FCJ–167 Spraying, fishing, looking for trouble: The Chinese Internet and a critical perspective on the concept of trolling

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Abstract:

Internet research has dealt with trolls from many different perspectives, framing them as agents of disruption, nomadic hate breeders and lowbrow cynics spawned by the excessive freedoms of online interaction, or as legitimate and necessary actors in the ecology of online communities. Yet, the question remains: what is a troll, where it come from and where does it belong? Presenting the results of a brief troll-hunt on the Chinese Internet and discussing the features of troll-like figures in Chinese digital folklore, I argue in favour of a localised understanding of Internet cultures, presenting trolling as a culture-specific construct that has come to embody disparate kinds of online behaviour and to function as an umbrella term for different kinds of discourse about the Internet itself.

'There is always need for a certain degree of civilisation before it is possible to understand this kind of humor" Wang Xiaobo, Civilisation and Satire'

Introduction: Why trolls, why China?**

As an interdisciplinary field, Internet research is in the challenging position of having to work out useful concepts and categories from precarious jargons, concepts and categories that are constantly tested against, and challenged by, the magmatic and unpredictable development of Internet cultures. From "netiquette" and "hacking" to "cyberspace" itself (The Economist, 1997), the fascinating vocabulary of Internet research constantly runs the risk of falling out of date and revealing the failure of academia to keep pace with the fast metamorphoses of online interaction. The ephemeral vernaculars of Internet cultures are often preserved by academic accounts in partial renditions of terms decoupled from their current usage, crystallised definitions that become charged with implicit value judgments (Merchant, 2002: 295), trigger lexical warfare around hot buzzwords (Ludlow, 2013), and reflect the difference between specific understandings of the Internet itself as a tool, a space, or a way of being (Markham, 2004: 358). Recently, the developments in research about networked participation and deliberation, Internet regulation and online community management seem to have found a common ground in discussions about trolls and trolling, an attention which is also curiously paired with a media-based moral panic about trolls, identified by some scholars as a not-so-hidden agenda of corporate and governmental pressures pushing towards and increased control over the Internet (Phillips, 2012). While interviews of self-proclaimed trolls pop up across popular media outlets, the word "trolling" itself – both in scholarly accounts and in the mass media–seems to have been essentialised through partial definitions and to function as an umbrella term for different phenomena. Moreover, great parts of trolling research are naturally based on the widespread, US-centric values of the golden age of Internet hype, perpetuating an online cultural imperialism of sorts (Lovink, 2009: 7). What does trolling signify for the Internet research of today, twenty years after the first documented appearance of "trolling" in the vernacular of Usenet mailing lists, a term meant to designate users who disrupt interactions with off-topic messages, jokes and deceptive identities? Is it a cohesive phenomenon across social networks, online communities and cultures? Why should scholars be interested in trolling, and how should they conduct research about it?

In his book *Networks Without a Cause*, media theorist Geert Lovink states his intention to "unearth aspects of everyday internet use that often remain unnoticed [...] user cultures that start to develop their own distinguished characteristics" and to follow the "relatively new ecology" in which new concepts and practices emerge from within user cultures (2012: 10). Following this broad characterisation of critical Internet research, I argue that looking for trolls on the Chinese Internet can work as a case against the essentialisation of online vernaculars and as a telling term of comparison better to understand what trolling means for the people who talk about it, without sticking to aging definitions or umbrella terms that bear little relation to contemporary Internet cultures. What matters most to

a critical Internet inquiry on trolling is not what trolling is, but the circumstances under which users accuse others of disruptive behaviour, identify themselves as disruptors, construct behavioural archetypes and comment on these very practices. In short, instead of assuming trolling as a culture or part of a larger Internet culture, it is much more productive to inquire into "the practices by which humans make themselves and others into subjects, objects, agents, patients or instruments [and the] other practices in which they comment on practices (and on commentative practices) themselves" (Hobart, 2000: 26).

These practices are inextricably linked to contexts and circumstances. China has a gigantic pool of Internet users, and research about different aspects of its national Internet confirms that during the last fifteen years the popularisation of ICTs has supported the emergence of a fairly peculiar Chinese Internet culture. Notwithstanding the common narrative of repression, China's thriving online ecology of social networks and discussion boards provides an incredible wealth of interactions, phenomena, and events for researchers to engage with. David K. Herold describes the Chinese Internet as an ongoing online carnival (2011: 11); my intention is to get a glimpse of this carnival to better understand the practices of its deceptive jesters and nasty provocateurs.

In this paper, I inquire about the existence of trolls on the Chinese Internet in order to argue the more general point that the troll is a culturally-specific folkloric figure that, after its appearance as the scourge of Usenet communities, has come to represent a form of boredom-fuelled humour and aggressive satire typical of Internet-based interaction, and has been interpreted and appropriated with several different meanings by the users, the media and academia itself. A local Internet culture has developed in China as a sort of linguistic and infrastructural walled garden due to a rather bumpy "double juggernaut" ride of ICT popularisation and capitalist modernisation (Chu, 2012). China's local Internet culture is disjointed from (but not entirely oblivious of) the US-centric Internet culture often regarded as global, and practices that would fit the general definition of trolling have been embodied in different figures defined by different terms, animating the carnival of digital folklore that mirrors social, political and cultural facets of contemporary China.

Instead of trying to stretch and fit a fixed definition of trolling to the peculiar Chinese online environment, I attempt to problematise the concept of trolling itself through the vernacular terms encountered during a brief exploration of Chinese digital folklore. As the accounts of trolling by Phillips (2011) and Shachaf and Hara (2010) document, trolling already means something sensibly different between, for example, Facebook and Wikipedia. In fact, since the Internet is a wholly built environment where platform design and policy deeply inform the actions of individuals and communities (Donath, 1999: 52), it is arguable that by the time academia produces an account of one phenomenon, the latter will adapt to

new environments, policies and cultural issues, mutating into something different. Hence, I argue that adopting old and culturally-specific concepts like 'trolling' to a different online environment like the Chinese Internet ignores key features of the local Internet cultures and results in poor understandings of larger issues regarding Chinese society (Yuan, 2013: 8). Moreover, persisting in the generalising usage of terms without delving into the diversified, everyday life practices of Internet users flattens out local vernacular ecologies and the shifting concerns and circumstances from which they emerge.

This paper summarises and reflects on the body of existing trolling research in order to question its usefulness when studying different Internet cultures. I gather insights from the observation of several Chinese social networking websites and online communities (Sina Weibo, Douban, Tencent QQ, Baidu Tieba) that I've been conducting in preparation for my doctoral research, as well as from personal communications with Chinese Internet users and friends. My goal is to suggest some hypothetical directions for future Chinese Internet research, as well as a general critique of the charm of essentialised metaphors enshrined in academic accounts of Internet culture. Instead of adopting generalised concepts and categories, Internet research should engage in what Foucault would call an archeological approach: questioning the totalities that history describes by making monuments out of documents or, in this case, mythical figures out of the trace of user practices (Foucault, 2002: 8).

What is trolling, again?

Trolls are ambivalent entities in the ecology of Internet culture. The term comes from the online vernacular of the late 80s/early 90s and has been given different definitions by both the media and academia; in the meantime, the forms of trolling itself have changed, adapting to the developments of online environments and interactions (Phillips, 2011). In academic literature, trolls have been either framed negatively as agents of disruption, nomadic hate breeders and lowbrow cynics, or more positively as productive author positions of Internet-based interaction.

The folk etymology of the term "troll" is unclear as to whether the first usages referred to "trolling" as fishing technique or to the Scandinavian mythological creature. Netlingo, an online dictionary of Internet ephemera, defines trolling as an already shifted signifier, a word that originally meant "the act of posting a message in a newsgroup (and later in a blog) that is obviously exaggerating something on a particular topic, hoping to trick a newbie posting a follow-up article that points out the mistake," and that today generally

means baiting or luring other users into argument: "Internet trolls are people who fish for other people's confidence and, once found, exploit it" (*Netlingo*, 2013). This definition is quite wide in scope, and it is followed by a subdivision of trolls into different categories according to their degree of seriousness and motivation, showing that the line between trolling, spamming, flaming, flooding and other disruptive behaviours is unclear even to Internet users themselves (Shin, 2008: 2). Online sources of digital folklore provide a rough understanding of trolling, but their definitions are not consistent enough to allow for a solid grounding of the scholarly discussion of this practice to avoid the conflation of phenomena under the same, rather vague umbrella term.

Lately, the media (at least the American, British and Australian ones,) seem to have co-opted trolling as a placeholder term for a generalised spectrum of Internet abuse and cyber-bullying (Phillips, 2011), conflating flaming, spamming, flooding and straightforward online bashing into one monstrous figure. In news columns talking about victimised and bullied teenagers, trolling provides an evocative name for online behaviours that benefit some people and damage others. In turn, this attempt at engineering a moral panic about trolls through a rhetoric of Internet abuse has supported the development of academic analyses that adopt the term 'troll' to indicate a generalised criminal or psychologically troubled Internet user who needs to be stopped at all cost, persecuted through detailed anti-trolling penalties or other legal provisions and eventually re-educated through gamified online environments (Binns, 2012; Bishop, 2011, 2013). When it comes to China, not surprisingly, trolls are equated to the similarly undefined "Water Army" of paid posters employed in government propaganda or private enterprises' turf wars. In keeping with a totalitarian, business-oriented image of China, it seems almost natural to find the exotic "Chinese trolls" in the booming, yet very little researched, business of paid spammers (Estes, 2011).

Academia has been interested in trolls and other figures of online interaction since the early nineties. One of the most quoted and concise definitions is given by Judith Donath, who defines trolling as "a game about identity deception, albeit one that is played without the consent of most of the players" (1999: 40) and troll as a user who contributes to a discussion with deliberately erroneous, disturbing or challenging information, with the intention of provoking a strong reaction from other users (1999: 47). Yet, for the most part, research dealing with trolling draws on both vernacular definitions of online culture and on the media, and is characterised by a suspicious approach to online social environments, often treated as breeding grounds for inflammatory interactions (Kozinets, 2010: 23).

As a result, many of the early accounts that refer to the phenomenon of trolling do so from a psychological perspective on the effects of computer-mediated communication (Kiesler, 1984: 1130) or from a legal/managerial point of view, and frame it either as an immature and antisocial behaviour or as a sexist (Herring et al.), criminal (Bishop, 2012: 161), immoral (Shin, 2008), deliberate act of violence capable of disrupting discussion spaces and even entire online communities (Hardaker, 2010: 226). Most of the studies agree in identifying the origins of trolling in the anonymity, reduced accountability and lack of social cues that characterise online interaction (Donath, 1999; Hardaker, 2010: 215), and are based on similar assumptions about a radical difference between computer-based communication and face-to-face interaction: trolling happens because online interaction allows people to express themselves more strongly (Kiesler, 1984: 1130), with attenuated social cues and statuses, a dramaturgical weakness caused by the lack of the rich feedback mechanisms that mediate face-to-face communication.

Some studies stretch the argument to the point of linking trolling to psychiatric illness or personality disorders (Shachaf and Hara, 2010: 365) or straightforward criminality (Shin, 2008), relating the appearance of trolling to the de-individuation typical of mass interaction online and to the lack of a regulating authority. Ultimately, most research is interested in the potential damage that trolls can bring to a community, social network or other online platform and in the strategies needed to identify and counter them (O'Sullivan and Flanagin, 2003; Shachaf and Hara, 2010; Chen, 2011). Finally, most of the research concerned with trolling–just as most Internet research in general–has focused on North-American online communities and social networking websites catering to a mainly Western user pool: it is not surprising to read Whitney Phillips' statement about trolling behaviours being "gendered male, raced as white, and marked by privilege. This demographic might not be literal, but it is symbolic—and more importantly, it is verifiable." This demographic obviously refers to a North-American culture of trolling that, even if symbolic and verifiable, is so only in relation to a specific Internet culture and a local online environment. [1]

A more recent (although less prolific) trend in academic research about trolling focuses on its productive function in the ecology of online communities. As Merritt (2012) argues, it is in their own interest that researchers willing to understand online communication should approach new forms of interaction, although deemed anti-social and disruptive, recognizing their complex and purposeful role in mediating online behaviours and gate-keeping online communities. Only a few recent studies describe trolling as a cultural phenomenon deserving a proper understanding (Krappitz, 2012), a practice of fundamental skepticism employed by members of online communities to secure trust and construct truth in the confused battlegrounds of information (Phillips, 2011) or as a as a sort of ritual or mock impoliteness with the function of reinforcing affects, thrust and membership in an online community (Merritt, 2012).

In its long journey from Usenet mailing lists to Facebook pages, Wikipedia entries and propaganda spam, trolling has been depicted in different ways, becoming the focus for debates about media control, Internet regulation, community management and Internet culture research. The definition of the term itself has become contested between panicking admins, journalists, academics and self-proclaimed trolls. As I show through the following overview of some Chinese online practices, it is fruitful to problematise the concept of trolling itself and explore similar practices and alternative concepts that reveal much more about Internet user cultures as a dynamic reaction to localised circumstances.

Machineguns, idiots and fishermen

The Chinese ambassador to the United Kingdom recently told a BBC journalist that despite the Western misperception about it, Chinese people are very open about the Internet, as the fact that China has the largest user population in the world clearly demonstrates (South China Morning Post, 2012). Leaving aside the discussion about the many different ways in which the Chinese government is or is not open about the Internet, it is undeniable that, clocking in at 591 million users in mid–2013 (CNNIC, 2013: 11), China has a huge online population. Through their interactions in an online environment partially separated from the "global" or "international" Internet culture that developed in an online environment dominated by US-centric paradigms (Lovink, 2009: 7), Chinese Internet users have developed, in a compressed fashion, an Internet culture that mirrors issues of their cultural-historical environment (Chu & Cheng, 2011).

Despite the common narrative that stresses censorship as the cause for the secluded nature of the Chinese Internet, I argue that this disjointed development of a local Internet culture is mostly due to linguistic issues. In fact, except for YouTube, Twitter and few other popular platforms, the whole plethora of online communities, image boards and other sites that are commonly seen as breeding grounds of Internet culture (for example 4chan, Reddit or Tumblr) are normally accessible to Chinese users. However, the majority of Chinese Internet users tends to stick to their own language and talk about relevant news items and cultural products on online platforms that are embedded in their own everyday life such as national newspaper websites, video streaming platforms and message boards, often linked to local portals and search engines.

Considering China's huge Internet user population, the recent development of social networks as well as the still thriving discussion boards (on both small, interest or practice-based scale and massive, portal-based scale like Tianya or Baidu Tieba), it seems almost

evident that some users will, at some point, troll or be trolled by other users. Yet, every time I tried to explain the concept of trolling to Chinese friends online and offline, I found myself in dire straits. Presenting practical examples from discussion boards and other online platforms that I would generally identify as trolling yielded different definitions: "this guy is just a spammer (*penzi*)!" or "he is looking for trouble (*zhao chou*)", or "this post is fishing (*diao yu*)", or "this one is an idiot (*nao can*)" – there was no direct Chinese translation for instances that I would definitely regard as trolling, and apparently no umbrella term in Chinese to cover the meanings that the word "troll" has taken in "Western" Internet culture, media discourse or academic debate. Conversely, when asked back, I found myself not being able to explain exactly what a troll was if not through specific, localised examples, that the Chinese counterparts would translate with several different terms.

Apparently, there was no popular term to define practices related to trolling in Chinese Internet culture. Yet satirical, ironic, humorous, aggressive and deceptive behaviour was clearly present online, and was referred to using a whole range of different, more or less vernacular terms. Some of these terms appear to have fallen into disuse, while others are currently used to define particular kinds of humorous, deceptive and aggressive protagonists in online interactions, even though none of these terms seems to have acquired the currency and the number of stratified interpretations that "troll" has received in Western media and academia. Thus, I present here a tentative and partial collection of the ways Chinese Internet users define the deceptive/humorous/aggressive behaviours of other users, effectively constructing peculiar identities in the carnival of online China.

Hunting the wrong beast

Trolling happens on the Chinese Internet all the time. During preparatory surveys of Baidu Tieba boards conducted for my PhD research, I observed several instances of trolling behaviour. For example, a user of the World of Warcraft discussion board created a thread titled "Is anyone here this late? If so I'll post some pics. – A 17 years old *diaosi* [loser]" in which she started posting cute pictures of herself. Even if the post appeared at 2:12 AM in the morning, asking about the presence of other users in one of Baidu Tieba's most populated boards is evidently a form of irony aimed at other users to provoke responses. The pictures posted by this user were not accompanied by any text, and the first confused response "………………" appeared less than one minute later, prompting sub-discussions in which other users started straightforwardly questioning her gender ("Are you male or female?", "LZ [original poster] is clearly a T [tomboy]", "Surely a guy", "I thought LZ was a girl"). Instead of attempting any dialogue (to one user asking "… and so what?", she replied "nothing, just dropping some pictures to get famous"), she kept taunting other users with blurry or edited self-shots that didn't give any precise clue about her gender. More replies

ensued, as other users started leaving their QQ [2] or phone numbers, asking for more details (post a picture in which they [the breasts] bounce", "show some cleavage!") or commenting on her appearance ("this girl did not develop yet", "flat breast, I'll give just five points"). LZ kept playing on her/his gender identity while adding little revealing details here and there: a picture of herself holding a wad of 100 Renminbi banknotes ("this is probably boasting… it's all money I earned"), another picture showing a hint of cleavage (to which other users immediately replied – "this is cleavage… is it?!… is it?!", or her location ("I'm in Beijing, Chaoyang district").

I followed this thread as it gathered more than twenty pages of responses in less than one hour, during which no conclusion was drawn regarding the gender of the LZ. As with most of the threads in the World of Warcraft Tieba board, this particular one had no relation whatsoever to the game to which the board was dedicated, and was instead a typical case in which the original poster kept putting her/his deceptive gender performance to the test with fellow board members willing to be lured into a game of deception for the sake of fun and the thrill of verification (Donath, 1999). On 4chan or similar message boards, this thread would have been included in a traditional "trap thread" joke cycle [3] and the original poster (OP) would have been identified as a troll pretty soon, with some of the classical formulas "OP is trolling everyone" "not getting trolled", "good job in getting trolled by obvious troll" quickly filling entire pages of replies.

The first observation is that in Chinese internet culture there is no single word for trolling as a practice. Instead, the observation of this single case provides a wealth of other interesting terms peculiar to Chinese online vernacular. Some are words corresponding to English terms ("T" for "tomboy"), while others such as LZ (*louzhu*) mirror English acronyms (OP, original poster) while also adapting them to the local online environments (on Chinese bulletin boards posts are numbered as building floors from the top to the bottom of the page, so that the first poster is actually the "building owner"). Other terms, like *diaosi* (loser), *hunlianshu* (posting self-shots to become popular) or *xuanfu* (boasting wealth) all have a documented history and are consolidated terms for phenomena typical of the Chinese online environment, with no direct translation or correspondence with the vernacular vocabulary to which trolling belongs. In this sense, looking for trolls on the Chinese Internet can be a tentative entrée leading to much more revealing aspects of the local Internet culture.

Korean Bangzi, Japanese Devils and Chinese Sprayers

Chinese Internet culture does indeed have a rich and fluctuating vernacular, so even if a corresponding word seems not to appear from preliminary and unsystematic observations, it makes sense to actively look for descriptions of trolling in sources of online ephemera—trolling might be less visible and fragmented in different forms of irony, sarcasm, confrontation and bored satire. The English Wikipedia entry "Troll (Internet)" points to the Chinese language one that explains the words *baimu* (white eyes), and *bailan* (childish), then condensed in *xiaobai* (little white), as the most appropriate translations of trolling, stating that the term propagated from Taiwan to indicate users that take advantage of anonymity and make statements without having to bear any consequences offline, a definition echoed in similar dictionaries and encyclopedias in mainland China (*Wikipedia* 2013, *Chazidian*, 2013).

Another term, *penzi* (sprayer), apparently more used in mainland Chinese Internet culture, seems to originate from a street slang term for any kind of gun and from the term used in first-person shooter games where it refers to any kind of machinegun. From there the term spread to message boards to indicate someone who "takes a look around and randomly curses people" without really caring about the content or rationally defending his position (*Baidu Baike*, 2013a). Looking at online usages, in online Chinese vernacular *penzi* seems to correspond most closely to the term troll: a random, unconcerned but nasty personal attack on other users, protected by anonymity—"If I pen you, you don't know who I am, and I don't commit any crime" (*Baidu Zhidao*, 2013). According to discussions between Internet users, "there are different kinds of *penzi*, but most of them are post–80s" (*Baidu Zhidao*, 2013), *pen ren* (trolling, literally "spraying people") is defined as something done for the pleasure of it: *pen*-ning people apparently brings a sense of achievement" (*Baidu Zhidao*, 2013). As the user posting the question "Why are there so many Chinese *penzi*?" on Baidu Zhidao (the Chinese equivalent of Yahoo! Answers) elegantly puts it, "I *pen* you, you *pen* me, everybody has fun". Other users, answering his question, bring up other issues: "who stays on the Internet for more than three hours doesn't get more than 2000 [yuan a month]. Who gets more than that, doesn't have that much time to waste on such a virtual (xuni) thing", "people that don't have any quality (*suzhi*) just go on and troll troll troll", "it is a kind of hollow, meaningless form of envy".

Pen ren, defined as an activity of playful disruption of online interaction made possible by anonymity and unaccountability, is quite similar to the basic definition of trolling. Yet, at the same time, it is limited to aggressive comments made out of boredom and linked to specifically Chinese elements like *suzhi* (moral quality) and to typically Chinese views of the Internet as an abstract (*xuni*) and thus unimportant form of writing. Even the recurring

statements "there are too many envious people in our country, this is not to mean that in other countries there are less, only that we don't see them", "Chinese people are too many, too complicated, there's all kind of people around" underlie the perception that sprayers are a typical Chinese phenomena—in a generic stereotyped and race-based definition *penzi* are typical of China just like Japanese are imperialist devils and Koreans are stupid: "Korean Retards, Japanese Devils, Chinese Sprayers", as the user mentioned above concludes his question, legitimising the practice of spraying along widely shared national stereotypes. *Penzi* covers a partial meaning of trolling, that of unconcerned, gratuitous direct attacks on other posts and users on message boards, and the common definition seems to link it to immaturity, boredom, impoliteness and moral baseness unavoidable in such a huge online population, a definition that still remains deeply connected to Chinese cultural elements and a perceived uniqueness of Chinese users themselves.

Literary fishing

Since, as illustrated before, China developed a partially separate Internet culture that is not entirely oblivious to the English-speaking one, there are many online discussions about the possible Chinese translations of trolling, where users propose words that approximate its meanings while also recognizing that "in Chinese there is still no word that corresponds entirely to 'troll'" (Tianya, 2011). Looking at some of these discussions I noticed how, besides *penzi*, users also mention other terms like *naocan* (idiot, mentally damaged) and *zhao chou* (looking for trouble) or *diao yu* (fishing) (Douban, 2012). The latter struck me as particularly interesting because lately it seems to be growing in popularity, and because it approximates some other meanings of trolling.

Baidu Baike defines *diao yu tie* (fishing post) as a specific form of writing meant to attract other people's attention and criticise the blind faith in commonly held opinions (*Baidu Baike*, 2013b). This practice is reportedly common in Chinese discussion boards about military technology and history and it eventually produced a whole genre of *diao yu wen* (fishing literature), fictive articles complete with data and pictures meant to fish for people through careful and scientific writing, which then utilise their conclusions to go against commonly held opinions or present extreme views, eliciting discussion on a topic of interest. Baidu Baike's entry "*Diaoyu wen*" identifies this phenomenon as present on early Chinese discussion boards since 1998, and characterised by a form of satire or irony (*fanfeng*) (*Baidu Baike*,2013c). The term diaoyu wen can be traced back to 2007 and indicates fake scientific or specialised texts meant to catch the attention of discussion board users and stimulate discussion—a literary and highly refined form of deceptive behaviour with a well-defined critical edge.

One of the most popular examples of fishing literature is the case of the High Speed Railway document that started circulating in September 2010: a fake academic article claiming that Professor Zhang Shimai from the Xi'an Global Environment Research Institute, affiliated with the Chinese Academy of Science, had conducted thorough and detailed research, concluding that the geology of Chinese soil did not suit the construction of high-speed railways. Claiming pseudoscientific evidence and predicting chained ecological disasters, the whole article was aimed at satirising (*egao*) the mass media's emphasis on Chinese technological achievements (*Baidu Baike*, 2013c).

Differently from the playful gender deception seen in the example from the World of Warcraft Tieba board, *diaoyu wen* employ carefully constructed deceptive texts, meant to target specific arguments or themes to stimulate constructive discussions through exaggerated claims or extreme positions. As the attention growing around these texts confirms, with Internet users requesting the "best fishing texts" of 2011–2012 (Guokr, 2012) and collecting them, *diaoyu wen* have become an online literary genre that has no direct correspondence in the so-called "global" Internet culture, unless one were to count general forms of urban legends and chain e-mails. Moreover, fishing literature often manages to troll not only Internet users who directly take the bait and engage in discussion, but the mainstream media itself, to the point of leading the Southern Metropolis Weekend to claim that the phenomenon of online fishing literature defies the credibility of online and offline media (Nddaily, 2011). In fact, the High Speed Railway document was repeatedly quoted by many Chinese media outlets right after the Wenzhou train crash of 23 July 2011, so that a piece of elaborate media satire was employed by the mass media themselves as an argument to attack the quality of the high-speed railway infrastructure (Baidu Baike,2013c).

Given their refined argumentative construction, *diaoyu wen* might seem to be ideal targets for the widely publicised pushbacks against false information and rumours that are cyclically launched by the Chinese government's propaganda departments. However, confrontational simplifications pitting instances of playful irony or satirical forgeries against a monolithic governmental reaction run a double risk. The first is overstating the proportions of a specific phenomenon: *diaoyu wen* are just one particular form of writing shared via e-mail, blogs and microblogs along with countless other items of gossip, urban legends and general infotainment, often to the delight of thousands of users who find the time to read it and laugh about its ironic twists. The second risk is underestimating the adaptive strategies of the relevant authorities: as Morozov (2011: 118–119) brilliantly illustrates, the Chinese government's censorship and propaganda bureaus react in very effective ways in many instances of Internet incidents crossing the borders of official tolerance. Just as with the Chinese government's co-optation of trolling into the by now notorious "Fifty-Cent Army" of paid spammers working as public opinion spinners (ibid.,

130), it is to be expected that even *diaoyu wen* could be repurposed in an attempt to muddle the waters of online debate and rectify or nullify dangerous rumours if they grow too big or too viral.

Conclusion: The value of local digital folklores

What is a troll? One of the constant complaints of trolling research is the difficult definition of the phenomenon itself, probably due to its wide range and the fluctuating nature of its practices: trolls have become similar to urban legends and the digital folklore that they contribute to debunk or disseminate. Even a general definition of trolling as a playful disruption of online interaction fails to account for all the different forms of humour, satire, confrontation and violence that are called trolling by different people in different online environments. Yet, people keep calling other people trolls, sprayers or fishers, and assign these terms a rich variety of meanings that range from spamming and posting stupid comments for fun to the aggressive disruption of communities, cyber-bullying and violent personal attacks or antisocial or criminal online behaviour. This suggests that the most fruitful way of understanding a phenomenon like trolling is not by asking "what is a troll" but opening up the discussion and looking at what people define as such when they engage in communal interaction, or at how do people define and lump together different degrees of interactional disruption in different user cultures and national Internets.

Moreover, as a figure of a culture-specific digital folklore, the troll does not survive translations. An into Chinese Internet culture has shown how the many facets of trolling correspond to different phenomena and entities in Chinese digital folklore, and how the choice of each term actually reflects cultural preoccupations and localised understandings, working as a part of the reciprocal construction of online identities. Minimising the intruder as a childish *xiaobai*, a solipsistic and unconcerned *penzi*, an idiotic *naocan* in search of trouble or praising him as the author of a successful *diaoyu wen* cannot be reconciled under a single term drawn from a different Internet culture. Trolling is not a unique genre of interaction, but has merely come to signify different forms of humour and disruptive behaviour used to experiment with identity, pass some time, have fun, reinforce a community through verification and fact-checking and criticising popular discourses.

What I would call trolling happens regularly on the massive social platforms of online China, yet it has not (yet) become a mythologised figure as in the Euro-American Internet culture and there is no generalised term to cover all implications that it takes. Instead, other terms that cover specific parts of a general idea of confrontational, disruptive

interaction reveal much more interesting and lively facets of the local Chinese Internet culture, as well as about the way in which Chinese users construct a local digital folklore, regulate online interaction, or even question established narratives and lure the media into information wars, resting on a common assumption of online interaction being unreliable, vacuous, humorous, and carnivalesque.

Bibliographical Note

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Notes

[1] This remark is not meant to question Phillips' conclusions about Facebook trolling in the U.S., but to highlight the culture-specific characteristics of trolls and the preoccupations of researchers. I found particularly interesting that many recent works about trolling emphasise its gendered character (Shachaf and Hara 2010, Phillips 2011).

[2] Tencent QQ is the instant messaging software most popular in Mainland China. A QQ account is not indexed through a username but through an arbitrary number assigned at the moment of registration.

[3] "Trap" is an American slang term for a very feminine transvestite.

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