—a physical resource that

serves as a “vehicle” and no more. In this process of parasitical infection, the host’s freedom of choice is understood to be taken away from them. Thus, the meme should be understood as a cultural unit of transmission that *propagates itself* without the intentional participation of the agent in its transmission. Hence, when such a term is evoked, it necessarily implies a certain form of domination in which culture dominates the participant of culture and turns the latter into mindless machines.

Before I go on to investigate the notion of the meme and its biological undertone, I will first remark that the aforementioned implication and the analogy itself suffice to serve as a superficial definition of what we today call memes. For in the propagation of these memes—videos and pictures on the internet—we indeed experience a lack of control. These memes found on the internet appear to us, first of all, as what “everyone *else* is talking about” and opaque. Like how the virus disguises itself and fools the immune system when it enters one’s body, the meme enters into our minds under this disguise of opacity and, through constant repetition in a short period of time, gets stuck in our minds. The memes, thus, in their opacity and interaction with our mind, produce a sense of exterior infection, which would explain why we use the term “viral” to describe its spread. In a sense, the YYDZ meme also confirms this trend, and the supposed original meme, figure 2, appears as an opaque object created by someone unknown to the receiver of the meme. Once that initial contact is achieved, the appreciators then start to propagate this meme through their own mutation—which is, in this sense, failed imitation. In this process, a supposed essence is kept—in YYDZ, this essence would be the formula of the meme—through multiple iterations, yet none of these memes has their hosts’s identity attached to them. Moreover, through the creators’ anonymity made possible via the internet, even a sense of unconscious production—like someone dominated by a virus—is imitated in the propagation. Once again, indication of individual intention is the last thing that memes want to have for this spread to appear viral. It would not be a far

stretch to say that memes could not be appreciated, for appreciation—which itself designated a kind of personal recognition of value—goes against this supposedly absolute absence of individual intention.

However, we must also remark that there is a gap between Dawkins's ambition for the term and its colloquial usage. Dawkins's project with this term, at least in *the Selfish Gene*, is to argue that the whole human culture is essentially a program of these memes. Yet, in colloquial usage, we connect "memes" with the internet. This parasitical infection—which Dawkins hypothesizes is the fundamental operation of cultural production and reproduction—thus only appeals to our sensation of cultural production on the internet. In this chapter, I do not wish to remark on this any further than to say that somehow, the internet provides a certain sense of non-presence that permits this sense of parasitical infection, while offline interaction is able to manufacture a sense of presence that makes us feel consciously involved in interpersonal exchanges. Nonetheless, I must also remark that what we are discussing here is simply a sense but not an actual presence because if, in the argument, I would argue that we are not really present or we are present in a different way than we are on the internet, I, therefore, would have to depict how digital beings on the internet are different from physical beings; in other words, I would have to separate the digital from the physical as its absolute others. Yet since the digital is, strictly speaking, also the physical—for they are manufactured by electronic devices without which they cease to exist—this separation does not work. If I took the virtuality of the internet for granted, then I would create a fictitious boundary between the digital and the material while ignoring the fact that the digital is too grounded in materiality. However, it is indeed noticeable, and we shall see more of this in the third chapter. Many regard virtuality as a separate set of reality, as if by being on the screen, the digital image enters another reality. Therefore, what remains to be investigated is how a set of physical interactions manufactures its sense of virtuality so much so that it seems to be

separated from the material realm. I will return to this phenomenon's connection with the internet in the third chapter.

For our theoretical purpose in this chapter, another link that interests me is, in fact, the theoretical limitation of this analogy: that somehow cultural interaction, offline at least, does not feel to us as fitting into this biological scope of parasitical imitation where intention is absolutely banished. I would argue that even Dawkins himself has a vague sense of this limitation, which is entailed in the passage that I have quoted above: notice that when Dawkins addresses the transmission of ideas from the scientist to his students and colleagues, a certain sense of subjectivity—a certain sense of intentional choice—nevertheless manage to infiltrate his “scientific” language: “If a scientist hears, or reads about a *good idea*, he passes it on to his colleagues and students.” Yet, who judges whether an idea is good or not? Although the scientific community has certain “objective” standards of value, these standards are only recognized and implemented by those who are using them to deliver a judgment. Hence, without further elaboration, it would seem like even in Dawkins's own analogy from which the term “memes,” cultural reproduction and production is nevertheless an intentional process unless one presupposes a transcendental value in the first place. Otherwise, one can not explain why certain “memes” get transmitted in the culture while others eventually die out: if a certain move of purposeful selection was not present in the first place, then this selection must itself be conducted by an automatic process that is exterior to individual intention. However, that would mean that the analogy itself breaks down, for it is no longer an analogous relationship between human culture and the natural environment, but the two become identical, for both supposedly designated conditions that come to individuals against which individuals are absolutely passive. Yet if that transcendental condition cannot be given, then the analogy would have to resort to saying that some human intention nevertheless participated in the cultural process of transmission, and therefore, the relationship between

the memes and its host no longer ceases to be fully parasitical. In such a rendition, it is again up to the hosts to judge which memes to pass on, and the memes themselves do not have the capacity to hijack the consciousness of the hosts and turn them into mindless vehicles of propagation. Dawkins's analogy is thus threatened with the possibility that it is either a false analogy or it will no longer be an analogy.

Dawkins thus struggles more in the following part of the chapter, where he throws out the term "memes." In fact, he immediately notices that what is at stake here is, essentially, the justification of value. Therefore, he immediately resorts to providing a definition of value appropriate for his analogy:

"Consider the idea of God. *We do not know how it arose in the meme pool.* Probably it originated many times by independent 'mutation'. In any case, it is very old indeed. How does it replicate itself? By the spoken and written word, aided by great music and great art. Why does it have such a high survival value? Remember that 'survival value' here does not mean value for a gene in a gene pool, but value for a meme in a meme pool. The question really means: *What is it about the idea of a god that gives it its stability and penetrance in the cultural environment?* The survival value of the God meme in the meme pool results from *its great psychological appeal.* It provides a superficially plausible answer to deep and troubling questions about existence. It suggests that injustices in this world may be rectified in the next. The 'everlasting arms' hold out a cushion against our own inadequacies which, like a doctor's placebo, is none the less effective for being imaginary. These are some of the reasons why the idea of God is copied so readily by *successive generations of individual brains.* God exists, if only in the form of a meme with high survival value, or infective power, in the environment provided by human culture" (Dawkins, 193, the italics are mine).

In this quote, Dawkins uses once again the term “cultural environment” here, and I would note that to his intention of the analogy, this evocation is itself peculiar in that Dawkins’s intention starts with a theoretical severance between culture and nature, yet here, culture becomes—through the operation and the necessity of analogy—something that resembles nature but is not quite nature. Here, Dawkins argues that memes appeal to “psychological value,” and the evocation of “questions about our existence” clearly indicates transcendental values. Dawkins’s implication and assumption are clear: there are transcendental questions that we as humans innately ask, yet these questions stem from human culture and are, therefore, unnatural. Culture is presupposed in Dawkins’s formulation in almost a tautological fashion. Why is the question of our existence a cultural instead of a natural question? Dawkins would answer because it is culture in definition. In a sneaky movement, Dawkins effaces his dogmatic movement of separating nature and culture in absolute categories to carry through his analogies further. These questions are, therefore, innate questions asked by humans that are not fully natural and yet are still essential in the sense that they can endlessly repeat without empirical conditions.

It is therefore, no wonder, why memes in Dawkins’s configuration thus apply directly to the brain, an organ considered by the tradition as a mythical intersection of the mind and body—the organ that hides the problem of interaction between the mind and body under the disguise of its own material complexity; an organ that is in every sense the site where the difference of nature and culture is simultaneously constructed and destructed. Yet since these questions of cultures are being conceived of as built in humans and asked innately, the matter of asking such a question and the value that comes along with these questions were rendered as things isolated from humans’ intention. The culture was, therefore, rendered into an in-between layer between the self and the natural environment in this analogy since it is this in-between layer that memes appeal to and replicate accordingly. Against this second layer of

artificial nature, the activity of the self is always ignored and powerless—for the notion of the meme refers to this active decision to exile the individual will from the broader cultural trends. In such a model, culture—memes—have no origin because they always appeal to innate features and questions that have always already been asked. Better, the memes correspond to questions that always will be asked; they are the response to our passivity that is itself passive and exterior to human agency; this is why it is always impossible to understand where the memes arose: the memes never arose, they are found and begins by infiltration.

Therefore, when such a concept of cultural production is successfully asserted and when the term memes is evoked, it primarily expresses this absolute exclusion of the individual intentions during the process of the propagation of cultural phenomenon. Yet the other problem immediately arises: if individual intention is, in fact, isolated, how is it possible for certain changes to take place in any given meme? To this problem, Dawkins provides two explanations that can take place at the same time: first of all, each meme can combine with other memes, and second of all, mutations—like genetic mutations—can occur in the process of imitation. It is this latter that interests me: if the change in cultural production is, in effect, purposeless and primarily “mutation,” which means, then what it necessarily means is that creativity is regarded by the system as an error in reproduction. Such an analogy thus configures memes into one that has an absolute interior essence that was always already created before the process of transmission started. It is as if this basic unit of cultural production had always existed before the circulation of any living carrier of these memes. The meme is a found-object, and such a found-object-ness arises at the very beginning of this analogy, where Dawkins introduces the meme concept with an example. The example introduces a cultural transmission scene in which distinct groups of bird “inherits”—as if inheriting *genes*—“memes of 9 different songs.” observe how Dawkins

describes this scene of the reproduction of essence and how a change in such an essence is described:

“During most of the time Jenkins was there, there was a fixed number of songs on the island, a kind of ‘song pool’ from which each young male drew his own small repertoire. However, occasionally, Jenkins was privileged to witness the ‘invention’ of a new song, which occurred by *mistake* in the *imitation of an old one*. He writes: ‘New song forms have been shown to arise variously by change of pitch of a note, repetition of a note, the elision of notes and the combination of parts of other existing songs . . . The appearance of the new form was an *abrupt* event, and the *product* was quite stable over a period of years. Further, in a number of cases, the variant was transmitted accurately in its new form to younger recruits so that a recognizably coherent group of like singers developed.’ Jenkins refers to the origins of new songs as ‘cultural *mutations*’ (Dawkins, 190, the italics are mine).

In this example of birds, the birds’ songs are always there before the investigation and ready to be transmitted. The original memes are understood to have a coherent and solitary interior that nothing should penetrate, in the ideal scene. Cultural transmission is understood here as a absolute repetition, and memes are understood as something that repeats itself for the sake of repeating itself. Since the very purpose of the system is understood as repetition, the system thus opens up the possibility of judging based on the quality of repetition, namely, fidelity. The right way of transmission is thus to do so perfectly: just like how the virus infects the host by inducing them into a countless pattern of reproducing the virus, so does the meme ideally infect the host by initiating in them this absolute repetition of the meme *itself*. Yet doesn’t this analogy to a virus or a gene already prescribed and entail the danger of mutation? Indeed, just like how viruses mutate, the memes also mutate, and it is here that the analogy (between human—gene/virus and human—culture) really reveals its true function: it

essentially expels any possible room for agential creativity through naturalizing culture. The new thing, song, product, etc., can only arise as an error in this imitation process **in which an original is already presupposed for without an original to compare to, the term “error” does not make sense in this context.** Hence, modification to the meme cannot be done in a conscious way; it can only happen as a result of carelessness. The individual is thus alienated from the creation of the meme; what is permitted to enter into the core of the meme and alter it is a sense of non-consciousness. These errors cannot be eradicated due to the imperfection of human memories, and therefore, they must again compete with other memes *in the cultural environment*. In effect, beneficial mutations would, in fact, further the memes’ survival. There is no creativity, only errors, and these errors can only, through random chances, be beneficial to cultural productions by furthering the tradition’s reproduction.

The implication here is even more intriguing than what we just explored: the task to banish human intention from cultural activity—hence valorizing science as the primary tool to ponder human life—is so profound here that everything is, in effect, a repetition. The cultural system is no longer regarded as the accumulation of individual creativity but is, instead, always already there before any individual was there in the first place. The system’s only purpose is to provide copies of itself, and therefore, the only true value of this system is quantitative value: every meme’s survival value can be measured according to quantitative dimension. As such, an individual has no way to intentionally influence the system—for each influence is an error, a mutation, in the reproduction process.

If we take out Dawkins’s usage of the term “error” from such the meme model—a term that only make sense when one compares with the original—then it indeed emerges as some form of postmodern deconstruction of authenticity and presence in the metaphysical tradition. In effect, the meme’s revelation that repetition or the possibility of repetition as iterability, is presupposed before any sense of originality. In that position, repetition and that

reproduction informs production means that absolute individual authenticity and the absolute presence of a consciousness are illusions, for even these concepts could be rendered into memes that propagate. From this perspective, we could even discard the necessity of the transcendental questions that we have identified a few pages before now, for even these questions and the asking of these questions could be rendered and hence understood as memes. It would also seem like that, without calling something as “error” or using the language of “mutation”, the impossibility of full repetition would appear as the positive condition of cultural transmission that explains the possibility of meme’s propagation. If we always already repeat perfectly, then the active act of repeating and the transmission of memes would never occur for, in that case, there will no longer be two different enough sites between which memes could make their passages. If we conclude here in haste, then we would optimistically state that such a model describes everything as a repetition, that everything inherent in us is inherent, and nothing real is not unreal fiction constructed by repetition in this model; and it simultaneously justifies this act of fiction as the possibility of meme’s propagation. Since we have argued in Chapter 1.2 that humor reveals the real that has been taken for granted as unreal, then what the meme-tic model proposes is a humorous model.

Yet that is not what Dawkins is interested in here; instead, through his usage of the term “error”, Dawkins indicates that a sense of originality or authenticity as the original and the authentic has not been fully banished here. As I will attempt to show in the following, precisely because of the concept of errors and creativity as errors, what Dawkins wants to establish here is, in effect, a very metaphysical model in which an absolute origin is ideally guarded against infiltration and contamination; in other words, Dawkins’s model, through banishing intention absolutely and functioning in effect of its absolute absence, valorizes absent-minded repetition as the original center and is therefore structured around a concept of

originality that it cannot address. This gesture is most apparent when, at the end of this chapter, Dawkins wants to defend memes as a form of preservation in which one's identity could attain a certain form of immortality. Hence, the ability to repeat yourself even after death emerges from this model; Dawkins has said about the positive side of the memes that "Socrates may or may not have a gene or two alive in the world today, as G. C. Williams has remarked, but who cares? The meme-complexes of Socrates, Leonardo, Copernicus, and Marconi are still going strong" (199). Dawkins's implication here is clear—that even though the meme reveals that every qualitative judgment is only a result of the quantitative difference in mimetic processes, that certain value is only asserted because it *has more copies*, the individual as the "original" propagator of memes still retains a metaphysical essence. Moreover, even though the model necessarily denies individual intention and, by doing so, renders every value of judgment as a symptom of the meme disease, Dawkins still wishes to inaugurate a sense of value for the model in terms of fidelity to the original copy. In other words, there is still an original copy that, even though formally, the analogy itself denies any possibility of originality.

Yet how has that identity of the original copy been secured over generations? That is something Dawkins does not answer, and he can not answer because of his inherent paradoxical intention that, on the one hand, he wishes to inaugurate the possibility of a quantitative model which expels any qualitative property, yet on the other, he wishes to give this model a meta-value, namely, fidelity, that is dependent on qualitative judgment. Fidelity to the original copy thus arises as here as the original purpose of culture: that which the tradition of biology defines as the thing that reproduces itself. Culture is rendered into something that repeats itself for the sake of the repetition. Against such a culture, we articulate the deviation from the original as an erroneous mutation, for if mutations were seen as signs of new memes coming along, then again, the individual intention would infiltrate into

the model because it would then be conceded that memes could be modified into new memes intentionally without being conceived of as an error. Yet if that possibility isn't there, then we must justify how fidelity itself arises as an original meme that informs the value of each repetition. Otherwise, how would it be the case that, even though Socrates was read in a different light in our time than those that come before, Dawkins could still argue that some essence was still passed through in each production?

Dawkins's justification seems to be putting this inherent paradox under the guise of his biological analogy: the meme is to the gene of culture, and since the gene copies itself for the sake of copying, the meme must also copy itself for the sake of copying. What is being naturalized here is thus the intention to copy itself—reproduction itself arises spontaneously as the original meme; as such, it serves as the foundation of the meme model but also cannot be grasped by the model. What the model of the meme cannot describe, or limits itself to describe, is the idea of an “origin copy” for subsequent imitation, for at that very origin is the imitation of the very act of imitation. Yet through valorizing an “original copy” and advocating for memes because of their possibility to be fidel to the original, what the meme model erases is the trace of the original founding of a not-so original as the original and the subsequent equation of creativity to a sign of error. The meme—units of cultural transmission — is the ultimate model of immortality that contains its own immortal life in its own core and blocks any possibility for a mortal to interact with that very core without them being conceived of as an infiltrator or evil-doer. Through this separation, culture as a combination of memes is rendered as a second nature that operates literally in the same logic as nature. The memes are a living system that renders living a process of repetition for the sake of repeating. In this sense, the model implies the possibility of humorizing everything and every value except this very concept of fidelity; humor is thus sanctioned from this very concept of repetition for the sake of repetition. Everything could be rendered as a meme except for the

very concept of a meme. Every individual in the meme model is but a blind-copied machine, but the model of repetition cannot grasp repetition when it appeals to fidelity as a sense of absolute value.

As we have previously described, there seems to be some kind of isolation from individual intention going on in calling something “memes,” and the internet does provide a cultural environment that resembles the model that Dawkins describes. Even though we have already shown that the notion of the meme, its intention to describe the cultural activity as purely parasitic actions of viral spread, and the reduction of individual will are all results of the active construction, what has, in fact, pervaded the internet culture is a sense that these comparisons are powerful. Each individual’s influence on the meme is very limited, and in each rendition of the meme, some traits do pass through. Dawkins’s model thus applies regionally to an internet environment. What we thus call memes is a spread in a culture that seems like it carries this reduction of personal intention. Even for the YYDZ memes at hand, what seems to be repeated over and over again is his face and the formula, yet the identity of each individual meme’s creator is not important. Nonetheless, the formation of an original formula is important since the fidelity to an original formula is the only serious rule of the game that remains. In the production of the meme, the requirement for any intention is reduced to its minimum by the formula inherent to the meme. In the appreciation of that meme, if appreciation is indeed the word here, one does not need to understand Ding Zhen’s identity nor the creator’s intention, for intention is the last thing a meme needs for it to be a meme. Instead, what the audience is laughing at is essentially a repeating thing; what they are enjoying in the process of transmitting this meme is a passivity or a viral infection. However, the meme reveals the other’s repetition by generating its own repetition, whether it would be a repetition of ridicule or parody. The memes criticize others for repeating inauthentically, but its own inauthenticity is ignored or escapes its meme-tic grasp.

When we thus subject the YYDZ meme as a meme and compare it with Critchley's humor, we will find that the final return to humility does not usually occur, for the meme parodies the others without realizing the possibility of itself being humorized. Reflecting on the image of Figure 1 and the antagonistic phrases of Figure 3, what is essentially conducted toward the figure of Ding Zhen is a misanthropic distortion. In pasting Ding Zhen's face on a tree, we do not seek to re-discover or reflect something about us—for in the meme, that sense of the self is reduced and bypassed—and instead, we believe we are laughing at something that is absolutely different from us, even though in this laughter we, too, are stuck in the same repetition; yet through valorizing fidelity our own repetition becomes recognizable to us.

Moreover, unlike when most humor appeals to social understanding, the laughter of the memes often seeks to appeal to no specific background for its purpose is to propagate; the best strategy to propagate is to make itself appeal to backgrounds as diverse as possible. Since the memes compete for our attention instead of our participation, what the memes seek is to shock its audience with an iteration of its distance from the audience. When such a strategy is reflected in an individual meme, it appears as straightforward and un-thought-provoking ridicule. Most of the time, internet memes appeal to body humor and seek to depict a scenario that is as opaque and ridiculous as possible: bewilderment and confusing laughter is the only way how it will spread *virally* across the crowd. Only when the memes can be applied to multiple scenarios will they gain popularity by fitting into the diverse lives we are living at each moment? Yet the unconscious nature of body humor—reflected in the YYDZ memes in its common strategy of pasting Ding Zhen's face on anything—prevents the laughing audience's self-reflection, for it reinforces the seeming distance between Ding Zhen and the audience. The strategy of the meme is thus something that completely abandons the possibility of Critchley's humor of self-reflection and appeals completely to the side of laughter. When Critchley's optimistic view of humor is that it can prompt self-reflection,

what we observe in these memes is a form of humor that seeks to reinforce the egoistic intention of those who are laughing. How is this transformation possible? Moreover, could we draw a connection between these types of laughter? Before answering this question, it is crucial for us to look deeper into the cultural background that prompts this internet humor, and, unsurprisingly, the same reduction occurs.

Chapter Two: The Self as a Meme.

With the last chapter, we have several intermediate discoveries: first, humor is that which reveals, responds, and eventually deconstructs our inherent passivity; second, a meme is a model that reduces or alienates individual creativity from the process of cultural transmission; last but not least, culture, understood as the totality that composes of countless memes, is understood as a layer of found objects—individual memes that are always already created before any creative endeavor initiates—that always comes toward the individuals as a background against which they can do nothing except for mutating that background by error. What has been described is a biological model to understand, that is, to define our relationship with a culture so that each of us as individuals has nothing to do with it. In other words, it is to understand a relationship based on a non-relationship, hence setting the individual in opposition to culture. Culture—the parasite, the virus, the meme—is the self-conscious Other that always comes before the individual and against which the individual is powerless. Culture is the right thing everyone says unconsciously, like a host being dominated by a parasite; culture is so right that it copies itself and repeats itself throughout generations; and the only right thing to do to culture is to obey it and copy it perfectly. Since the opposition between culture and the individual is rendered absolute, humor, accompanied

by this understanding of culture, is always the ridiculing action of laughing at—for the passage between the individual's contribution and the culture is blocked.

As we will see more in-depth in the following chapters, such a conception of culture as the source of the individual's absolute passivity could then influence our cultured ideas of what an individual means. Though culture is rendered here as a model that excludes individual intention as a set of concepts, it also includes within itself an ideal of what authenticity to the individual means. In other words, the meme culture understands that which it excludes as a form of culture and a meme. By investigating the etymological roots of both “Chun[pure]” and “Zhen[authentic],” we will better understand the connotation behind describing Ding Zhen using a combination of the two ideograms. We will also see how a craving or a valorization of such a “Chun Zhen” leads to the formulation of a meme of a true self within consciousness that defines authenticity as the rigid conformity of consciousness to this interior true self. As a result, the operation allowed people the ability to expel something from “the original” and therefore criticized them as a threat, contamination of the true self and the true “original culture”’s preservation. The antagonism between culture and the individual thus leads to an argument for the “truest” and the “most natural” form of value that demands conformity. In a doubled movement, Ding Zhen's Chunzhen-ness allows for the fictitious establishment of the most natural nature and the truest truth by describing that which is unnatural and untrue. It is this movement of the narration that we must now elaborate and examine.

2.1. The Etymology of Chun Zhen and the Meme Model.

We must now meditate on how the self is conceptualized in the world of memes. It does not hurt to go back once again to Ding Zhen, who is the protagonist of our investigation.

Ding Zhen is known, as we have already mentioned before, for being pure and authentic or, in Chinese, Chún Zhēn [纯真], which we loosely define here as being true to oneself. Yet how is such a relationship maintained? How is being true to oneself understood here? In order to understand this, we have to look back at the words' etymology and define these characters. Only when such a relationship is defined could we understand the individual's relationship to their self and, through which, draw out the profile of the self-being conceptualized here.

According to *Xin Hua Da Zidian*—literally meaning the *Xinhua Big Dictionary*—the ideogram Chūn [纯], often translated as purity or being pure, originally refers to a type of silk that is of the same color. As time went on, the ideogram started to signify the state of not having any other impurity for the silk is of the same color (181). Through that, the ideogram then reaches its common signification: purity, the state of not having any impurity—the contamination from the outside—within itself. Already, we see this idea of cleanliness and maintaining such an inside being connoted here as an undertone. Therefore, the dictionary defines the ideogram's first meaning as “of singular composition; is not contaminated with other object” (181). One can easily connect this to the solidarity of the memes since both of them signal an interior against which any infiltration or changes are error, mutation, and contamination. Then, at the second level, which we will investigate later along with a similar connotation of “Zhen,” the ideogram also means “proficiency[熟练]” (181). Why does an ideogram originally denoting “purity” also contain the meaning of “proficiency”? To this question, the dictionary's explanation is “(of the state of) uncontaminated, purity. From which it is inferred as simple, devoted, from which it is inferred as skilled, proficiency(181).”¹³ The term, in its etymological form, thus constantly fluctuates between describing the state of being simple and that of being adept. The dictionary definition thus implied that, at least from

¹³ Original text: 不含杂质的，纯净的。由此引申为单纯，专一，又引申为精通，熟练

an etymological perspective, the state of simplicity could be thought in connection with being proficient, or just like any other state, the purest state in which the thing itself is purely itself, is a state that takes time and progress to reach. Hence, the state of purity itself calls for the previous process of purification.

Isn't it already strange that the stage of simpleness and contamination is not something that is not to be taken for granted and needs progress to reach? Let's follow this thread of strangeness a little bit further in our investigation of Zhen [真], which the dictionary defines primarily as "matching the objective appearance of the thing itself (antonym to "fake")(1611)."¹⁴ Here, there is a doubling going on: the thing itself has an objective appearance, which is the thing, yet on top of that appearance, it has another layer that needs to match this thing itself for the notion of truth to be completely established. Again, the simply true stage in which the thing just *is* in its true form is not established without a movement of creating another double that needs to skillfully conform to this objectivity. Again, the notion of progress and effort is somewhat evoked.

Yet even the etymology of Zhen[真], if etymology is indeed a model that we can apply to the Chinese language, carries this underlying connotation that an original status requires constant cultivation to reach:

"the meaning of the form of Zhen [真] is unknown, some people believe it is a phonogram...¹⁵ Others believe that it originated as a miswritten form of Zhen [贞, often translated as innocence]. There are also people who believe that the character in

¹⁴ The original text is: "与事物本来的客观面貌相符 (与“假”相对)", here I followed the standard translation of these terms. Yet the term "appearance" is first, strategically selected for "appearance"'s philosophical baggage in the Western tradition and also that the original word "面貌" itself carries the connotation of appearance in the physical sense.

¹⁵ The character could also be written in traditional Chinese as 眞. The shape of the character in traditional Chinese is what the rest of this quoted passage is referring to.

the seal script is an ideogram that combines the huà [化] that signals “change,” the yǐn [引] that signals “to vanish from,” the bā [八] that signals the cloud or winds which the Immortal rides when they ascend to heaven¹⁶. Combined, the character means those people who, because they have *preserved and nurtured their nature* well, ascended to heaven...(Xin Hua, 1611, the italics are mine).¹⁷

Zhen, which could be translated as “authenticity” or “truth” and that which corresponds to the original appearance of the thing itself, is also something that can only be reached after astute practice of preservation of the self. In other words, that original status is something that must be constantly guarded against to prevent contamination; the term thus contains the signification that such a nature is always at risk of being contaminated. The *Zhen*, that authentic and true nature of an individual, has a permeable boundary that is always threatened by its other. However, what is this other? Doubtlessly, the source of this contamination, this other against which one has to preserve one’s true nature, is mortal life as such because the destination of such preservation, the stage that Zhen originally describes, is the ascension to heaven and the departure from the mortal realm. The true form of one’s self is always placed at a distance from those living beings by the fact that they are living. Therefore, the

¹⁶ The original phrase here which I translated to as “immortal” is “仙人”. The word itself does not have a exact English translation since it could be used to refer to a deity, a god, or it can also be used as a honorific title to a highly achieved Daoist. I translated the term as “immortal” because Daoist generally believes that the status of “仙人” could be reached by those who practice the art of immortality. In the general context, these practices concentrates on cultivating one’s health and body physique. It is also worth noting that the Daoist’s ascension to heaven is not generally viewed as an eternal reward as in religions like Christianity. Rather, it is seen as the final destination to a personal practice and is not connected with the concept of some sort of divine judgement. Correspondingly, the Daoist’s conception of “heaven” also differs from the Christian conception in that heaven is not necessarily conceived as a perfect realm of eternal happiness. Rather, “heaven” and “the ascension of heaven” sometimes simply signals that the immortal ascends above the mortal realm in a supreme lightness and can ignore those common troubles.

¹⁷Original Text: 真字构型的含义不详。有人认为是形声字，下部贝形，上部为古文殄的反写……为声。也有人认为，真是贞字讹写变化而来的。还有人认为，这个字在篆文中是会意字，由表变化的七（读作 huà）、表隐去的乚（读作 yin 三声）、表仙人升天所乘云或风等物的八组合而成。合起来表示因存养本性而得道升天的人。真的本义指未掺杂质的本性，引申指与事物的本来面貌相符，又引申指明明确清楚。真作副词时，表示实在、的确。真还指真书、即楷书。“（1611）

attainment of becoming that “true status” of the self calls for the active protection of the interior self from the threats of the outside. Since the effort this movement requires is extremely immense, “zhen” is very valuable and very praiseworthy.

On a superficial level, it is almost intuitively given that netizens would call Ding Zhen “Chun Zhen.” In almost any culture, the concept of mortal life is connected with the concept of a cultural society composed of other people; in other words, it is connected with the conception of mainstream society. Such a mainstream is then conceived of as being in opposition to one’s natural self. As we said in the introductory chapter, much of Ding Zhen’s original popularity corresponds to the fact that he seems to be far from what is commonly understood as a modernized society. It is not very difficult to imagine why such a figure—Ding Zhen, the sweet wild boy—would be so appealing to the average Chinese citizen who works in a typical industrial and urban environment. Most of his public activities correspond directly to this appeal; for instance, Ding Zhen’s speech at the United Nations was almost exclusively about his idyllic lifestyle and his “animal friends” (Guan 18). On this basis, the collapse of Ding Zhen’s figure after that smoking accident is also understandable, for this basis of the natural boy and the uncivilized innocent youth is immensely challenged by the action of smoking, an action that symbolizes a sense of mundane contamination that goes directly against the natural and the true. Since we have defined humor as the movement that reveals what is thought of us given and necessary as an active pretension, this sudden collapse is indeed a humorous movement. Let’s recall the common explanation of the meme that we’ve introduced in the introductory section: that YYDZ memes refer to that which, on a homophonic level, means that which appeals to the eyes at first sight as the trues while operating as the exact opposite as being the most inauthentic. It is very appealing to conclude that Ding Zhen’s action of smoking is itself an act of humor, for at that very moment, he

reveals that what he has been acting as his natural status is, in fact, a pretension, and hence, Critchlean humor finds its place to prosper.

Nonetheless, if one pauses for a second and meditates closer to the meme, a peculiarity soon arises from such a construction. If one understood “chun zhen” as simply that status in which all there is in one’s self is one’s self, then why could Ding Zhen’s action of smoking a cigarette betray that definition? By the same token, even the term itself seems redundant: if “Chun Zhen” is simply acting according to one’s nature, how is it possible that anyone would deviate from such a nature because, at every given moment, the person is defining themselves? Therefore, where does that need and urge for purification come from? Moreover, upon which basis does that distancing of a living self from an interior self constitute its possibility? In particular, in our cases, what is the construction necessary for one so that they would find such a trivial action funny?

There is, thus, obviously, another subtle act of operation that we didn’t discover in our etymological investigation. In other words, there is another theoretical movement at work here that makes it possible for one to intuit this model of contamination and opposition and, from that, to intuit the laughing stock of Ding Zhen and his cigarette. It is this underlying operation that we must further investigate in order to be brought under the light of truth.

2.2. The Doubled Interior

Ding Zhen is a symbol of the pure and the true: he is defined as that which is himself and contains nothing but himself; Ding Zhen coincides with himself unconsciously. However, this gesture of simplicity is regarded by those on the internet as a luxury, for it is a difficult task to protect the self from the ever-feculent exterior world. Yet when he smokes, the netizens find it funny for he betrays this definition of the pure and the true, as if the netizens

are saying that Ding Zhen is no longer himself and contains nothing but himself as if the netizens are saying that Ding Zhen is not acting like that pure and authentic self out of authentic intention but conforming to the exterior, just as themselves.

If we followed the common binary model of the interiority-exteriority split of the individual that does not purposefully describe a boundary between the two, the ideal movement above is almost unthinkable. If the human being, in this construct, is only split into the interior and the exterior—with the interior designated as simply that which intentionally drives the exterior to perform, the exterior as the physical condition that sometimes demands the interior to make choices that are “not its own,” and authenticity defined as a convergence of the two—then the ability to judge whether an action is authentic will be left entirely to one’s own self. The reason that the possibility of exterior judgment will be denied is that an exterior other will no longer be able to tell whether, for each motion, a convergence occurs because the interior self, the intention, can never be presented to any other individual. Furthermore, since the binary model posits an exterior and an interior that is absolutely separated, it does not explain how the interaction between these two extremes composed by the former as the absolutely material but a-psychological and the latter as the absolutely psychological but a-physical, interacts: and this is indeed the age-old criticism of Cartesian dualism. With no explanation of interaction, a sense of universal value that describes a good or bad based on evaluating such an interaction is also theoretically unthinkable. If we can not even define how the interior interacts with and commands the exterior, how can we know whether it is failing that demand? Derivatively, pure and authentic will also become something that is not praiseworthy in the dualistic model. This binary model is, therefore, not what this pure and authentic narrative is presenting to us here.

Are we, then, permitted to take the gesture of humor and say that in this model, there is indeed no boundary between the interior and the exterior or that the differentiating

boundary is itself purely constructed? There is no doubt that such a construction will solve the problem of interaction by resorting to interaction as a sense of illusion since there would be no interaction, only action within a singular but multifaceted self. Yet this gesture and such construction are not what we are facing here in the particular case of Ding Zhen. We must notice that if we simply say the boundary is constructed and hence unreal, then we would leave ourselves no room for the possibility of thinking of any contamination and protection. If the interior is the exterior, then it would also be impossible to establish a sense of otherness; hence, the possibility of thinking that one can be subordinated to the other through the other's infiltration will also be abolished. Moreover, if there is no operation at work here, then the stage of convergence, which we can appraise as authentic, will have no value, too, because it will be the basic and immutable stage for someone who believes that their interior has no difference with the exterior. However, the fact that Ding Zhen's purity and authenticity are appealing to a general audience signals that there is something else going on here. This operation accomplishes two paradoxical actions at once: first, it ensures the possibility of interaction between the interior and the exterior, and second, that there is still a difference between the two so that some form of opposition is maintained.

Let us look again at the Ding Zhen incident. Ding Zhen smokes; at that moment, he reveals through his presentation of himself that it is not a result of his intention, but he is conforming to the exterior. It is when this happens that we say Ding Zhen is no longer being pure and authentic, or we can say that Ding Zhen is not being true to himself. Yet, does not Ding Zhen also actively want to smoke? Is not the action of his smoking also an act of intention? Moreover, why do none of the people conceive of Ding Zhen's act of internet presentation itself as a result of intention, but rather, they have to conceive it as a betrayal of such an intention? The only explanation is this: that even within intention, there is a substantiated region—meaning the region is already saturated with substance— drawn there

with substantive description, and only when Ding Zhen is conforming to this region will it be intuited that he is being true to himself.

We can call this internality of the interiority a conception of a true self; then, to the other side of the interior self that the true self circumscribed, we can call it consciousness, for it is that which intentionally makes decisions to conform to this true self or not depending on exterior conditions. It is this doubling of Ding Zhen's interiority that simultaneously ensures the valorization of authenticity through ensuring actions of conformance and the possibility to conceive of contamination as the errors of those actions. Ding Zhen is, thus, understood as being at least tripled: in the first layer, his true self presents to his consciousness his own true form, then in the second layer, his consciousness decides whether to obey or not, and in the last layer his exterior behavior merely presents the decision made by his intention. Ding Zhen's behavior is thus only a representation: it presents the desire for the true self that is already filtered by his consciousness. Ding Zhen's doubled-interior self, the two inner layers of him, is also a structure that constantly communicates and interacts with each other. Within the interior self, there is still a region of the true self that the decision-making consciousness must adhere to in order to attain authenticity. This true self is conceived of as that which is uncontaminated; therefore, it is the original. The true self is understood as not a meme because it is not the result of an imitation.

Yet, as we have examined in Chapter 1, what the meme model reveals to us is essentially that every belief could be rendered as a meme and that the exterior is already understood as a parasite; this true self must be there before the intentional self enters into culture. However, if everything that surrounds us is already cultured, and since consciousness is that in-between that is opened to the outside, we must say that as long as there is a consciousness, then contamination has already begun at the moment consciousness begins. In other words, this doubling of interiority presupposes contamination. For something to

precede contamination and establish itself as the original, it must be there before life begins. In this sense, this true self is innate to each individual in the sense that it precedes their birth. The true self is always there before the consciousness comes to presence. In the game of authenticity, consciousness is, at best, a repetition of this true self, yet by virtue of being repetition and mimicry, it is irreducibly different from the true self. Hence, “Chun Zhen” is valorized, for life in this sense does not begin in simplicity but in a duality that it must strive in order to get rid of.

This true self is always immediately there; nonetheless, to protect its purity and uphold its definition as that “true” self of the individual, it must not be opened to any empirical condition, for every experience is infiltration and contamination. However, it must be able to be presented to the consciousness in a way that ensures the latter can follow its advice. Therefore, it must be capable of communicating through no signifier and relationship of signification; it must be capable of presenting through an immediate presence that is absolutely simultaneous. It is a found object that the consciousness found within itself, and when consciousness betrays this true self, it becomes inauthentic, not true to itself. This true self is not what the consciousness desires; it defines why the consciousness desires it. It is the interior of the interior that is presented as a muted exteriority.

The believers of this true self preach: “Think about what *you* want.” Within this slogan, the paradoxical construction of the doubled interiority rears its head: who is the one thinking? Consciousness is doubtlessly the source of the individual’s action. Yet if that is the one who is thinking, who is this second *you*, the *object* of this sentence? It is obviously the found object that is supposed to dominate the consciousness as its legitimate leader who is always at risk of being usurped by the poisonous outside. Once the relationship of dominance is defined and the true self is rendered as an object that merely wants, consciousness no longer has the power to redefine such a true self. As such, the consciousness, the knight, and

the disciple of this true self must constantly ponder what this true self wants and must constantly concern itself with guarding its purity and authenticity by conforming to this muted lord. Consciousness must thus adhere, duplicate, and represent the true self, from which the exterior behaviors of the serfs in this feudal conception of the individual must be organized. Perfect reproduction is only identifiable if this true self is already substantialized with the material condition; only when such a process of substantializing is completed can one tell whether someone else is being true to themselves. Therefore, through such a construction, every deviation of the consciousness from the true self is thus an error, a mutation, a contamination, and an infiltration of the outside.

Yet, is not the found-object-ness of the true self already established itself as something that is from the outside? If we imagine consciousness “picking up” this true self that it then upholds to valorize, then is not this object that it picked up also the product of the process of imitation? Perhaps an illustration through anecdote could better demonstrate our confusion here. Let us say in the logic of this model that my true self hates philosophy but loves soccer, yet my reality compels me to sit here in front of the laptop and write this thesis.¹⁸ This true soccer-loving and philosophy-hating self is true to me because it is something I had from the very beginning of life: I was born *with* this trait. Yet is not this trait also a result of the cultivation of my family history that has breaded generations of generations of soccer lovers and philosophy-haters? Or should we say that, just like Mendel’s mutated peas, I am a mutated individual of this family, yet is not mutation also the result of an imitation, albeit a failed imitation? Again, just like how Dawkins struggles to say that the “meme of Socrates” will live on forever, at the extreme or the beginning of this meme model of the individual’s self and subjectivity, we find ourselves at a loss when we are trying to

¹⁸ Though this statement of my personality is inaccurate, the sentence is indeed an accurate description for that moment when I wrote down this sentence, namely, late afternoon, first of March, 2024 . Sitting in the Media Library of the Woodruff Library, I stared outside the window and observes what could only be described as a rainstorm: a soccer game is indeed implausible and unthinkable in this weather.

secure the identity of such an origin. Although the legitimacy of the true self's reign is only established since it is that which the individual has for themselves, not as the result of an imitation but as the origin, what we have shown is that the true self, since it is substantiated with identifiable traits, is also an imitation.

In short, the true self, since it contains substantiated principles against which one could measure their authenticity, is also only a meme. Yet, since it must uphold its own quality as an original copy, it actively seeks to erase its quality as a meme by erasing the original process of designating a meme as the original. Therefore, we see those believers of the true self actively saying, "This is not who I am," for once something *is* and can be described by exterior conditions, it can be revealed as an imitation or as a meme from the outside. Therefore, not only must the true self not be opened to anterior modification in one's living life, but it must also spawn spontaneously as if it is summoned into existence out of nowhere. Against such a true self, the consciousness's disobedience will be seen as inauthentic, but since the consciousness can only "find" such a true self and can only serve as its repetition, the intentional consciousness always already disobeyed the truth as an inauthentic copy: therefore an analogy of the biological endeavor that circumscribes a region of absolute passivity within the self. The true self-concept, therefore, naturalizes a region within the self that is inherited as one's *nature*, even though a boundary that differentiates between one's nature and one's consciousness is never fully secured. The true self is conceptualized as the interior of the interior; it is a parasite that designates the absolute absence of intention or the ideal absence of intention as purity. **Such a conception allows the true self to dominate consciousness and castigate its deviations even though it can never fully differentiate itself from the consciousness, hence, to ensure its power it actively seeks to erase the presence of intention or consciousness from its origin. In other word,**

it seeks to constitute an absolute binary opposition between absence of intention and presence of intention.

2.3. The Ding Zhen Meme that Preceded the Yi Yan Ding Zhen Meme

In examining the culture of authenticity, what we find essentially is this conception of a supposedly “true self” that turns out to be as original as it would want it to be. The very establishment of the original presupposes contamination as the deviation from the original, as a result, the establishment of an original is an active process that the culture of authenticity seeks to erase. As I will endeavor to show in this section, in the Yi Yan Ding Zhen meme, the establishment of an original Ding Zhen and its subsequent erasure constitutes a violent justification for powers.

Ding Zhen, the one whom people thought to be coinciding with his “true self,” was already a meme before the netizens turned him into YYDZ: a smiling face on the tree, on the mountain, and everything imaginable. Those who originally publicized him and brought him his internet apotheosis had great expectations of him; they wanted a true symbol of the pure, the authentic, and the beautiful from this young man. If humor is understood as the movement that deconstructs and reveals the construction of everything that one considers as “natural” and takes for granted, then what the original followers and proponent of the “pure and authentic” Ding Zhen want is a symbol that can be devoid of humor for, in their constructions, Ding Zhen is truly what his true self is, his appearance adheres to that true self and is therefore unconstructed. Since that ideal image of Ding Zhen is not a result of construction but a result of absolute spontaneity, there is then no room for the deconstructive

force of humor to slip into in the first place. In short, they wanted the meme of Ding Zhen's true self to fully dominate his consciousness, such that Ding Zhen serves as a model, an ideal, and a perfect dream for the rest of the people like him. This program of constructing Ding Zhen's meme thus needs to constantly deny its own existence in order to represent Ding Zhen as if he is truly that pure and authentic self on screen.

One can spot the trace of this program if one takes a closer look at those articles published on CNKI, China's database of its academic journal, that studies the Ding Zhen phenomenon under the name and cause of "value guidance," "positivity guidance" and "educating teenagers using internet celebrity." The maintenance of Ding Zhen's image is, thus, also a national and political program that constantly seeks to evoke a sense of legitimacy by presenting its adherence to a reality that it itself constructed. We must here emphasize the logic of this program: that upon establishing a difference and a boundary between itself as the true and the other as the untrue, everything that seeks to subvert, transverse, and deconstruct—essentially, to make humor out of— this difference and boundary is a threat, a contamination, and a mutation. Take this article named "On the Guidance of Contemporary Youth's Internet Ideology—Taking Ding Zhen's Popularity as an Example," for instance, published in the journal *Youth and Adolescence Studies*; the article acclaims the "value" of Ding Zhen's fame with the aforementioned logic as its undertone:

"The teenager group is open-minded, they do not conform to formulas and equations, and they worship unique personality, from which evolves the "appreciation of ugliness" culture...the *irrational* "appreciation of ugliness"...are vulgar and cheap. "Appreciation of ugliness" *subverted the standard of beauty and ugliness, blurred the boundary between good and evil, and weakened the artistic appreciation level of the youth. As time goes on, it will threaten society's core values.*

The pursuit of the beautiful is *guidable*...Ding Zhen, who has shiny eyes, clear eyes, and a unique personality, lets people see the *beauty of nature's carving* that is different from that of Photoshop...Ding Zhen and his hometown were *recruited as symbols* into the promotion discourse system of the local government, and they guide people to seek the *natural and authentic beautiful and good*; they are correcting the standard of beauty, they *transcend* the repetitive virtuality and the attention-grabbing E'Gao, and are outputting the most authentic and the truest value (Yan and Liu 4, the italics and translation are mine)."¹⁹

Here we see an internet celebrity that is famous for being distant from “virtuality”; we see an internet “promotion discourse system” that actively seeks to condemn the virtual and the digital system that serves as the very medium of its publication; we see the active attempt to erase the trace of the internet, by condemning it as unreal and virtual in contrast to the real so that the figure it publicizes might represent the “most authentic and the truest value”; at last we see the claim to a value that belongs to the society as its essential core which everyone, particularly the government, has the responsibility to protect from the threat of being subverted, mutated, contaminated and blurred. Just like every claim to the universal core and universal essence of a culture, the image that Ding Zhen is supposed to represent is against the humorous gestures such as “E'Gao” and rejects any other values that threaten its legitimacy.

However, before going a step further, we must note that the action we are seeking here from our parody of the “promotion discourse system” is not its absolute annihilation. It is

¹⁹ Original Text: 青年群体思维开放跳脱，不拘泥于方程定式，崇尚另类个性，也逐渐演变出“审丑”文化，包括恶搞、装土、戏谑、扮傻等非理性的审丑...内容低俗劣质。“审丑”颠覆了美丑的标准，模糊善恶的界限，弱化青年的艺术鉴赏水平，长此以往将对社会核心价值体系造成威胁。对美的追求是可以引导的...气质独特的丁真让人们看到不同于精修磨皮的自然雕刻的美好...自然雕琢的环境、淳朴健朗的康巴汉子，丁真和他的家乡作为符号收编进当地政府的形象宣传话语体系中，引导人们追求自然真实的美好，校正美的标准，超脱出千篇一律的虚幻和夺人眼球的恶搞，传输寻找最本真最真实的价值观。

philosophically absurd if we believe we can cut the heritage of this program completely from the system so that some ideal neutrality could be reached; inheritance is always unavoidable, and neutrality is always itself partiality. We do not wish to replace a system of truth with our own system of truth. Nor do we deny that a sense of universal agreement is always presented in every society. Nonetheless, what we want to do here through our representation of the underlying narrative of the original Ding Zhen is to underscore its underlying claim of universality and the defensive gesture that follows it and actively censors humor. The narrative that Ding Zhen represents the most authentic and the most natural is itself a great example of this gesture; it seeks to reinforce a boundary that, at its base, is arbitrarily or drawn in blurriness; it seeks to categorize everything into binary oppositions so that it can constantly deny this other. Therefore, it creates a meme of the true self and true culture; the individual must actively guard the former to prevent contamination; the nation and society must actively guard the latter against exterior infiltration. Once such a meme is established, the authority must also actively erase the meme quality of the true self and true culture as memes and hail them as the truth.

This double-movement of establishment and subsequent erasure is exemplary in the case of Ding Zhen. From the very beginning of his fame, Ding Zhen does not get a say in who he “truly is” on the internet. When the photographer took a picture of Ding Zhen’s smile and when that smile went viral, Ding Zhen was understood as someone who is “Chun Zhen”. The true self of Ding Zhen comes before Ding Zhen himself enters the gaze of the netizens as an active presence. Ding Zhen does not consciously come up with this true self; if anything, his consciousness, that which is opened to exterior desire and capitalization, is always a threat to the true self. It is as if, at the moment of his fame, his true self is solidified, and it becomes impossible for one to realize that maybe that smile is also only a staged act before the camera. Instead, mainstream media hailed that moment as an accidental moment; it

must do so to demonstrate that what is presented here is an accurate representation but not a consciously filtered representation. Between the consciousness and this true self, there is thus no interaction, meaning that the former, in order to be authentic, can do nothing but conform to this true self. Just like the knight who can only obey the king but cannot alter it unless, in usurpation, the conscious self cannot actively change this found object of its “true self” and redefine it unless it decides to be inauthentic to itself. The conscious individual is thus, once again, reduced to a copy machine.

As we have mentioned, Ding Zhen’s rise to fame was being upheld as an accident: the narrative is he accidentally appeared to the public in a documentary showcasing that iconic smile and ethnic clothing; no narrative about the intentional editing of this scene by the director of the documentary is mentioned. From that narrative, the audience believes that Ding Zhen is Chun-Zhen because he looks in an uncontaminated way both physically and by virtue of the fact that he only accidentally, hence unconsciously, presents himself this way. It is obvious that Ding Zhen does not even choose to be “Chun Zhen” in the first place; rather, such an image has already been selected and discovered by others, and it is only then that Ding Zhen re-discovers this image and appeals to it for further publicity. Once he deviated from it, it was also the netizens who condemned him and ridiculed him as not actually authentic by producing memes about it. Within this process, Ding Zhen, as an individual, is always absent and always responds passively to the gaze of the netizens. He does not even get to say that his true self smokes; he cannot say that his true self smokes.

However, as we have shown in Chapter 1, even when the netizens seek to humanize Ding Zhen through the YYDZ meme, they do it without denying that there is still an original Ding Zhen out there. Hence, the establishment of a meme as truth and its subsequent erasure also operate in the YYDZ meme itself. Just like what we have mentioned before, the most mundane explanation for such a meme is that it reveals that Ding Zhen while claiming to be

the most authentic, is actually the most inauthentic, yet does not the establishment of a most inauthentic also entail a claim to the most authentic? Therefore, just as what we have described in the last section of the first chapter, the humor of the meme is essentially a movement that is similar to the establishment of Ding Zhen's true self as a meme, albeit that it is in the opposite direction. Just like the "promotion discourse system" that promotes their version of reality and definition of truth, the netizens also say what they believe authenticity "truly is" through condemnation of Ding Zhen's inauthenticity. Hence, both of them are based on similar egoistic endeavors to establish themselves as that which cannot be laughed at by laughing at or condemning another that is supposedly different from them. Therefore, the humor of the meme is not reciprocal but also stops at a certain claim of self-legitimacy.

Through investigating humor theory and the original program of the memes in the first chapter, we have discovered the reduction of the human as a blind copy machine of their culture, which is itself a humorous way of depicting our environment that seeks to be as humorless as possible. Then, in this chapter, we have discovered that a similar reduction goes on with the individual's relationship to themselves as they become blind copy machines of their "true self" by ignoring that this true self is also a meme. As such, we have discovered that the internet culture is accustomed to the erasure of the meme-tic quality from a meme hailed as the truth; it is subsequently addicted to this action imposing "a true self," and it is fetishizing those who are "authentic," which means they are loyal to their true self. It is thus the right time to ask this question: why does the internet provide such a fertile ground for such a desire? What is it about the internet that makes such a desire and fetishization so popular? To do this, we have to go back to the internet itself.

Chapter Three: The Internet's Double Movement

As we have said, but it is still justified to repeat once again here, what we have witnessed so far in the two chapters above is essentially a double movement being repeated in two different yet interconnected realms. These two were almost the same movement transported twice: culturally, it establishes repetition as the original meme of life and erases the meme-tic quality of repetition; when related to the relationship to the self, it seeks to establish a meme as an original self and erases the meme-tic quality also. What we are trying to do here is to see how the internet contributes to this same movement by providing a fertile ground for its operation.

One might wish to see me demonstrating that this desire, in effect, *originated* from the internet. Yet that is not what I am capable of doing in this chapter; what is instead proposed here is a correlation between the internet, in particular social media, and its censorship. The reason why this limitation of our investigation must be established here is that, as Justin. E.H. Smith has demonstrated in his work, *The Internet is not What You Think*, that the idea of the Internet in all its functions is already present in the long history of our imagination and philosophical discourses (5). In particular, Smith asserts, through careful genealogical studies, that the idea of imitating reality through machines to reveal our reality comes from a long tradition (135). Yet that ideal presupposes a stable reality that repeats itself through repeatable law and subsequently presupposes that these laws are exhaustible and hence an imitation through the programming of a machine that copies the real: the copy machine of the real is possible. The desire to model the real as real and the possibility of such imitative modeling are the same strokes that emerged. This desire thus urges one to first observe a finite amount of seemingly repeating phenomenon and, second, describe out of it a

transcendental law that describes the infinite region of reality. Meanwhile, the trace of the presupposition that reality everywhere repeats and obeys a certain set of laws—the presupposition that reality repeats itself and hence a finite region is sufficient to predict such a repetition—is being effaced. Through such a moment, it becomes possible to conclude that finite regional repetition was hailed as an infinitely repeating law; it also makes it possible to both imitate the real through a programmed machine and to let the imitation reciprocate our understanding of reality. In other words, it renders the verb “be” into a transcendental signified through designating a true way of presence in a supposedly full reality. It is this movement that we should invest our attention toward, and since it both predates and prefigures the internet, we must not say that the latter is an origin but is, in fact, a ground that such a genealogically traceable action is being practiced and even refined with modern technology. This demonstration is indeed an ambitious project and should be conducted in effect in every corner of our contemporary age, but even for the internet, an unlimited demonstration of how such logic functions at the very fundamentals of the organization and the self-organization of the internet is impossible for this essay. Since the YYDZ memes arise from diverse social media platforms, we should satisfy ourselves from now on and focus completely on social media.

To demonstrate how social media corresponds to the logic of this double movement, we must investigate these two paradoxical actions that are, in fact, going on on these platforms: first, the social media announces itself as a virtual reality that functions outside of reality, it announces its virtuality; second, the social media, though announcing its virtuality, simultaneously establish an economy of value based on authenticity. To summarize, social media intentionally announces itself as virtual, yet when such an announcement is made, it seeks to valorize a value that, in fact, denounces virtuality but hails for its opposite. We feel compelled to ask this question: why do social media continue these opposite actions? What is

it that can possibly explain this bizarre logic that compels it to keep defining itself in its own negative term? Why does the internet condemn itself, a self that it has, in fact, never stopped claiming as its true form?

3.1. How Virtual is the Virtual Communication?

The internet has always been characterized by being virtual and non-immediate, and as a result of these two characteristics, it was thus conceived of as a place where one can attain absolute fluidity in terms of expression and identity. To illustrate it with vivid descriptions, one can imagine the quintessential netizen, and an image more or less resembling the following descriptions emerges a person staring into a screen through which he sees things that are very far away. Subsequently, a social media netizen would be characterized as someone who is staring at a screen, enjoying a virtual community instead of having a real one. Before understanding the function of social media and its relationship with the internet in general, we must first understand how the internet, as a mode of communication, is being critiqued.

Hubert L. Dreyfus wrote his work *On Internet* in the late 90s. In this book, he works hard to define the influence of the internet's virtuality and why it does not serve as a great site for *real* education. The center of his argument is that the interaction we get on the internet is *disembodied* and hence frictionless, whereas real-life education requires fractions and one to learn from one's mistakes. Refining on such an argument, Dreyfus wrote:

“Indeed, our form of life is organized by and for beings embodied like us: creatures with bodies that have hands and feet, insides and outsides; that have to balance in a gravitational field; that move forward more easily than backwards; that get tired; that have to approach objects by traversing the intervening space, overcoming obstacles as

they proceed; etc. Our embodied concerns so pervade our world that we don't notice the way our body enables us to make sense of it (21)."

Dreyfus's characterization of internet-oriented activity is that it allows us to defy bodily limitations. There is no doubt some valence in this perspective. Even though Dreyfus wrote the work at the end of the 20th century and was perhaps dealing with a set of hardware, websites, and social media platforms (if there were any) that are vastly different from our own, the temptation to justify this disembodied argument subsists. To a certain extent, the internet indeed allows us to interact with digital objects and with each other while feeling as if we are disembodied: for instance, in the pandemic, we did not need to physically be in the classroom in order to attend a class and can do it via zoom or other software. It is indeed tempting to characterize such an interaction as "disembodied," for we are not present there with our bodies but are instead there only in a *virtual* environment. Here, virtual reveals itself to be that which is a physical, a "there" that is actually "nowhere," and therefore, it characterizes itself as a site of absent presence.

However, if Dreyfus stops here, then what he has provided as a working definition of the virtual environment seems to be undistinguishable from the function of a book, a painting, or really any form of communication. In each of these media, the subject directing the information to the addressee is more or less absent, or, as Derrida puts it in his essay "Signature Event Context," since the possibility to repeat the communication is inscribed in any form of *writing*—which for him is a general term of any communication in general—this repetition implies an iterability that presupposes the possible absence of both the subject that communicates and the one whom the communication is addressing toward. Therefore, he writes:

"The possibility of repeating, and therefore of identifying, marks is implied in every code, making of it a communicable, transmittable, decipherable grid that is iterable

for a third party, and thus for any possible user in general. All writing, therefore, in order to be what it is, must be able to function in the radical absence of every empirically determined address in general (316).”

Derrida thus reminds us that there is never any form of communication that is as original as what Dreyfus would like it to be. As long as communication is made possible by some form of medium, the possible absence is already presupposed by the iterability of the form. Therefore, the difference between virtual and realistic communication might not be as rigid as Dreyfus would like it to be.

Although Derrida is being very theoretical here, we do not have to venture that far but can imagine for us a communicating situation that also challenges this rigid distinction that Dreyfus proposes when he argues—and these arguments we are of no strangers to as 21st-century netizens—for things against online communication such as: “to trust someone you have to make yourself vulnerable to him or her and they have to be vulnerable to you. Part of trust is based on the experience that the other does not take advantage of one’s vulnerability. I have to *be in the same room* with someone and know they could physically hurt me or publicly humiliate me and observe that they do not do so in order to feel I can trust them and make myself vulnerable to them in other ways (71)”. For Dreyfus, this “disembodied” communication deprives us of trust in the same environment because they occur in a space that we are not as vulnerable as we are when we are actually in a room in each other. Only when such a value of presence is attained—that we are situated in a space in which damage might be physically *real* and hence I can constitute my trust to others through seeing their real refrains from conflicting harm to me—could we say that we are really and physically interacting, instead of being virtual.

Yet it seems like such an argument might crumble from both side—that the physical form of us is not that vulnerable and that the virtual form of us is not that invulnerable either

—let us look at the former first. Since we have already established, through Derrida's argument, that a certain degree of absence is presupposed in every communication, it becomes difficult to say that physical interaction does not also presuppose the possibility of me acting or being insincere to shield myself from harm. For instance, even for physical speech, it is possible to imagine a situation in which I am conversing with a stranger and hearing them distributing ludicrous statements that I do not believe in; I might not speak against them or even pretend to agree with them. However, I do so because it is possible for me to communicate in the form of absence: I nod, but my mind is not present in that nod. In this case, the stranger is vulnerable to my future humiliation or even violent rebuttal if I am not as good-tempered as I am, but it is difficult to say that he, too, trusts that I agree with him because he is aware also of this possibility of me being absent-minded to our conversation. His vulnerability, my addressee's, is irreducible in the very structure of communication because it presupposes my absence. It seems like, in this case, the only thing he can do to trust my words is to take a leap of faith, and it seems plausible that our physical presence might make these words more compelling or even less compelling, depending on my acting skills; but it seems implausible to say that our physical presences absolutely modifies these interactions in such a way that we can conclude that physical communication is essentially different from virtual communication. The physical is not as physical as Dreyfus would want it to be.

Moreover, even though physical harm might not be immediate in the online environment, it is difficult to say that it is absolutely absent. We might not be as invulnerable to harm as Dreyfus is trying to argue here; this is true since any social media account always needs to be accessed by a physical medium, and therefore, we now have technology that tracks the address back to one's physical location and censorships that actually block the account and delete comments. Hence, it is actually possible for someone to be tracked down

and *physically* harmed; this is particularly true for a place in China, where one's social media account is tied to their Identification Documents, and hence their avatar is always tied to their real names. Yet even when we look past these technologies, for Dreyfus to characterize the internet in the way he does above as an environment without risk, he would have to demonstrate that it is absolutely impossible for one to be harmed by these words online that are directed to their social media account. Nonetheless, the numerous cases of cyberbullying have already demonstrated to us that it is possible for us to be harmed just by the words of others, and it is also possible for one to direct their ability to harm another toward an avatar speaking only words. The virtual is not as virtual as Dreyfus would want it to be, either.

If the virtual is characterized only as an absence of the physical, with the former characterized subsequently as a partially absent presence and the latter a full presence, then it seems like such a distinction is not as stable as it would seem to be at first glance. The disembodiment argument that we are only a bunch of floating minds on the internet does not stand, nor does it stand that the internet brings about an altogether different way to be present, for presence is never as secured and fully determined as many hold it to be. What we are encountering here, in effect, is not a qualitatively new way of communication but is instead something that carries only quantitatively difference: social media enables us to communicate with each other's words or even their faces from a longer distance, but it does not enable us to communicate in an absented present way because that has always been the mode of communication. In other words, the virtual is not as virtual, nor is the reality, that which is circumscribed in the contour of the real, as real as we commonly hold them to be. There is, strictly speaking, no binary opposition here, only less virtual communication and less real communication. If that is the case, I feel compelled to ask how such a virtuality—one that appears out of difference and needs to be established—is conceived and what the implications of such an establishment are.

3.2. *The Not-So-Virtual Internet*

The ability to be in multiple places at the same time is not something that only recently captured our imagination. One can spot this desire even from much earlier myths. My childhood hero, Sun Wukong, the legendary Monkey King who came from a novel written in the 16th century, has, on different occurrences, demonstrated his ability to detach his soul away from the body. For instance, his body might be suffering in a boiling pot of oil, but his mind has already been out to dine with the heavenly gods. Our fascination with this immaterial and material split of our identity is not something that has been enabled only recently by the virtual culture; rather, it has always been there for a long time.

Yet the fulfillment of this desire is indeed lying at the core of early social media's advertisement. These social media platforms privilege themselves as a way to *connect* people from all over the world, meaning that, through this supposedly new technology, you are able to be present where you are absent, and you are able to be absent where you are present. In short, you—the netizens—are granted the very mystical power of the monkey king; you are granted his magic to traverse mountains and sea with your thoughts while being physically trapped in a nutshell. As we see in Dreyfus's work, a naive belief in this statement might even guide the critique of the internet into a critique of the very possibility of disembodiment. Yet that possibility has been there for a long time; even the fact that we are capable of imagining Sun Wukong's magic testifies to its existence. In previous ages, this possibility might have been enabled by the invention of writing, the printing machine, and the novel. To this extent, one can even courageously conjecture that a cross-examination of Dreyfus's work and Plato's *Phaedrus* will reveal much resemblance between the former critique of the internet and the latter's critique of writing.

That is, however, not what we are interested in here; what we are interested in is that we must not take the internet virtuality for granted. It announces itself as another layer covering up reality; better, the internet claims that it is, at best, an imitation of reality, and it is an imitation that can, at all times, be separated from the real. What it needs is to justify its virtuality by establishing a boundary that our previous investigation reveals to be not there in the first place. Yet that very establishment signals a separation of things that are not so different from each other into two absolute categories: the real and the virtual. Hence, the operation the internet is attempting to perform for us is essentially the very establishment of a solidified boundary between the virtual and the real. It must designate a contrast through which one can identify the real—that is, in this narrative, the physical, the offline—as real, and reciprocally, it must show the virtual as virtual. Yet since the binary opposition that critics like Dreyfus argue for is, in fact, a construction based on the false presupposition that full presence exists in a mode of communication and from then, ignores the irreducibility of a degree of absence in any mode of communication, they must negotiate a radical difference by 1. erasing the our absent-presence in a “real” communication 2. erasing our present-absence in “virtual” communication. Hence, the double-sided operation it performs denies the virtuality of the real and the reality of the virtual. Through such an operation, anything on the internet, social media included, is being conceived of as a detached layer that is disconnected from the “real” world.

Therefore, just like the meme model and its subsequent “true self” culture, the internet must argue for an original that is never quite original, yet this original is its opposite: the offline reality; it is also burdened with the task of showing the imitation as only an imitation of the original by creating a standard to distinguish the two. In Dreyfus’s work and in many other narratives critiquing internet products based on their difference from the “real” world, such a boundary is defined as a form of passivity that both confirms full presence and makes

full presence confirmable. In other words, they argue that real reality provides spatial-temporal certainty to those who inhabit it, which entails an absolute passivity that is unattainable to the virtual “world.” Reciprocally, the “digital being”, by virtue of being “virtual,” denies such a spatial-temporal certainty and hence operates in a realm that is fundamentally different from ours. For instance, Joohan Kim argues in an article titled “Age Phenomenology of Digital-Being” that, since “digital beings,” which to him means, for instance, the billiard balls in a virtual game of pool, is not a representation of “real things out there” as it would be in a real game of pool, it “digital-beings have no determinable spatiotemporality. This is the fundamental difference between physical things and digital beings: while every physical thing is *here or there*, a digital being is *here and there*” (94, the italics are his).

What thus serves as the basis for the difference between a physical thing and a digital thing is thus the possibility of providing a perfect imitation: that while we, as the real physical, are circumscribed in one specific spatial-temporal realm, digital beings are possible to be here and there once at a time hence does not have that certainty. The ability to digitize every piece of information possible, for Kim, makes it possible to communicate at a level of intimacy that transcends any form of communication. Kim argues that, through transcribing all our sensations to the digital, we are capable of feeling what it means to be in another place, to actually stand in one another’s shoes by having every segment of the feeling of that stand digitalized (107). In Kim’s argument, digitization is thus itself a neutral action: it seems like rendering information into ones, and zeros will also be conceived of as a way to represent something perfectly. In contrast, people in an offline world are confined to a certain location, and hence, their communication is always limited and mediated by space and time. Hence, offline communication is thus infiltrated by irreducible errors in each imitation. The

internet thus seems like a place where perfect imitations in each reiteration are possible, and hence, it seems possible for a meme to propagate on the internet without being contaminated.

Kim's argument is obviously very optimistic: *oh, now that we have the web, we will be able to communicate knowledge or truths on a different level of intimacy. The truth will finally be immediate; the offline reality would never permit us to do that.* It is indeed a beautiful thought that digitality grants us the possibility of denying spatiality and temporality. In this sense, it is indeed this virtuality—that digital beings operate at a level of reality different from ours, hence transgressing some necessary limitation innate to our realm—that grants virtuality its power. Whereas the meme model and its subsequent culture of the true self asserts its value with fidelity to the original, the internet as a medium thrives because of its own constructed narrative that it is not the original but merely a digitized copy. As Anton Barba-Kay summarizes in his book, *A Web of Our Own Making*, “what comes naturally to us, however, what is relaxing and effortless, is in fact the desire for absence – the desire to be on the move, the desire for attention to be forever elsewhere. The digital forces us, as no other technology, to face the unquenchable lust of the mind to be diverted nowhere to no end” (69). Through constructing the illusion of an absented presence by making itself more unreal than it is, the self-proclaimed virtual presence grants netizens the addicted feeling that they can be unlimited from spatial and temporal constraints and hence makes them addicted to this constant “jumping” in between spatial-temporal realm. It is indeed this illusion of the new possibility to always be elsewhere that helps to constitute a sense of frictionless existence: that feeling that I can be everywhere with just a tap of my finger.

Yet by virtue of the physical tap of a finger, we are once again brought back to a physical realm and are left to ponder: is there truly such a thing as this ideal digital being that fully detaches itself from the physical realm? Or is it that since Kim has taken the digital being's detachment from the physical as the basis of his argument, he ignores that such a

denial never took place in the first place? As readers will intuit, the correct answer is obviously the latter. One does not even need to read technical books about the fundamental mechanics of the internet to understand that this detachment never took place. The reason why we must negate Kim's argument is that the Internet never exists independently of physical users, their interactions with a physical medium, and the active physical location of storing information. As such, we must say the internet is as physical as anything. This is why we must stress in the paragraph above that no matter how interesting "digital being" sounds, it is, in the end, a purposeful construction of a narrative that wishes to make people ignore the medium, for when we access the internet, we do not just fall down the rabbit hole and enters into a realm that does not have time and space. What happens is that I turn on my phone, my laptop, or some other digital device, and I gain access to this virtual reality. Then, when I see a picture of an apple on the internet, I do not just somehow perceive a representation of some digital thing that is not really there. What I see is a physical reproduction of a set of data that the internet gains physical access to through the physical facilities—internet cables, electric cables, etc.—that make such access possible. In fact, the very thing that appeared on my screen and is thus presented to me is also the result of a series of physical interactions between different electronics: my physical screen, the physical video card, and the physical cables connecting these parts. As a result, when my screen is damaged, the illustration is also damaged; when my screen is yellowed, the very picture of the apple is also yellowed. From that perspective, how can we say with any degree of certainty that what is presented to us is, indeed, a digital, non-physical being that does not conform to space and time? Does space and time cease to operate for me, the actual user of these "virtual" beings? Doubtlessly not. An irreducible degree of physicality thus infiltrates into the internet: a model that supposedly allows for the formulation of another detached reality.

From this point of view, a digitalized being inherits the very spatial temporality in which I, as its user, am situated. Yet its very virtuality, encapsulated in Kim's ideas but many others like him, actively seeks to be severed from spatial temporality in order to let itself be conceived of as a realm of new possibility. This new possibility, as we have delimited, is essentially the possibility of perfected imitation and unmediated communication: once we have digitized knowledge, we will be able to propagate it with perfect copies that are immediately accessible to everyone online without being contaminated by the physical realm. Yet what stands as the obstacle to such a constitution is thus an ongoing physical process that grants me access to the supposedly virtual internet in the first place. What has been purposefully covered up in this very argument is that no matter how one underscores the notion of the virtuality of the internet as that which exists as out of the real, it is, at the end of the day, only a communication tool that operates in a physical realm, albeit it is much more powerful than any similar tools that precede it. Only from this very location could we have a clear understanding of the phenomenon at hand.

Much technological innovation has already been devoted to such a "naturalization"—shall we say, since it is indeed an attempt to make us get naturally familiar with phones such that we do not even notice their existence—of the physical mediums. The phones are getting ever thinner and smaller, and their operation transformed from awkward arrangements of physical buttons into smooth touch screens; wearable devices like smartwatches were only one of James Bond's magic gadgets decades ago, but now they have already walked into our lives. There is no doubt that technological advancement in the digital device era actively works to make these physical mediums less detectable by making them more and more intimate to our bodies each day. This process of improvements makes these processes easier and easier, and hence, it actively works to erase the physical trace of the supposedly digital

interaction. Only by doing so can such a detachment of the digital from the physical be completed, and the internet can seem to work in everyone's absence.

However, this process of erasure cannot be completed, for once the internet becomes truly natural, the program's original logic is that through constituting a boundary and making physical presence more real and the virtual presence more unreal, we empower ourselves to enter into the illusion of virtuality. Nonetheless, if one tries to imagine a world where the virtual has fully blended into our bodies with no mediation of the medium, they would soon figure out that, in such a world, the virtual exists no longer as in opposition to the virtual but in effect, will subsist as part of our physical reality: if the physical medium is no longer inquired than each netizen becomes themselves parts of the internet and interaction becomes almost physically biological. Such a seemingly paradoxical situation is due to the fact that virtuality only subsists as virtual due to the fact that it sits uncomfortably in the physical realm with a physical medium and is not fully integrated. Hence, a small gap must always exist to constitute this very boundary that allows an essential difference to be constructed in the milieu of two mediums that, as we have shown in the section above, are not so different.

Therefore, not only is the internet trapped in the double movements of first, demarcating an absolute boundary, and second, separating similar experiences into absolutely different experiences according to the border it itself constructed, but such a double movement eventually leads to its own failure. The separation that the program of virtuality wants, the pure difference, can only happen when the actual interaction between the physical and virtual is eliminated, yet such an elimination brings forth the absolute destruction of the possibility of separating one from the other. The internet must, thus, retain a small gap of intermediacy, of a small discomfort, so that it may reveal itself as different from the real. Yet, on the other side, it also seeks to reduce such a gap to claim its power as a virtual apparatus. To put this in the language of imitation, the internet must make sure it is a perfect copy of the

original, yet by virtue of being a perfect copy, it no longer becomes distinguishable as an imitation; hence, to reclaim itself as a copy, it must make sure that it is always placed at a distance away from the original.

Such a paradoxical movement reveals that the internet's fundamental logic is not just that of a neutral web, but it clearly resembles more of a video game. In the video game, virtuality and intimacy to reality are two paradoxical qualities that the video game must actively work to uphold; the former, constructed by the physical action of playing the computer or the console, brings forth the rewarding feeling of entering into another reality where one can do whatever one wants with no limitation demarcated by their spatial-temporality; the latter, constructed by the apparatus of verisimilitude such as high definition, real lightings, real physical engines, etc., make the video game more enjoyable for they allow the game to excite more emotion from its player than a game that seems less close to reality.

Most of the internet functions smoothly with this video game logic without realizing this paradox, for some of them get to prioritize one over the other. For instance, a digitized journal closely imitates the original reality and retains virtuality only as a means of its propagation. Since the aims of academic journals are usually to communicate knowledge in such a way that makes it look as authoritative as possible, it does not concern themselves with the virtual's ability to transgress the limits of space and time. If one simply plays within the economy of authoritativeness and authenticity to the original, then this digital liberation is not what they are concerned with, and hence, a boundary that demarcates difference needs not be maintained. On the other hand, short video platforms like TikTok focus closely on providing addictive experiences that attract more and more attention, and hence, everything appears as detached from the real as possible so that the audience can be fully liberated from their own physical context and just enjoy the short video. Platforms like TikTok do not concern themselves with their users, for they function like addictive drugs to lure their users

into confusing the virtual with the real. Again, if one plays simply within the economy of attention, then the paradoxical agenda of maintaining a difference only through a method that leads to the destruction of that difference will not reveal itself.

Social media, on the other hand, cannot prioritize itself. It simultaneously plays within the economy of authoritativeness in that, as essentially platforms for communication, such a dimension is significant to its very credibility. If social media cannot tie each user within an identity with some sense of security, then communication becomes forever undermined. Hence, social media orients its users to be as authentic as possible. On the other hand, social media wants to make self-presentation an enjoyable process for both its audience and its performers; its very existence lies in the active participation of its users. To provide incentives to their users to present and read, every social media platform builds within itself an economy of attention: each post is measured by the number of likes, comments, and, on some platforms, even the number of dislikes. Such a quantification gives measurable value to the attention of other people. The competition for attention resources leads to each post presenting content that is more and more structured, designed, or even actively challenges the common experience of an average individual. Social media needs to actively announce itself as the virtual and hence the detached imitation of the real. Social media, thus, lives in the paradoxical realm where reality is at once separated but confused, and the physical presence of the netizens on the internet becomes, at each time, both forgotten and addressed. It is the ultimate video game of doubleness.

From here, we are finally able to think of social media and ponder the question: what is its program? Why is it such a fertile land to the memes? Why is it such a fertile land of the true-self culture?

3.3.The Logic of the Video Game

Social media are video games. What Justin E.Smith says about Twitter can be said for virtually every social media: they are social interactive video games in which “you start as a mere ‘reply guy,’ and the goal is to work your way up to the rank of at least a ‘microinfluencer’ by developing strategies to unlock rewards that result in increased engagement with your posts, thereby accruing to you more ‘points’ in the form of followers” (122). Social media plays a role in the economy of attention, in which the gazes of others are turned into a resource. The most efficient strategy to harness such a resource is to appeal to the virtuality of the internet: to underscore possibilities that are “impossible” in “real life” that the internet cultures have constructed by establishing a boundary between itself and physical and offline life and actively erasing its own physicality. Yet, within this system, social media also relies on an economy of authenticity that grants the currency of self-presentation its value. Conversely, it must also try to close the gap between real life and the virtual so that some form of values, measured by the authenticity of each digital imitation, can be attained. Social media live in the very boundary constructed by the so-called digital culture. Therefore, it lives in the liminal region where the digital becomes inseparable from the physical realm and vice versa.

Such liminality is underscored most clearly at moments when social media ask you to address yourself: WeChat asks you to summarize yourself by leaving your gender, your age, an avatar, your physical location, and a few sentences about yourself on the home page, Tieba asks you to summarize yourself as a list of “interests” so it can guide you to places where you must be interested in; in the Chinese Reddit, Zhihu, you are asked to do all of the above, yet Zhihu will also display the posts you have responded to previously, although you can lock these posts from the others, the very locking also signals some form of information of this

account. Unlike other places on the internet where you can log in through simply a console, we always step into these platforms by “opening an account.” At these moments, we are given an opportunity to digitize ourselves—to make digital imitations of ourselves that can propagate online with just these limited pieces of information. From that very moment, one speaks through this account and this account only; just like in a video game, one does everything through a character and this character only.

People are thus necessitated by the platform to play roles: now, these roles can certainly be their own selves, yet they can also be things that are totally different from themselves and are only connected to them because they are those actors behind these performances. Yet, in each case, an irreducible gap between this account and oneself seems to be established. Even in the former, when social media roles coincide with their own identities, the problem of “which part of my life should I present and how should I present this?” still enters the foreground. The perceivable delays and the possibility of designing and perfecting each post thus make every moment of presentation only a re-presentation. Social media thus gives people the belief that one is representing oneself. When people thus answer the question, “Tell us something about yourself,” they always know that they can lie; they can be someone they *are* not. Thus, in the very moment of re-presentation, one perceived the opportunity to shift away and escape from their life. The possibility to choose between lying or telling the truth thus introduces a degree of delayed presentation that makes detachment from an immediate presence possible. From then on, people put on their digital masks, and they enjoy the acts. If they are not very confident, they might carve the masks as something that is entirely different from their own, and conversely, they might just tell the story of themselves and nothing but themselves. They can be Chun Zhen, or they can be not Chun Zhen. Everything is thus oriented in social media to the creation of a mask: an imitation of something that you are or that you are not. Just like a show of puppetry, the puppeteers

themselves must step behind the curtain to make the show enjoyable. This means that reality itself must be separated into having a front stage and a backstage. A performance theatre is thus set up through the categorization of two sets of reality.

When this theatre is linked to the possibility of benefiting either materially or psychologically, everything becomes a potential competition for the attention of others. This means that our images online must somehow evoke others and enter into their mind. Better, our images must dominate them so that they can propagate these imitations for us. From this perspective, memes—which, in the digital sense, means a viral spread of something that repeats itself for the sake of repetition—are inscribed in the fundamental structure of social media because our accounts are memes that we must design to win this video game. Then, when we post memes in the form of a photoshopped picture with snarky comments on it, the original meme is already a repetition of another picture. In the case of Ding Zhen, the very first YYDZ is a parody of that smile. Therefore, from the very beginning, the puppeteer recedes from the foreground in a viral trend of memes. Then, as I have shown in Chapter 1, in the creation of each meme, their consciousness must recede to the background to valorize the original formula of the meme creation. The structure of passive and viral spread is inscribed in the structure of the meme itself; therefore, in creating memes, the creator puts on a mask and enjoys the pleasure of putting on such a mask. Memes proliferate on social media because it is the embodiment of this very desire to escape into a viral trend and to enjoy an endless stream of pleasure through the humor of each parody.

Yet to lie, to parody, to imitate necessitate that one is already certain of what the original is: one must direct their parody to something that they believe they know well enough. One must know the truth to tell the lie; one must know reality to parody reality. Moreover, acting as someone displaced from ourselves is only fun because we, at least, to some degree, perceive the passivity of being ourselves. Therefore, just like how humor acts

as a critical response to the passivity of our existence, our very desire for such humor on the internet is a response to a reality that seems less mutable, more passive, and more intolerable. What, therefore, arises parallel to our escape to the digital realm is a justification of such an escape by underscoring the immutability of our true selves. Immediately, a cycle is established, we escape from the real into the digital because we find the former insufferable, yet the very insufferableness of the real is also something that we repetitively feed ourselves with on a daily basis so that the next escape seems more fun. On social media, we constantly cross the real and the virtual, and we complete ourselves in this border-crossing.

However, just as what we have shown in the entirety of chapter 2 and the first section of chapter 3, since reality—as a realm of full presence—is never there in the first place but as a form of theoretical fiction or an imitation to which those valorize it as real actively seek to erase its imitative quality, the very border that we constructed to make this border-crossing possible is also a fiction. We are never purely passive nor purely active, yet on the internet, we must believe that online we are the former and offline we are the latter so that this transition is enjoyable. Subsequently, it also means that we can reverse the logic above, and the circuit will still function. If we praise the loyalty to this true and real life and condemn our digital performance for being a frictionless and, hence, bad copy of this life, then we would advocate for a better imitation and advocate for “being ourselves on the internet.” But this, like those netizens who use YYDZ memes to endlessly critique a sense of inauthenticity, goes back to constructing a real Ding Zhen by negating his internet performance. Social media and reality once again become two regions of absolute difference, and the border is once again secured and protected. Moreover, in upholding an imitation as the original, one also gains the power to define what reality is. In the context of Ding Zhen, one can clearly identify how his off-grid lifestyle and his supposed purity and authenticity have been upheld as the original and real life. In this way, the ability to standardize life as a standard form of

being, to define what life is supposed to look like by defining how one is supposed to be authentic, is also secured by the active construction of this difference and the ongoing reinforcement of it.

Hence, by detaching itself from the real, social media gives rise to meme cultures in which the original real becomes impossible to locate. However, it must also depend on identifying a real so that it can announce itself as nothing but an imitation. It is through singing the heaviness of a reality that social media makes itself light. The announcement of itself as an imitation thus introduces the possibility of evaluating the fidelity of each imitation and the true self-culture. At the very foundation of the magical effect of the internet, the virtual, and the social media, we thus a bold leap of faith into believing in an essential difference that is never quite there.

Conclusion

We have traveled a long way from the realm of one humor meme. I hope through my demonstration above that something becomes clear: that this singular movement of upholding a difference between the supposed real and the supposed virtual, between the supposed inauthentic performance and the authentic true self, and between the supposed original and the supposed imitative exists vastly on the internet. It is this movement that informs the functioning of the internet and our perception of it as this virtual realm. It is also this movement that necessitates the erasure and condemnation of anything that lives on the boundary and tries to make humor out of this boundary. The effect of this movement of separation is irreversible, and eventually, it makes even humor, the thing that supposedly breaks down all convention into laughter, protection of the conventional view of this border.

The Internet, whatever its power may be, cannot be thought of as this magical device that introduces a border. However, such a boundary is being conducted by us, by our narrative, by our language, by our academic discourses around the internet, etc. It is almost impossible for me to trace every place where such a program of boundary construction rears its head because it is everywhere. The very act is also the direct descendent of a long train of thought that has always existed throughout history, even before the internet physically came into existence. For instance, my generation grew up hearing our parents' criticism of our habits of playing video games since they are "virtual, not real," yet when they were younger, they were also criticized by their parents when they were watching films or television because they are "not real but only an imitation of reality." One can go even further in the investigation of such a boundary, for it is common knowledge that our grandparents grew up hearing our great-grandparents chide of their habits of reading novels because novels are "not real and only an imitation of reality" either... This investigation can go on forever, and it soon becomes apparent that there is nothing that is purely real, and if one can see something as real while those before them see it as virtual, then nothing is purely virtual either. Instead of saying we have now entered into a reality with virtual reality thanks to the internet, we must say that we have always already been in that reality with virtual reality. Reality is as much virtual as virtual reality. Yet through constructing a bifurcated reality, we are given the privilege to value one over the other and eventually prioritize, even valorize, the supposed real and sanction it from humor's subversion. Therefore, we must say that we have always lived with the virtual and always lived with the possibility of being online as in being elsewhere when we are somewhere. It is only through the construction and simultaneous condemnation of what is unreal that we find a fragment of real.

Nonetheless, just because it is a tradition does not mean this desire to bifurcate and seek binary opposition cannot be turned into humor, but as we see in Chapter 2, there are

people who wish to sanction humor away from this tradition. Their words are the same; in each generation, they are the one who says, “this is not real,” or “go get a real hobby,” or “go do something real,” then they point to a life they have painted as “real” and make people believe in it. In doing so, they want their reality to escape the confrontation of questions like “what is real about it?” and “why is it real?”. Eventually, this practice is there to ensure an “original” can finally be established as something that is supposed to be taken for granted as common knowledge. Through defining a real as the absolute real and the virtual as its radical counterparts, this discourse defines a rigid form of *being* that requires one to conform to the real and the original. This discourse supplies power, at least as what we see in the case of Ding Zhen, to those who advocates a real and authentic form of being that it itself manufactured.

I do not wish to venture too far into this lyrical critique, but let’s bring it back to Ding Zhen, once again, repetitively, to pay homage to this familiar stranger who has initiated my thoughts in this paper. I want to ask once again this question: “who is Ding Zhen?” only to show that this question (is) unanswerable unless we presupposes a meaning of the term “is” as the absolute presence to make sense of the concept of this equivalence. Yet in doing so, since the possibility of an absence of intention is always inscribed in the structure of presence, we will already be committing the violence of manufacturing a rigid form of being on insecure ground. On the other hand, since the reverse is the same, we must not, like Dawkins, answer this question as if this question does not make sense, because we must need to remark that intention is not absolutely absence from our existence either. Therefore, I must answer knowing that my answer contains in itself an absolutely irreducible error, yet it is precisely because of its structural irreducibility my answer means at least something. I must answer knowing that my answer would one day be ripped apart and be make humor out of. There is not a real answer to this question, not because real or virtual is subverted, but

because the very construction of real and virtual is unthinkable if we try to look beyond the boundary that makes the distinction possible in the first place.

In that vein, I will answer in full seriousness that I really believe Ding Zhen is Ding Zhen. Please, my dear readers, make humor out of my preposterous statement so that, we might therefore, try to live in the realm where the real is not that real and the virtual is not that virtual. Let's at least, from time to time, make some humor out of every answer of that question or others of the some sort that answers in seemingly unshakeable confidence.

Works Cited

- Barba-Kay, Antón. *A Web of Our Own Making: The Nature of Digital Formation*. Cambridge University Press, 2023.
- Cohen, Ted. *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters*. University of Chicago Press, 2001.
- Critchley, Simon. *On Humour*. Routledge, 2001.
- Dawkins, Richard. *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Margins of Philosophy*. Translated by Alan Bass. Harvester Press, 1991.
- Dreyfus, Hubert L. *On the Internet*. Routledge - Taylor & Francis Group, 2007.
- Guan, Jieying. “Research on the Construction of Dingzhen’s Image by Official Micro-Blog of Mainstream Media.” *Jiangxi University of Finance and Economics*, 2022.
- Kim, Joohan. “Phenomenology of Digital-Being.” *Human Studies*, vol. 24, no. 1/2, 2001, pp. 87–111. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20011305>. Accessed 7 Mar. 2024.
- SaltyfishLeavesyoung. “Saltyfishleavesyoung/YYDZ: 丁真宇宙，一眼丁真合集，已有两千多张图片。The YYDZ (Yi Yan Ding Zhen / One Eye Ding Zhen) Dataset.” *GitHub*, 20 June 2022, github.com/SaltyfishLeavesyoung/YYDZ.
- Smith, Justin E.H. *The Internet Is Not What You Think It Is: A History, a Philosophy, a Warning*. Princeton University Press, 2022. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1z3hmcj>. Accessed 24 Feb. 2024.

Sun, Mingxian. "Guidance of Netizen Aggregation Behavior from the Perspective of Interactive Ritual Chain Research -- Take Ding Zhen's Popularity as an Example." *Liaoning Normal University*, 2022.

Xinhua Da Zidian [The Xinhua Big Dictionary]. The Commercial Press, 2004.

Yang, Xinyu. "Why Do the 'Exam-Doers' Vent All Their Resentments on Ding Zhen? ['做题家'们的怨气，为何要往丁真身上撒?：周末谈.]" *Wechat Public Account*, China Youth Daily, 20 Dec. 2020, mp.weixin.qq.com/s/vB0sVier2NteLJlVQkIpgQ.

Yan, Daocheng, and Jialin Liu. "On the Guidance of Contemporary Youth's Internet Ideology —Taking Ding Zhen's Popularity as an Example." *Youth and Adolescent Studies*, no. 142, 2021, pp. 3–7. *CNKI*, <https://doi.org/10.16399/j.cnki.qsnyj.2021.02.001>.

