

# Why Do Chinese Young People Call Themselves "Losers"? Diaosi: A Counter-Hegemony Identity

*Xinyu Huang*

In recent years, Chinese young people tend to use a popular Internet word *diaosi* to mock themselves as “underprivileged losers” who fail in their careers and romantic relationships. This paper tries to examine this cultural phenomenon through the lenses of Symbolic Interaction Theory and Cultural Hegemony Theory. It argues that individuals create and modify the meaning of *diaosi* during social interactions. Furthermore, the popularity and changing meaning of *diaosi* have made it an influential ideology which challenges the dominant ideology that a successful man earns a large amount of money and has a good wife. But paradoxically, those who call themselves *diaosi* actually wish to become successful within the dominant understanding. The term *diaosi* also further marginalizes people such as migrant workers and farmers who can barely make ends meet.

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*Xinyu Huang from Georgetown University is pursuing her MA degree in Communication, Culture and Technology. Her research interests lie in social media and marketing. You can reach her at xh79@georgetown.edu.*

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No savings, no girlfriend, not handsome, having a low-paid job and always playing video games (AFP 2015): if a Chinese man fits the above descriptions, he would be considered by himself and others to be a *diaosi*, which roughly translates as “underprivileged loser”.

First found on the Internet in 2011, the word *diaosi* became increasingly popular as it went viral. Chinese young people from all backgrounds – regardless of sex – began to embrace the term (Zhang & Barreda 2013). In 2012, *diaosi* was so ubiquitous that it topped the list of Internet buzzwords of the year. (Zhang 2013) In 2014, Peking University’s Market and Media Research Center surveyed 213,795 people between the ages of 21 and 30 across 50 cities in China. 62.2% of respondents considered themselves as *diaosi* (Fauna 2014). Why are people of the younger generation willing to label themselves with such a seemingly derogatory word that indicates a person’s failure in both his career and romantic relationships?

To dig into this interesting phenomenon, this paper tries to understand *diaosi*’s prevalence and its cultural indication through two theoretical frameworks – The Symbolic Interaction Theory and Cultural Hegemony Theory. Symbolic Interaction Theory serves as a microscopic angle to examine *diaosi* as a symbol, looking at how it gains different meanings in social interactions; while Cultural Hegemony Theory provides a relatively macroscopic lens, through which one can see how this symbol claims its power in the whole society.

## The Symbolization of Diaosi

The meaning of *diaosi* was constantly enriched and modified during its spread on China’s Internet since 2011 until it finally

deviated from its original context. Originally, *diaosi* was literally a vulgar word, with *diao*, meaning penis, and *si*, meaning string or hair. It was a word created by some Chinese netizens in late 2011 to mock the fans of a mediocre Chinese soccer player Li Yi on his online fan club forum (Yang, Tang & Wang 2015). Instead of feeling embarrassed, Li Yi’s fans were happy with their new name and started to call themselves *diaosi* all the time on the forum. By doing so, they turned the use of this derogatory word into a method of self-mockery and took pleasure in such self-degradation (Yang et al. 2015).

In 2012, more and more Chinese netizens who had nothing to do with the soccer player started calling themselves *diaosi* as a way of self-mockery as well and thus gave rise to a viral spread of the word *diaosi* online and even offline (Yang et al. 2015). For example, those who considered themselves losers in both their careers and romantic relationships mocked themselves as *diaosi* to suggest how miserable they were, which seemed to be a type of emotional release showing their discontent with the status quo. When using *diaosi* in communication, netizens further created a set of compound words that were closely related to *diaosi*, resulting in a unique “*diaosi*-centered” discourse system. For example, a *diaosi* is usually someone who is “short-ugly-poor” (*ai-cuo-qiong*), whose biggest dream in life is to become as successful as those people who are “tall-rich-handsome” (*gao-fu-shuai*). In the netizens’ definition, success generally means having a well-paid and decent job and marrying a girl who is “fair(skinned)-rich-beautiful” (*bai-fu-mei*).

Being created and modified during social interactions, *diaosi* is a symbol that gains its meanings from communicators. It pertains to the symbols discussed in the field of communication (West and Turner 2013,

77). Thus, Symbolic Interaction Theory is a great model to understand how people actively employ *diaosi* to interact and why they are so attracted to it. In the next part, I will review the key concepts of Symbolic Interaction and examine how it helps one to better understand the symbol *diaosi*.

### Symbolic Interaction: *Diaosi* as a Means of Social Bonding

American sociologist G. H. Mead (1982) presented the idea that "the individual mind can exist only in relation to other minds with shared meanings" (5). Based on the work of Mead, Herbert Blumer, a student and interpreter of Mead, coined the term "Symbolic Interaction". Blumer (1969) contends that individuals construct and modify the meanings of symbols in the process of communication (can be interpersonal or intrapersonal), and that they are motivated to act based on their interpretations of these symbols. Such social interactions help develop self-concepts, create social bonds, and shape social structure. Ralph LaRossa and Donald C. Reitzes (1993) suggest that Symbolic Interaction is "essentially ... a frame of reference for understanding how humans, in concert with one another, create symbolic worlds and how these worlds, in turn, shape human behavior" (136). The Symbolic Interaction Theory (SIT) considers individuals as active participants in the society who "live and work to make their social world meaningful" (Smith & Belgrave 1994, 253).

But scholars criticize that SIT focuses too much on the micro-level and that it neglects the emotional dimension of human interaction (West et al., 2013, p. 90). This paper will take advantage of its former "shortcoming" to examine *diaosi* from a microscopic lens, analyzing how individuals actively use the symbol *diaosi* in social interactions.

According to SIT, the goal of interaction is "to create shared meaning", and such meaning is modified in the course of communication (West et al. 2013, 79–80). During the spread of *diaosi*, communicators changed its meaning from a derogatory one to that of self-mockery. Specifically, they re-created this word in regard to its meaning and context: 1) instead of a simply derogatory word, *diaosi* became a symbol used to indicate one's failure in his/her career and romantic relationship, or an "underprivileged loser"; 2) *diaosi* was separated from its original soccer context and almost everyone might have a reason to describe themselves as *diaosi*. A successful "tall-rich-handsome" person who has nothing to do with "loser" may call himself *diaosi* as well. By doing this, he intends to emphasize how hard it was to become successful and attributes his achievement to his own effort instead of his own advantages, such as being born into a wealthy family that could have assisted his career by money and an existing network. Marquis and Yang (2015)'s analysis of the use of *diaosi* on Weibo (China's equivalent of Twitter) indicates a trend that the context of *diaosi* is shifting from negative to positive. These changes happen because communicators will select, check, and transform the meanings of symbols in the context in which they find themselves (West et al. 2013, 82).

Furthermore, SIT also suggests that people develop self-concepts through interactions with others, and such self-concepts motivate their behaviors. When individuals interact with those who claim themselves as *diaosi*, they develop a self-concept of whether they are also *diaosi*; and this self-concept decides whether and how one will use *diaosi* in communication. For example, those who consider themselves as poor and single tend to seek social support by using *diaosi*. They label themselves as *diaosi* to express how

dissatisfied they are with the status quo and they feel relieved to some extent when they find out there are so many people who are as “miserable” as they are. In this way, they further identify their self-concept as “underprivileged losers” and enhance their social bonds with other “losers”.

Apart from manifesting the dynamics of online interaction, the creation and popularity of the symbol *diaosi* also allows us to observe a generation of Chinese young people who express their depression of struggling to live a good life and their discontent with the extremely uneven distribution of wealth in China’s rapid development. Embedded in China’s culture and social structure, *diaosi* is a symbol representing an antagonism against the wealthy and powerful people at the top of China’s society and against the social rules created by them. But there is a paradox here: such antagonism shows that these young people actually long for the comfortable life of the upper class—the people they seemingly despise. To thoroughly understand this phenomenon, it is necessary to observe *diaosi* from a macro-level vantage point and Cultural Hegemony is the best lens to observe how the power relations in China’s society shape the meaning of *diaosi* and its cultural indication.

### **Cultural Hegemony: *Diaosi* as a Counter-Hegemony Ideology**

Rooted in the works of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1971), Cultural Hegemony essentially deals with how dominant groups in a society exercise their power over the culture of the whole society, manipulating social beliefs and values, or, in other words, ideologies. (West et al. 2013, 364-365). According to Cormack (1992), ideology “is a process which links socio-economic reality to

individual consciousness”, which establishes a “conceptual framework” that “gives rise to our ideas of ourselves” (13). As individuals are constantly creating and disseminating meanings in the society, various ideologies are produced and they compete with each other in the “theatre of struggle” (Hall 1997). It is a play of power relations and people at the top of the social hierarchy who own more power usually win in the conflicts of ideology, maintaining the dominant ideologies and suppressing others. The media that represents the dominant class reinforce such hegemony. However, subordinate groups do not necessarily consent to the mainstream ideologies that are imposed on them. According to Frank Parkin (1973), individuals can react to a dominant ideology in three ways: 1) they defer to it and aspire to succeed within the dominant understanding; 2) they accept it and accommodate the undesirable situation; 3) they reject it and promote an alternative (81-82). The third scenario is what Gramsci calls the practice of counter-hegemony, where people use hegemonic behaviors to challenge the dominant ideology (West et al. 2013, 369).

*Diaosi* is how those Chinese young people make sense of their social existence, indicating where they find themselves in the social hierarchy. They mock themselves as losers because under the dominant ideology, they have to buy an apartment, own a car, earn a significant amount of money, and also have plenty of savings in their bank accounts in order to be considered successful people. By labelling themselves *diaosi*, they try to indicate how hard it is to live up to the dominant standard of success. As a result, they create an ideology that challenges the dominant one. On the “theatre of struggle”, they ask: 1) why does a man have to be “tall-rich-handsome” and a woman to be “fair(skinned)-rich-beautiful”? Even though

I am a *diaosi* who is “short-ugly-poor”, I am still proud of who I am; 2) why is success defined as making a lot of money and having a great marriage? Why does everyone have to be successful? Even though I am poor and single, why can't I claim that I am successful because I live a happy life? As a vulgar word in essence, *diaosi* serves as a rising ideology that represents China's grassroots culture antagonizing the dominant elite culture. It is the Chinese people's self-perception of what it means to be an ordinary Chinese citizen, and such voices challenge the mainstream narratives of the lives of people at the top of the social hierarchy.

The *diaosi* phenomenon is embedded in the social structure of China. With the rapid development of China, the distribution of wealth is increasingly unequal: about a third of the country's wealth is concentrated in the hands of 1% of Chinese citizens; and the poorest quarter of citizens own only 1% of the country's wealth (Kaiman 2014). Bloomberg reported that China's income gap between the rich and the poor surpassed that of the U.S. and “is among the widest in the world” (Woellert & Chen 2016). Such severe inequity of wealth distribution intensifies the antagonism between people at the top and those at the lower parts of the social hierarchy. A report from Forbes indicates that the wealth gap has caused social conflicts that tend to escalate (Rapoza, 2016). When a group of “underprivileged losers” mock themselves as *diaosi* and tease those “tall-rich-handsome” people together, they are expressing their discontent with the unfair wealth distribution, their struggle to live a better life, and their rejection of the dominant narrative of success.

Calling oneself *diaosi* is a practice of counter-hegemony, but paradoxically, *diaosi* consent to the dominant ideology because in the *diaosi* narrative, they wish

to overcome adversity and live a life as the people at the top. In Parkin's words (81-82), the way these young people react to the dominant ideology is a combination of rejecting and deferring. On the one hand, they show contempt for the “tall-rich-handsome” people, seemingly rejecting this domination; but in reality, they also long for having the wealth and marriages of the people they tease, and many of them aspire to succeed within this dominant framework of success. They oppose their own positions in the social structure, but they do not doubt if the structure itself is reasonable. In this light, *diaosi* will never successfully challenge the dominant forces and become the new hegemonic force, because they consent to the ideology they claim to oppose: even though their power of resistance is strong enough, it eventually dissolves in the entertaining narratives on the Internet.

## Conclusion

Through the micro-level lens of Symbolic Interaction Theory and the macro-level lens of Cultural Hegemony, this paper has examined the phenomenon of *diaosi* from an individual and societal angle: the motives of individuals using the symbol *diaosi* and its power of counter-hegemony in China's society. Furthermore, the interpretive perspective provided by SIT serves to observe the *diaosi* phenomenon in detail, while the critical perspective of Cultural Hegemony helps us thoroughly understand the power relations and social values behind it. Particularly, Cultural Hegemony provides a possible improvement in the resistance of *diaosi*. Only when they come to realize their actual consent to the dominant ideology and challenge the social structure itself will they succeed in their resistance and gain more discourse power in the “theatre of struggle” where ideologies compete (West et al. 2013, 369).

But there is another important fact that we cannot ignore: when everyone is labelling themselves as *diaosi* online, those migrant workers and farmers who actually struggle in poverty and worry about their next meal are almost unable to use media to express their voices. They are the ones representing the majority of the “actual” underprivileged people who share only 1% of the country's

wealth. While *diaosi* can use social media to compete with dominant ideologies, these underprivileged people can hardly present their identities and voices to the society. The *diaosi* narrative which seemingly represents people at the bottom further obscures the possibility of these underprivileged people to be remembered. This is an issue that both of the theories might fail to capture.

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