

From “Sweet Wild Boy” to “Sharp Cigarette King”: A Brief Analysis of the Logic Behind the “Ding Zhen Ghostly Meme” Carnival

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Article Info

Accepted: 06 December 2024

Keywords:

Carnival theory; Ding Zhen;
Communicative ritual;
Ghostly meme; Carnival out of
control; Risk society

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Abstract

Bakhtin’s carnival theory highlights a folk-rooted “universal human spirit.” Postmodernist influences have diversified and deconstructed carnival in online spaces. Ding Zhen’s rise, driven by media promotion and commercialization, shaped three carnival spaces and four dimensions of thought, symbolizing satire and resistance. However, escalating negative energy risks collective bewilderment, fragmenting culture and spiraling carnival out of control.

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doi.org/10.70693/itphss.v2i2.229

1. Introduction

Carnival, as a universally existing spiritual phenomenon in human society, has long been a subject of scholarly interest and research. Influenced by postmodernist thought, carnival has evolved into a multidimensional, covert, and deconstructive phenomenon. In the internet era, online carnival has expanded through the evolution and transformation of communicative spaces, resulting in a more extensive system of symbol production and representation. “Ghostly memes,” as a cornerstone of subcultural online communication, have consistently played a key role in constructing carnival spaces, creating carnival atmospheres, and generating carnival symbols. This carnival model is particularly evident in the ghostly meme expressions surrounding controversial societal topics and figures.

Ding Zhen's rise to fame began with an accidental exposure by a Douyin (TikTok) photographer. Due to his unique Tibetan cultural identity and physical appearance that aligns with internet aesthetics, Ding Zhen's popularity surged rapidly under the promotion of mainstream media, self-media, and other commercial platforms. His story has become a long-standing focus of "traffic-driven discourse" on the internet. However, unlike traditional internet celebrities, Ding Zhen's fame, marked by his unique identity, personal background, and the extraordinary pace of its fermentation, has linked his image to many contemporary Chinese societal issues. This connection has drawn severe criticism from certain literary and political-economic commentators.

The carnival spaces surrounding Ding Zhen, along with participants' carnival orientations, significantly deviate from traditional carnival paradigms. Characterized by elements of reality, intensity, and abstraction, these spaces are boundaryless and prone to spiraling out of control, thereby establishing Ding Zhen as a distinctive subcultural symbol in online discourse.

Through an in-depth analysis of the Ding Zhen carnival phenomenon, this paper examines the origins and transformations of the "Ding Zhen Carnival" by using the timeline of Ding Zhen's media life as a horizontal entry point. It further explores the cultural logic underlying the shift of Ding Zhen's ghostly meme carnival from rule to chaos, investigates the multiple impacts and implications of carnival rituals in the internet age, and delves into the core spirit of postmodern carnival. This study also defines the connotations and characteristics of "carnival out of control" and discusses the potential risks posed by this phenomenon in online communication.

The research provides valuable insights for understanding and analyzing the relationship between carnival out of control and risk society, as well as for macro-level governance of online public opinion. It also offers theoretical and empirical foundations for academia to comprehend the cultural dynamics, group psychology, and social interactions in contemporary society, contributing to subsequent cultural studies.

2. Why Carnival? An Analysis of the "Ding Zhen Carnival" Framework

2.1 Carnival and the Loss of Control in Carnival

The theory of carnival, proposed by Russian philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975), is a systematic framework rooted in his textual analyses of works such as *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* and *Rabelais and His World* (Chen & Xiu, 2021).

This theory revolves around three central concepts: the carnival, the carnivalesque, and carnivalization. Carnival, as defined by Bakhtin, allows individuals to transcend the confines of identity, status, hierarchy, age, and even gender, engaging in free and intimate dialogues on an equal footing. In modern society, Bakhtin argues, individuals long for a sense of collective unity and emotional resonance that transcends personal boundaries. Carnival, as a collective behavior, dissolves barriers of alienation among individuals, fosters emotional expression and creativity, and instills a sense of belonging and existence. It creates a temporarily egalitarian and liberated world, enabling participants to challenge authority and sacred symbols with vitality and rebellion in the pursuit of freedom.

Bakhtin's carnival theory represents a complex "ritual system," viewing carnival as a vivid practice of human liberation. At its core, carnival seeks a second life independent of the official world, achieved through a Dionysian self-intoxication. Key characteristics of carnival include:

1. Openness: Carnival must involve open participation, with active engagement and symbolic creation.
2. Open Dialogues: Carnival's singularity¹ begins with open communication among participants.
3. Self-Indulgence and Catharsis: Carnival culminates in open-ended self-exile through indulgence and emotional release.

While widely perceived as an egalitarian space free from distinctions of status, race, and discrimination, carnival can occur in any setting where dynamic communication eliminates barriers between communicators. When such a setting achieves subversion, equality, and universal participation, a carnival ritual unfolds.

The vibrant and colorful media landscape of the internet offers a new perspective for applying carnival theory in the analysis of subcultures. In the digital age, the internet has become the primary platform for citizens' "second life," providing unprecedented freedom of speech and self-expression. In the virtual plaza of cyberspace, netizens express their attitudes toward life through text, symbols, images, and music, engaging in daily carnivals and symbol-making to amplify the carnival atmosphere. They release emotions or articulate opinions.

Due to the anonymity, decentralization, and reduced institutional pressure of online platforms, certain internet carnivals easily deviate from their original order and control. This deviation, propelled by intensified emotions and rampant symbol production, often manifests as behavioral disorder, chaos, or extremism. This phenomenon is termed "carnival out of control." Research into the avoidance and logic of carnival loss of control has become a critical focus for applying Bakhtin's theory in the networked era.

2.2 Ding Zhen and Online Carnival

On November 11, 2020, Ding Zhen, a Tibetan boy from Litang County, Garze Prefecture, Sichuan Province, was inadvertently filmed by photographer Hu Bo (@Smiling Collector - Brother Bo). A short Douyin (TikTok) video clip of less than 10 seconds attracted massive attention. This young Kham man, with limited formal education, halting Mandarin, and an inability to write, charmed the public with his pure and innocent smile. He was affectionately nicknamed "Sweet Wild Boy" by netizens and became an internet sensation within a month,

¹ Singularity here borrows from physics, referring to the origin point or purpose of carnival, symbolizing its spiritual genesis: Carnival focuses on decentered, non-hierarchical atmospheres.

frequently trending on Weibo and attracting widespread attention from mainstream media(Zhou, 2021).

The explosion of traffic marked the inception of the “Ding Zhen Carnival.” First and foremost, Ding Zhen’s distinctive and captivating appearance played a critical role. While his features align with mainstream internet aesthetics, they are far removed from the “technological face” of commercially curated internet celebrities. His unpolished, pure, and natural appearance drew significant attention. This stark contrast to traditional internet celebrity imagery turned Ding Zhen into a unique symbol with high recognizability, embodying the archetype of a “pure boy” in the minds of many netizens.

Audiences’ psychological projections of Ding Zhen were accurately identified and amplified by online platforms. Enveloped by consumerist culture and shaped by the differing promotional needs of government and private media, Ding Zhen’s fame skyrocketed. His success, born of “sheer coincidence,” gradually positioned him as a pinnacle figure under the spotlight of public discourse.

Ding Zhen’s rise to fame follows two distinct narratives:

1. Official Promotion: Ding Zhen became a cultural ambassador, delivering speeches at the United Nations and representing Tibetan youth—and even Chinese youth as a whole.
2. Commercial Exploitation: Ding Zhen’s persona was crafted to integrate him into the entertainment industry, exploiting his traffic potential to the fullest.

As Ding Zhen’s fame and traffic continued to soar, these two narratives drew diverse audiences to him, culminating in a super-networked carnival centered on his image(Zhao, 2023).

3.Alternative Field: Comparative Analysis of “Carnival” Studies

Bakhtin’s theory of carnival was originally applied to the folk culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, focusing on the dynamic balance between oppression and resistance in human societies (Bakhtin, 1984). In recent years, researchers have extended the applicability of carnival theory, exploring its manifestations in various cultural and media contexts. For example, Hoy (1992) examined the representation of carnival in popular culture, highlighting its metaphorical role as a form of political resistance, while Humphrey (2000) reinterpreted carnival as a historical and analytical concept.

In the digital age, carnival theory offers a unique perspective for understanding online subcultures. Gaufman and Ganesh (2024) emphasized the de-hierarchization and dialogic characteristics of carnival theory in its application to online spaces, particularly in highly anonymous environments where individuals can create symbols and redefine cultural identities. In the Asian cultural context, Hu (2012) explored the intersection of “imitation culture” and carnival characteristics, demonstrating how cultural replication driven by commercialization forms new subcultural expressions.

In contrast, studies of phenomena such as Japan's idol economy and the influencer culture in the United States typically analyze how cultural symbols are consumed and propagated within the framework of capitalism (Delgatto, 2011). However, China's subcultural carnival, such as the "Ding Zhen ghostly meme" phenomenon discussed in this study, not only reflects the influence of global consumer culture but is also deeply shaped by China's unique political and cultural environment. These subcultural contexts in China exhibit significant specificity and alternative research value. The Chinese cyberspace, characterized by both anonymity and strict regulation, adds complexity to the dynamics of subcultural creation and dissemination. Scholars like Herold (2011) observed that Chinese online carnivals often serve as platforms for expressing the "voices of the grassroots." This "native color" makes public carnivals prone to losing control due to platform policies and public opinion guidance, resulting in a proliferation of distorted and abstracted symbols and the hidden occurrence of "carnival out of control" phenomena.

The unique significance of studying subcultural carnivals in China lies in providing a lens through which to examine the interactions between state power, social emotions, and cultural production. For instance, Guo (2018) analyzed how Chinese internet buzzwords use carnivalized forms to express implicit resistance to social contradictions. Zhang (2022) explored the dramatization of individual identities in digital spaces through the lens of bullet screen culture. These cases demonstrate that Chinese subcultural carnivals are not merely cultural phenomena but also crucial platforms for social participation and political contention.

This study focuses on analyzing the logic of carnival out of control in the "Ding Zhen ghostly meme" phenomenon and how such events, through the dissemination of online subcultures, affect social psychology and cultural spaces. This perspective presents two innovative contributions compared to existing literature: First, it enriches the application of carnival theory in non-Western contexts by taking Chinese online culture as a specific research object. Second, it introduces the "Carnival Energy Transformation Model," revealing the energy flow mechanisms among multiple carnival scenes and extending the dynamic understanding of carnival theory.

In summary, this study not only deepens the analysis of carnival theory but also attempts to address gaps in the systematic exploration of carnival out of control phenomena and their socio-cultural consequences in the context of contemporary society.

4.Methods and Procedures

4.1. Semiotic Analysis

This study focuses on emblematic works of Ding Zhen-related ghostly meme carnivals, primarily including short videos, memes, and musical adaptations. These symbolic texts are analyzed for their internal systems (e.g., character images, linguistic expressions, and visual symbols) and their implicit cultural meanings. The goal is to uncover the intrinsic logic of symbolization processes within the "Ding Zhen Carnival" phenomenon, exploring how ghostly symbols are generated and circulated across different carnival scenes. This approach aims to identify the sociocultural functions of these symbols and their contributions to the phenomenon of carnival out of control.

4.2. Discourse Analysis

Representative works from the Ding Zhen carnival, alongside their accompanying commentaries, were subjected to qualitative analysis to decode hidden linguistic patterns, rhetorical devices, and

narrative structures. This analysis investigates how these carnivalized works construct irony and parody against mainstream culture and power dynamics. Furthermore, it examines the transmission pathways and sociocultural significance of such discourses across diverse subcultural groups.

4.3. Model Construction

Building on the findings from semiotic and discourse analyses, the study innovatively develops the “Ding Zhen Carnival Practice Axis” model. This model visualizes the creative dimensions of carnivalized works, the symbolic distribution within carnival spaces, and their interrelations with cultural fields. By presenting the characteristics of different carnival mentalities through a theoretical model, it elucidates how symbolic energies flow and interact across multiple carnival scenes, offering a structured interpretation of the “Ding Zhen Carnival” phenomenon.

4.4. Qualitative Sampling

In selecting ghostly meme samples, the study focuses on highly influential and widely discussed works representing various creative paradigms, such as “Zood,” “Smoke Distance,” and “I Remember (Ding Zhen Version).” The sampling criteria emphasize the viral impact of these works on platforms like Bilibili and Douyin, ensuring the representativeness, topicality, and relevance of the data. This sampling strategy provides high-quality material for semiotic and discourse analyses.

5. Carnival Lost: The Logic of the “Ding Zhen Carnival” Going Out of Control

Ding Zhen’s meteoric rise to fame can be attributed to the amplification of internet traffic and the construction of a unique internet celebrity persona. Unlike other commercial internet celebrities, who often undergo a prolonged “trainee phase” (as seen in South Korean entertainment) and rigorous selection processes by major entertainment companies, Ding Zhen’s fame seemed to emerge as a predetermined spectacle orchestrated by fate. It was as if “a single handsome face, combined with a few cultural symbols unique to a minority ethnicity, could set the wheels of destiny into rapid motion overnight.” Within the realm of literary criticism, Ding Zhen’s rise is often seen as a sudden, almost explosive phenomenon, his fame imbued with an excessive degree of chance.

Although fame through chance is not uncommon in the history of human entertainment and media, fame derived purely from physical appearance—without other notable attributes such as intelligence, athleticism, or emotional intelligence—presents significant value for discussion within the context of communication studies and the spectacle of society(Zhang, 2021). This randomness in the “Ding Zhen phenomenon” reflects a deeper reality: the determinative role of power, or Leviathan, in shaping the destinies of ordinary individuals(Wang, 2023). This Leviathan-like quality has been a consistent feature of Ding Zhen’s media life from the outset, distinguishing his carnival from other entertainment-driven carnivals.

Through an analysis and classification of online materials related to Ding Zhen, three distinct types of carnival spaces emerge, each reflecting different perspectives and forms:

5.1. First Carnival Space:

The audience in this space consists of followers of mainstream media culture. These individuals enthusiastically consume Ding Zhen's persona, immersing themselves in media reports and promotional campaigns about him. They find excitement and fascination in his image and story. This audience often participates in official carnival platforms, such as concerts, fan meetings, variety shows, and trending Weibo topics.

5.2. Second Carnival Space:

This audience is generally indifferent to the public discourse surrounding Ding Zhen. Their engagement stems solely from his overwhelming influence. Occasionally, they may repost or discuss Ding Zhen-related content when encountering it in the media, often for amusement, such as sharing memes or GIFs of Ding Zhen on platforms like WeChat.

5.3. Third Carnival Space:

The audience in this space adopts a critical or oppositional stance, questioning the reasons behind Ding Zhen's fame and scrutinizing the power dynamics underpinning his rise. Their primary modes of expression are ghostly memes, parody, and other satirical artistic creations. While this space represents a counter-carnival, its oppositional nature amplifies the carnival's capacity for deconstruction and fragmentation of authority. This energy imbues the carnival with growing appeal and infectiousness, propelling Ding Zhen to the pinnacle of subcultural carnivalesque.

Bakhtin, in his theory of dialogue, observed that "ideas and viewpoints can function within one system or another, and the complementarity and coexistence of different systems can transcend subjective cognition, allowing an entity to enter an entirely new realm through coordination and dialogue with its counterpart." Despite their differing attitudes, these carnival spaces interact within a complex system, facilitated by three key mechanisms: empathy, understanding, and supersight(Hou, 2023).

- Empathy enables participants in different carnival spaces to understand each other's positions and perspectives, setting aside subjective value differences.
- Understanding reflects the deep emotional resonance that emerges within the carnival.
- Supersight allows carnival participants to transcend the surface-level discussion of the "Ding Zhen phenomenon," situating it within a broader cultural context.

Due to the inherent randomness of Ding Zhen's fame and its association with Leviathan-like power dynamics, the discourse surrounding him maintains a strong attachment to reality. Consequently, the third carnival space often dominates the flow of energy. Through interactions within the carnival dialogue, audiences from the first and second spaces frequently empathize with the unique ghostly meme culture of the third space.

Ding Zhen's fame, lacking a firm foundation in meritocratic principles, is overshadowed by excessive traffic amplification. Even audiences with favorable views of him (in the first space) often shift their attitudes as real-world issues surrounding his fame surface. These audiences may then align with the perspectives of the third carnival space and even participate in the consumption and production of Ding Zhen's ghostly meme culture.

This explains why Ding Zhen-related topics—whether in forums like Tieba or Zhihu or in ghostly meme videos on streaming platforms—almost invariably carry undertones of satire and parody. Through supersight, audiences perceive deeper cultural questions underlying Ding Zhen’s rise: “Why can power so arbitrarily determine an individual’s destiny?”

The cultural skepticism stemming from these questions fuels emotions of fear, helplessness, irony, disorientation, and desire, all of which escalate within the ghostly meme carnival. In this process, subcultures—through continuous “carnival empathy” rooted in real societal issues and contradictions—transcend the limitations imposed by mainstream cultural narratives. Ding Zhen’s negative image, alongside the “symbol of destiny” represented in ghostly meme works, gradually becomes a shared consensus among netizens.

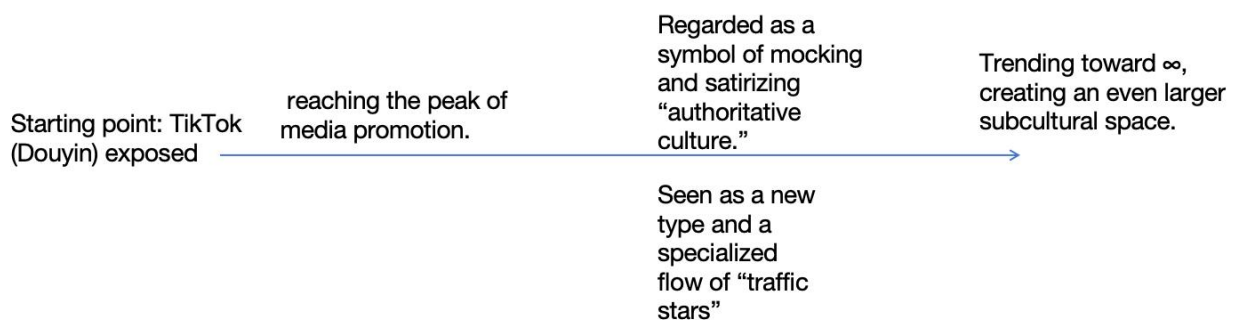


Figure 1: Overview of Ding Zhen’s Media Life

6. Dimensions of Carnival: Deconstructing the Spirit of “Ding Zhen Carnival”

Richard Dawkins introduced the concept of the “meme” in his book *The Selfish Gene*, defining it as a cultural gene transmitted through imitation. In the digital age, the emergence of digital meme forms—such as images, internet slang, videos, and immersive technologies like VR and AR—allows information to be rapidly replicated and disseminated. One defining characteristic of ghostly memes is their basis in secondary creations (fan edits or adaptations). When a topic gains traction within the ghostly meme culture, it undergoes endless reinterpretation by various creators, based on the same figure or storyline. These adaptations, from primary to secondary and even tertiary forms, create a closed loop of ghostly meme production, resembling the process of gene replication. Consequently, ghostly meme carnivals are inherently meme-based.

When the third carnival space adopts a mindset primarily rooted in satire and irony, it becomes the dominant perspective of the Ding Zhen carnival. This cultural expression evolves alongside Ding Zhen’s media life, propagating into a vast subcultural space. Over time, it continues to embed negative emotional motifs—such as despair, sarcasm, and rejection—into the cultural genes of the Ding Zhen carnival (Feng, 2023). While also cultivating a distinct contemporary internet carnival spirit.



Figure 2: Coordinate Axis of Ding Zhen's Carnival Practices

6.1 The Four Dimensions of the "Ding Zhen Carnival"

Artistic creations like music, videos, and memes serve as the primary carriers of online ghostly meme carnivals. While Ding Zhen-related ghostly memes are generally rooted in the perspectives of the third carnival space discussed earlier, the complexity, interconnection, and self-evolution of online subcultures ensure that ghostly meme creations reflect diverse artistic ideologies. These ideologies directly influence the carnival's trajectory and form the "spiritual fuel" driving the loss of control in the carnival. Based on an analysis of existing "Ding Zhen Carnival" artistic works in online culture, this paper proposes an innovative model—the "Ding Zhen Carnival Practice Axis"—to visualize the four ideological dimensions of the Ding Zhen carnival and the different carnival groups and cultural spaces they represent.

The Carnival Practice Axis

The left side of the axis points to authoritarianism, meaning the closer a carnival work is to this side, the more it reflects the official preconceptions and authoritative undertones of the carnival. The top of the axis points to neoliberalism, a concept originating from Western political economics that emphasizes governmental responsibility in regulating free markets. In cultural contexts, neoliberalism represents the guidance and intervention of official thinking in artistic production under the framework of marketized artistic operations. Thus, carnival works closer to the top of the axis are considered to highlight the positive contributions of official media to society.

The right side of the axis leads to anarchism, representing a complete rejection of authority and an embrace of self-exile and extreme indulgence as an artistic orientation. Meanwhile, the bottom of the axis points to Dadaism, an influential post-World War I art movement. Dadaism regards life and reality as void and insists on creating nihilistic works that mock despairing realities. The closer a carnival work is to the bottom, the more absurd, contradictory, and sarcastic its underlying connotations.

Carnival Quadrants

First Quadrant: Authoritarian Media Carnival

This dimension represents the official narrative of Ding Zhen's story as a promotional figure. In this view, Ding Zhen is depicted as "pure and flawless," with his linguistic and cultural deficiencies fully masked. Official media capitalize on the qualities of Ding Zhen most aligned with traffic generation, producing positive entertainment works such as music albums, videos, and variety shows. These works construct carnival spaces for audiences while employing consistent fan slogans, stylized Tibetan attire, and other unified symbols to "crown" Ding Zhen. These rituals highlight Ding Zhen's symbolic value, fulfilling the purpose of the official carnival space.

Representative works in this quadrant include Ding Zhen's EP album *1376 Heart's Desire*, produced by NetEase Cloud Music Studio and supported by ideological platforms like Xuexi Qiangguo and Litang Tourism Investment. This album has garnered over 100,000 enthusiastic comments on NetEase Cloud Music.

Fourth Quadrant: Subcultural Leader-Driven Carnival

Creators in this dimension harness the ghostly meme potential of Ding Zhen's narrative under the framework of authoritarianism, leveraging subcultural forms to divert audience attention from official narratives. Fourth-quadrant ghostly memes focus on Ding Zhen's external features, voice, accent, and catchphrases, transforming them into secondary creative keywords. Prominent creators (such as influential video bloggers like Liukeshushu and IAmZhaozhao) play key roles in this dimension, adhering to platform regulations and social responsibilities. Their works avoid excessive negativity and do not delve deeply into the power dynamics behind Ding Zhen's fame. Instead, they aim to amplify Ding Zhen's traffic through ghostly memes, offering fresh viewing experiences while profiting from entertainment. Representative works in this dimension include the Zood parody of *Mood* by Goldn & Iann Dior, which garnered 24.5 million views on Bilibili.

Second Quadrant: Civic Carnival with Social Critique

Situated on the left vertical axis, this quadrant reflects the voices of ordinary netizens leveraging the internet's empowerment to challenge the constraints of authoritative platforms. This group does not focus on Ding Zhen's persona or polished media image but on the power dynamics that shape his media life. Carnival works here often feature "constructive pessimism," where carnival acts as a guise for expressing grievances and advocating for a more just society. These works frequently highlight the superficiality of Ding Zhen's fame and persona with sharp lyrics and satire, emphasizing his role as a puppet of media power rather than a genuine star. A representative work is *Yan Distance*, a parody of the controversial rap song *Xue Distance*, with over 10.3 million views on Bilibili.

Third Quadrant: Nihilistic and Extreme Carnival

The most radical dimension, this quadrant adopts Dadaist nihilism to express profound dissatisfaction and irony toward reality. In the Ding Zhen phenomenon, audiences in this quadrant dismantle conventional carnival norms by subverting values, disrupting norms, and shifting perspectives. Their works, amplified by "despair culture," reject all established interpretations of the world. Representative expressions include grotesque parodies of Ding Zhen's image, violent and crude memes, and self-deprecating content that ridicules both personal and collective destinies.

This quadrant illustrates an endless spiral of criticism and doubt stemming from the Ding Zhen phenomenon. It embodies Herman Marcuse's concept of the "Great Refusal", which advocates

nonparticipation, disbelief, and nonconsumption of capitalist cultural products. Through nihilistic revelry, these audiences mock not only their own bleak realities but also the “power logic” represented by Ding Zhen. This nihilistic worldview threatens to divide societal consensus and ideals, spreading a culture of despair beyond the Ding Zhen phenomenon to influence broader internet subcultures(Xi & Xin, 2023).

6.2 The Spirit of Carnival in the “Ding Zhen Carnival”

6.2.1 Self-Exile on the Margins

Marginality refers to a deviation from and rebellion against mainstream norms. Alternative or subcultures that represent marginalized, grassroots, or youth groups can all be seen as forms of marginality. In the early stages of Ding Zhen’s dissemination, the opposition to authoritative culture, represented by the third carnival space, sought an independent mode of existence.

These groups no longer relied on recognition from the social mainstream but instead pursued self-identity and freedom of expression based on their cultural needs and the social realities they faced. Many young people from small towns, unable to gain control over discourse or experience the good fortune of being favored by power like “Ding Zhen,” chose self-exile as a form of carnival expression. This approach was low-cost, free-spirited, and carried the contagious, collective energy of a carnival. By intentionally deviating from the normal order and the societal mainstream, they expressed disdain and resistance toward established norms.

6.2.2 Seeking Identity in Cyberspace

The internet is a new reality, created by human symbolic and conceptual abilities, that is indirect, virtual, and open. In the virtual space of the internet, marginalized groups can redefine their identities and values, transcending the definitions and limitations of the real world. By creating and sharing their cultural expressions, they build connections and solidarity with other marginalized groups. The “Ding Zhen Carnival” serves as a “connection node” within this specific internet environment.

In this fantastical world, rooted in reality but entirely distinct from it, individuals hide behind symbols(Xu, 2022), weaving abstract cultural expressions. Through insults and ridicule aimed at Ding Zhen, they momentarily forget their own grim realities, trapped in what might be described as the “Kong Yiji trap,” resigned to a bleak existence.

6.2.3 Parodying and Mocking Authority Through Satire

Like traditional carnivals, online carnivals emphasize the spirit of entertainment, using laughter to undermine authoritative control. Entertainment is one of the most typical manifestations of online carnival.

In the Ding Zhen phenomenon, the imbalance of communication power leaves audiences unable to effectively question “Ding Zhen” within official carnival spaces or engage in meaningful dialogue with official media about the underlying theme of “power determining fate.” As a result, audiences resort to building carnival spaces through “intense satire.” These spaces, often crude and chaotic in form, emphasize Ding Zhen as an outlet for venting grievances against privilege and demanding mechanisms for equal civic dialogue and the construction of civil society.

This parodying behavior also reflects certain divisions within contemporary internet culture dissemination, where fragmented networks create disparities in communication and representation.

7. Carnival Convergence: The Risk Fragmentation of the “Ding Zhen Carnival”

Bakhtin, in his evaluation of Dostoevsky’s novels, stated: “Dostoevsky’s novels are composed of numerous independent and non-convergent voices and consciousnesses, forming a polyphony of fully valued and distinct voices.” He believed that polyphony and multivoicedness endow literary works with “polyphonic attributes”(Li, 2001), granting them openness and an unfinished character.

The media life of Ding Zhen is built upon various forms of literary and cultural creations, making the “Ding Zhen phenomenon” a polyphonic communication. Since its initial exposure by a photographer on Douyin (TikTok), the process of Ding Zhen’s viral spread has unfolded along multiple narrative threads, shaped by the multidimensionality and cultural variability of internet media agendas. These threads have evolved through repeated “crowning” rituals by the media to craft his persona and attract traffic, as well as through grassroots “decrowning” efforts characterized by ghostly memes, insults, and satire.

The prolonged media dynamics of the “Ding Zhen phenomenon” have ultimately produced two distinct “textures” within its polyphonic communication(Figure 3):

- The melody line represents the mainstream media’s promotion of Ding Zhen’s mainstream values and the creation of his “Sweet Wild Boy” persona.
- The harmonic line consists of grassroots discourse and independent attitudes that continuously devalue the mainstream narrative, forming a counterpoint to the melody line.

Together, these elements constitute the entirety of Ding Zhen’s media life and the dissemination of related topics.

Due to the complexity of the Ding Zhen phenomenon and its connection to real-world issues, the harmonic line of polyphonic communication often manifests as grassroots satire, irony, and deconstruction of authority in a carnivalesque form. As the polyphonic “performance” progresses, tonal conflicts—between the promotion by mainstream media and the deconstructive rebellion of grassroots carnival spaces—frequently occur and intensify.

Additionally, in the open-ended dialogue of online carnivals, the interactions among carnival participants evolve alongside the continuous fermentation and proliferation of Ding Zhen’s positive and negative fame and traffic. Consequently, the “Ding Zhen Ghostly Meme Carnival” exhibits strong openness and unfinished characteristics in its objects, subjects, processes, and outcomes(Yuan & Yang, 2023). The completeness of its carnival works and constructed spaces remains subject to the subjective interpretations of participants, making them difficult to identify or control.

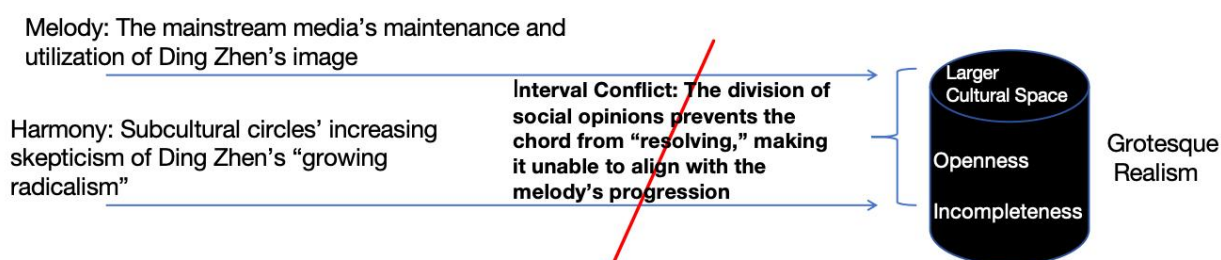


Figure 3: Polyphony of "Ding Zhen Communication"

In conclusion, the Ding Zhen phenomenon, as a symbol of resistance to authority and young people's expression of disappointment with real life, will ultimately enter an unobservable state of carnivalesque irony in the future, forming a peculiar "grotesque realism black box." This black box houses a larger system of symbolic production and cultural spaces, where audiences abstractly propel the Ding Zhen carnival toward a climax of loss of control. The loss of control in carnivals will exacerbate risks in society and, at the micro-level, lead to the following consequences:

7.1 Proliferation of Blind Carnival Phenomena

Blind carnival refers to large-scale, uncritical adherence to trends or behaviors in society, where individuals lose the ability for rational thought and independent judgment. Instead, they blindly follow the behaviors, viewpoints, or values of others or the masses.

As social media—one of the primary platforms for ghostly meme carnivals—becomes increasingly widespread and influential, the speed and scope of carnival information dissemination have expanded significantly. Audiences are easily influenced and guided through the dissemination of information and emotional contagion on social media. This amplifies humanity's natural herd mentality, encouraging people to find outlets for venting dissatisfaction and alleviating peer and life pressures within blind carnivals, which can gradually escalate into extremism.

7.2 Mainstream Media's Entrapment in the "Tacitus Trap"

The Tacitus Trap, named after the Roman historian Tacitus, describes a social phenomenon where government institutions or organizations lose credibility to such an extent that, whether they speak the truth or lie, or do good or bad, they are universally distrusted.

In the polyphonic communication of the "Ding Zhen phenomenon," the tonal conflicts inherent in the dissonance between mainstream media's promotion and grassroots-level deconstruction intensify the controversies surrounding Ding Zhen's fame. Audience carnival emotions are prone to diverse mutations, fostering even more abstract and complex cultural creations.

As these creations ferment within the "grotesque realism black box," mainstream media's efforts to maintain Ding Zhen's image and persona increasingly appear ineffective, even triggering public resentment. Ding Zhen and the media, trapped in a state of "resonance disconnection," enter a vacuum(Guan, 2021), where almost all media statements about Ding Zhen are perceived as

untrustworthy and worthy of ridicule due to the empathetic and supersight attributes inherent in his phenomenon.

If this skepticism surrounding an entertainment topic shifts to other areas such as livelihood or current affairs, it could inflict sustained, fatal damage on the credibility of mainstream media.

7.3 Satirical Fragmentation of Social Culture

In the fragmented communication environment of the internet, shaped by the deep integration of digital technology into daily life, “information overload” has become an unavoidable societal reality. Overload manifests in various ways, including unlimited information quantity, minimal information quality, and the fragmentation, embeddedness, carnivalesque appearance, and disorderliness of information.

Amid a fast-paced lifestyle, society has grown accustomed to entertainment forms like satire that provide immediate stimulation and humorous “brainwave signals.” Satire aligns perfectly with the “fast-spread, fragmented-context” reality of entertainment carnivals.

In the Ding Zhen phenomenon, satire is the lifeblood of ghostly meme carnivals, driving their “carnivality” and “topicality.” As the loss of control in carnivals continues to fragment, the “bottomless” nature of carnival satire based on societal issues (Liu, 2009), poses numerous challenges to a clear and constructive social cultural environment.

8. Conclusion

The enduring theme of the “Ding Zhen Ghostly Meme Carnival” is the injustice of “power and fate,” which serves as both its foundation and its driving force toward loss of control. As the “Leviathan” of entertainment dissemination and traffic monetization continues to grow, resistance from audiences has given rise to a multitude of subcultural forms. These include ghostly meme creations (memes, quotes, jokes, texts, and music), which use self-deprecating, ironic, parodic, and mocking tones to express pessimism toward the Ding Zhen phenomenon and disillusionment with life.

Within the frameworks adopted by different “carnival spaces,” aside from the official media narratives influenced by authoritarianism and neoliberalism, all other subcultural dimensions engage in varying degrees of irony and satire through ghostly memes. On a textual level, the “Ding Zhen Ghostly Meme Carnival” dismantles mainstream metanarratives, shifting toward “life narratives” that emphasize individual will, encapsulated in terms like “smoking, civil service exams, state enterprises, and stable jobs.” These expressions reveal both active aspirations and passive self-presentations, reflecting the life struggles faced by carnival participants.

Formally, this “pessimistic ghostly meme carnival” reconstructs texts through parody and collage, simultaneously “decrowning” Ding Zhen’s mainstream image while eliciting profound empathy. If such pessimism spirals out of control, it can continue to mutate and self-replicate within larger subcultural spaces, posing severe challenges to positive and upward societal cultures.

The roots of Ding Zhen’s carnival loss of control lie in two aspects:

1. The lack of public recognition for “Leviathan-attached” grassroots internet celebrities.

2. The absence of effective communication mechanisms between citizens and media power represented by entertainment media.

In such a scenario, audiences resort to self-exile in carnivals to numb themselves, lacking legitimate outlets to question or challenge media authority. This “loss of control” crisis highlights the need to address pressing issues of fairness and justice. Without proper attention, constantly evolving, decentralized, unregulated, and highly anonymous online media spaces risk turning subcultural carnival venues into extreme outlets for public frustration, undermining social order and exacerbating divisions across classes and groups.

To address these issues, communicators must remain vigilant and actively seek solutions through sustained dialogue and communication with diverse societal stakeholders.

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