From Internet Memes to Emoticon Engineering: Insights from the Baozou Comic Phenomenon in China

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Abstract. Baozou comic, a.k.a. rage comic internationally, has been widely used as a form of visual communication of emotions in social media, advertisement, entertainment, and many other domains in China. In particular, Chinese netizens have converted this type of Internet memes into emoticons and use them extensively in Instant Messaging applications. This paper discusses the potential socio-economic context of the Baozou comic phenomenon in China. Baozou comic is a unique combination of cuteness and parody, and can serve as a vehicle to convey out-of-control, subtle, complicated, or hidden emotions. Its ugly aesthetics reflects the self-perception of a new generation of Chinese Internet users. The grassroots emoticon engineering process, including easy production, replication, and customization, also contributes to the growing popularity of Baozou comic in China. Analysis on miscommunication over Baozou emoticons reveal some related issues such as the need to balance ambiguity and emotional depth in expressions.

Keywords: Internet memes · Baozou comic · Rage comic · Emoticon · Stickers

1 Introduction

On October 1, 2015, the city police of Nanjing, China published a set of anti-fraud booklets in a Baozou comic (i.e., rage comic in China)[1] style on its Weibo[2] and WeChat[3] account (Fig. 1 Left). Just in one day, the booklets received over 200,000 clicks online. Many news media, including the CCTV (China Central Television) news website, reported the success of this campaign [4]. In the same month, the Weibo account of the official Taobao Store of the Forbidden City Museum[4] posted an article titled "Enough, Leave me Alone" (Fig. 1, right). The article told the story of the last emperor of the Ming Dynasty with Baozou comics [7]. The purpose was to advertise for the museum's lucky souvenirs. Over 1.27 million people have read the post and many left a like.

[1] Chinese website of Baozou comic: http://baozoumanhua.com.
[2] Chinese Microblogging platform: http://www.weibo.com/.
[3] A online social networking tool by Tencent: http://www.wechat.com/.
[4] Forbidden City's official Taobao store: https://gugong1925.world.taobao.com/.

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Fig. 1. Left: screenshot from the anti-fraud booklet (Copyright ©weibo.com/njga); right: screenshot of the microblogging article by Forbidden City's official Taobao store (Copyright ©weibo.com/gugongtaobao).

These events have demonstrated the well-recognized ability of Baozou comic to evoke public attention in China, regardless of the heated debates on the appropriateness of using this new style of visual communication in scenarios that are often considered to be formal or serious. Compared to stylish graphics carefully crafted by designers, Baozou comics are unpolished, rough, ugly (in the conventional sense) sketches or images made usually by amateurs exploiting materials available over the Internet (see examples of comparison in Fig. 1 right). However, despite its "minimal effort" aesthetic [6] and potential legal issues [17] as a type of Internet memes, Baozou comic has swept all kinds of online communications, from instant messaging (IM) such as WeChat (Fig. 2) and QQ[5], micro blogs, e-bulletin boards, to forums.

The popularity of Baozou comic is a reflection of an emerging fad of emoticon (particularly digital stickers in IM) engineering [25] in China. More and more Chinese Internet users are involved in the creation and dissemination of static images as well as animated GIFs of facial expressions, many of which are in the style of Baozou comics. There has been some research on the spread of Internet memes globally [2, 18]. However, not much work has looked into (1) why are Chinese people who have the tradition of making and keeping "face" (miànzǐ 面子 in Chinese) [10] willing to depict themselves in ugly drawings? (2) What kinds of emotions do Chinese people intend to express through these comics, given that their culture is rich in affects [26] but encourages emotion restraint [1]? And (3) why and how can the emoticon engineering practices be widely adopted?

[5] QQ is another instant messaging tool of Tencent: http://im.qq.com/.

Fig. 2. Left: WeChat Cute Pets stickers in conventional Internet meme style; right: WeChat Bubbly Chatter stickers in Baozou style. (Copyright © Tencent).

This paper aims to address these questions. I use the Baozou comic phenomenon in China as a lens to explore the potential socio-economic factors behind the indulgence in emotion expression in the form of a parody. I investigate the different types of emotions commonly depicted in Baozou comics, and tactics to craft such illustrations. In the end, I discuss some insights into emoticon engineering and its social implications in the situated cultural context.

2 Background

This section reviews the history of Baozou comic from its root Internet meme and more specifically rage comic, the use of emoticons, kaomoji, and emoji in online communication, and the fad of sticker in Asia.

2.1 Internet Meme, Rage Comic, and Baozou Comic

An Internet meme is "a form of visual entertainment" [2], which gains "influence through online transmission" [5] and gets "replicated via evolution, adaptation or transformation of the original meme vehicle" [12]. More specifically, an Internet meme can be a static image, an animated GIF, a video clip, or a remix of different modalities reproduced or repackaged by anyone out of any existing materials available online [2, 18]. Therefore, Internet memes are usually lightweight with low visual quality, which to a certain extent makes them easier to access, replicate, adapt, and spread across the Internet. The memes tend to be simple in style, directing readers to emphasize on the embedded message rather than the aesthetic value of the graphics [2]. Note that the message expressed in a meme often deviates from the intent of the original source. It can be explicitly presented as additional text or implicitly conveyed through the graphical content, sometimes with special effects as visual cues. A commonly seen example of Internet memes is lolcats, i.e., humorous photos of cat(s) with superimposed text, from the Caturday tradition of 4Chan[6]. More examples can be found on the website Know Your Meme (knowyourmeme.com).

Rage comic is a special genre of Internet memes, originating from an amateur-made four-panel web comic strip about an angry experience published on 4Chan in 2008. It mainly consists of a stick figure-style character with a crudely drawn face (a.k.a. rage face) to "show universal emotions" – not restricted to anger or rage – "of varying degrees under a wide variety of circumstances" [15]. A rage face can be a freehand sketch or copy-pasted from some other sources such as photo, video, cartoon and Japanese manga [6]. Some of the most popular rage faces include Forever Alone, Trollface, and Rageguy[7]. Creators can compose elaborate comic strips using rage face(s) to depict some personal story with a humorous punch line.

Rage comic was first introduced to China as bàozǒu mànhuà (or Baozou comic 暴走漫画) in 2008[8], and has become increasingly popular among Chinese Internet users since then. The term bàozǒu means out of control, which implies the simple and crude style of the visuals on one hand and its use as a venting channel on the other hand. Initially, Baozou comics were mostly amateur comic strips submitted to the baozoumanhua.com website, telling stress-buster jokes or real-life stories that everyone can somehow resonate with [3]. In recent years, another form of Baozou comic has emerged and gained popularity even outside the baozoumanhua.com community.

As part of the fad of sticker in Chinese social media [25], still or animated Baozou figures are used as emoticons in electronic and web messages (Fig. 2 right). Besides the classic rage faces, Baozou comic creators have added to the collection some new facial expressions extracted from online photos and videos of (Internet) celebrities, such as the famous Yao Ming face. By changing text descriptions and/or varying the background, the same face can express different affects. For example, a friend living in

[6] An image-based bulletin board: http://www.4chan.org.

[7] See http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/rage-comics for more examples.

[8] The copyright of rage comics in China is owned by Xi'an MOMO IT Ltd., the owner of the website baozoumanhua.com.

Beijing sent me a Baozou style WeChat sticker[9] on the coldest day this winter to tease the north-south divide of central heating in China. The top character in Northern China is showing off while the bottom one in Southern China is pretending to be strong, but they actually share the same face. I call this process emoticon engineering, since users mainly customize existing Baozou faces to indicate their feelings.

2.2 Emoticon, Kaomoji, Emoji, and Sticker

In the narrowest sense, "emoticon" refers to typographic smileys[10]. Kaomoji[11] are Japanese-style emoticons that make full use of the Japanese character set in addition to the common symbols. In many occasions, the definition of emoticon is extended to include other versions of smileys such as drawings and pictographs. In the scope of this paper, I use "emoticon" as a general term, i.e., a visual representation of a facial expression, especially as a kind of grassroots creation.

In contrast, emoji are stylish graphics originally developed by the Japanese communication company NTT DoCoMo for online communication. The contents of emoji range from living being and everyday objects to signs and symbols, no longer limited to facial expressions. Although the vocabularies are more or less the same, companies tend to have their own design of the graphics. For example, iOS emoji have a different look from those on an Android phone.

Another related concept is sticker – illustrations or animations of characters sometimes attached with witty words and phrases that can be sent in instant messaging (IM) applications to express emotions. In other words, stickers are emoticon designed for IM services. The depiction of facial and bodily expressions in stickers is more elaborate, expressive, and comprehensive than the traditional typographic symbols.

A picture is worth a thousand words. Users find digital stickers beneficial especially in East Asian cultures, because sending a sticker is less cumbersome than typing out the entire message in a logographic script like Chinese [8, 21, 22]. Furthermore, it can increase the sense of intimacy [24, 25], and convey feelings that may be awkward to say in words [21]. Therefore, the fad of sticker quickly spreads across Japanese, Korean, and Chinese users of Asia-based IM services such as Line [21] and WeChat [25], and extends to other platforms such as Facebook Messenger [8].

Most of stickers feature a cute style [8, 21]. However, under the influence of Baozou comic, stickers in China have established a special type of "cuteness" that is very different from the Hello Kitty Japanese kawaii style, i.e., vulgar, wacky appearance with anarchic wit to achieve a parody effect [13, 25]. Take WeChat as an example. Not only do many third-party sticker packs ready for download have some Baozou flavor, but it is also common that users convert Baozou-style images and GIF animations from the web into stickers or simply make their own. One can find the use of Baozou emoticons in other online media as well, ranging from forum and blog posts (Fig. 1 right) to Internet

[9] See http://ww1.sinaimg.cn/bmiddle/6807d621gw1f0dxsyyh9sj20bc0m8ta5.jpg for the image.
[10] See this article for details: http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/feb/06/difference-between-emoji-and-emoticons-explained.
[11] See http://kaomoji.ru/en/ for examples.

novels. Exploring the socio-economic context of contemporary China can provide some insights into the popularity of Baozou emoticons.

3 Socio-Economic Factors of the Rise of Baozou Emoticons

Baozou comic was first adopted by young Chinese netizens to vent about amusing or frustrating experiences. Later, it was accepted by a more general population as emoticons. The ugly aesthetics of Baozou comic reflects the self-perception of ordinary Chinese Internet users and meets their need for expression in a face-keeping culture.

3.1 Subculture of Diǎosī

A nation-wide survey by Sohu showed that 64, 81 and 70 percent of respondents in their 20 s, 30 s and 40 s, respectively, considered themselves as a diǎosī (屌丝) – a nobody [11]. Diǎosī is an epithet that was originally an insult but has now evolved to be a universal self-ascribe identity, meaning someone born in an ordinary family, with a mediocre look, and having a humble job [20]. Although often used comically as the polar opposite of the upper-class gāofùshuài (高富帅, literally means a "tall, rich, and handsome" male) and báifùměi (白富美, a "fair-skinned, wealthy, and beautiful" female) [11, 20], diǎosī actually denotes an average person. According to the 2013 survey, 76 % of the respondents from Shanghai, China took on the diǎosī label [11], many of whom had college education and a middle-class income.

In other words, a diǎosī is not a loser in the traditional sense. Rather, it is a self-perception that one's socio-economic status is far from perfect in "a pretty person's world" (看脸的世界) where "only the rich can live a willful life" (有钱才能任性). On one hand, diǎosī usually admit such imperfection through self-belittlement such as ǎicuǒqióng (矮矬穷, i.e., short, ugly, and poor) or humorous satire such as "look at how I look rather than my look" (主要看气质, Fig. 3 right) [20]. On the other hand, they share the disillusionment of low socio-economic mobility through èggǎo (恶搞, i.e., parody, see Fig. 1 right for an example) [20]. For example, the diǎosī character portrayed in popular Chinese web series such as "Unexpectedness (万万没想到)" is usually a guy with no background, no money, and no future in reality, but always keeps the daydream of moving up the socio-economic ladder. As one of the famous lines from Unexpectedness says, "[I] believe that very soon I will get a promotion and raise, be appointed as the manager, become the CEO, marry a báifùměi, and reach the peak in life. [I] get a bit excited just thinking about it."

Baozou comic as a unique combination of cuteness and parody [25] fits the multi-facet image of diǎosī. First, it is vivid but not very offensive to depict the self-mockingly vulgar appearance and life of diǎosī using crude, cheap-looking Baozou-style characters (Fig. 3 left). Sometimes the visuals come with captions in both Chinese and Chinglish ("give you some color to see see" in Fig. 2 left) as a self-belittler. Second, Baozou comic has a sense of humor in its gene, and thus can be leveraged to convey the playful nature of diǎosī especially in the form of èggǎo (Fig. 3 right).

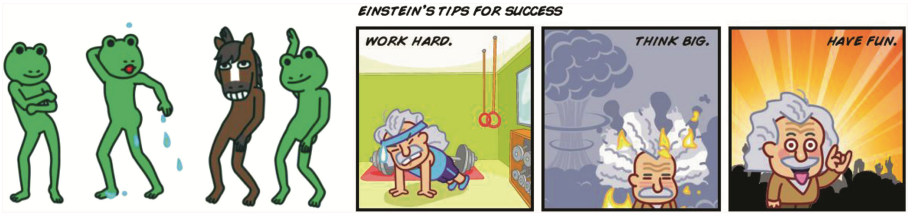

Fig. 3. Left: WeChat Horse and Frog stickers that illustrate a diǎosī's self-perception; right: examples of èguǎo using Hey Good Thinking stickers. (Copyright © Tencent).

3.2 Subculture of Tǔcáo

Diǎosī often like to tease themselves or assorted phenomena in daily life. The use of mockery is called tǔcáo (吐槽 in Chinese and tsukkomi in Japanese). This term comes from Manzai, a type of team comedy in Japan in which the tsukkomi player points out and corrects the errors and misunderstandings of the boke player in a direct, sharp manner [19]. These days, tsukkomi has become a common archetype in Japanese light novels and modern anime. Through these channels, Chinese netizens got introduced to the act of tǔcáo and have adopted it in everyday scenarios.

However, tǔcáo is a challenge to traditional face-keeping culture in China. Self-teasing in public may impair one's own image, while mocking others may be considered as offensive and consequently cause aversion reaction. Using Baozou comic for tǔcáo can be an effective risk mitigation strategy. For one thing, Baozou faces are universal. People are less likely to associate the characters with a specific person. For another, the exaggerated facial expressions in Baozou comic are a well-known device to achieve a comedic effect. As a result, people often view Baozou-style tǔcáo as a mockery of some common experiences or phenomena rather than a targeted insult. For example, there are two stickers from the same WeChat sticker pack specially made to welcome the year of 2016. One is an ordinary New Year wish, "A whole new year, a whole new me." The other is a tǔcáo that can be sent when someone posts that wish, which says "In a few days, someone would post self-deception messages such as 'A whole new year, a whole new me' again."

4 Emotions Expressed in Baozou Emoticons

Chinese Internet users, especially those identifying themselves as diǎosī, often use Baozou emoticons in parody (èguǎo) and mockery (tǔcáo) of different emotions. This section discusses the underlying rationales, based on 400 Baozou faces retrieved from baozoumanhua.com and over 300 Baozou stickers collected from WeChat messages.

4.1 "Out of Control" Emotions

Chinese people have the tradition of educating children the culturally appropriate way to display and react to emotions [23]. On one hand, Chinese people value the negative

emotions such as surprise, angry, and dissatisfaction that they perceive as signals of violation of social norm or unfulfillment of social obligations [26]. On the other hand, they are encouraged to regulate the expression of such emotions in terms of duration, intensity, and frequency, so as not to disrupt interpersonal relationship and social harmony [1]. Contemporary Chinese are less reluctant to speak out especially online. But still many people feel that venting through emoticons is more socially acceptable in many occasions than directly saying things in words. It is because emoticons were initially invented to differentiate jokes from serious content online, meaning that the expressions should not be taken very seriously [16].

Before the introduction of Baozou emoticons, kaomoji was a popular means (and still is in many places) to communicate feelings in forums, games, chat rooms, etc. It employs a bigger character set than the single-byte typographic emoticons, and can convey richer affects with faces, actions, objects, and special effects (Fig. 4 bottom). However, kaomoji are considered as kawaii icons and thus favored far more by females [9]. In comparison, Baozou emoticons are relatively gender-neutral. They can apply similar visual cues to kaomoji and use exaggeration more extensively as a rhetorical device (Fig. 4 bottom).

Fig. 4. Top: Curly Pete sticker (Copyright © Tencent); bottom: corresponding kaomoji.

Besides showing facial expressions as ordinary emoticons do, Baozou emoticons can indicate a strong surge of emotion by comically visualizing the intended feeling getting out of control, such as lightning strike (rúléihōngdǐng 如雷轰顶) for surprise and throwing table (xiānzhuō 掀桌) for anger. Although 14 of the 19 emotion categories in baozoumanhua.com are negative, the same technique can be used to signify positive affect. For example, Fig. 5 (top) shows various “thank you, boss” stickers that I collected from WeChat messages when participating in digital red packet activities during the Lunar New Year[12]. Characters in the stickers bow, kneel, or kowtow to the sender of the red packet – the boss – for even just a few cents, which hilariously demonstrates appreciation under the diǎosī mentality. Such behaviors, however, would be perceived as a severe loss of face in real life.

[12] South China Morning Post article on WeChat red packet: http://www.scmp.com/tech/apps-gaming/article/1905882/get-lucky-spring-festival-wechat-adds-sexy-twist-red-envelope.

Fig. 5. Top row: various professional red packet-related stickers with the message "Thank you, boss"; bottom row: various user-made stickers related to red pocket (from screenshots of WeChat messages, Copyright © Tencent).

4.2 Subtle or Complicated Emotions

Although the Chinese language has already had a rich vocabulary of emotional terms [26], netizens keep inventing new idiom-like Internet slangs to express more subtle or complicated emotions, such as rénjiānbùchāi (人艰不拆, "Some lies are better not exposed, as life is already so hard")[13]. While existing textual emoticons and emoji aim to show common feelings, Baozou characters tend to have more emotional depth. Many Baozou faces consist of salient features from different basic emotions [14], e.g., the Curly Pete guy in Fig. 6 (left). Some even deliberately introduce ambiguities. For instance, it is hard to tell if the character is smiling or crying with one hand over the face if the tears are not drawn (Fig. 6 right). Since such designs can lead to different interpretations of the encoded emotion, it leaves room for users to customize the message by attaching different witty phrases and/or adding visual cues (Fig. 6 right).

Fig. 6. Left: the Curly Pete face consists of salient facial features of three basic emotions; right: an examples of one sticker with different messages (Copyright © Tencent).

4.3 Internal "Overlapping Sound"

Sometimes people do not mean what they say. Chinese Internet users have been using a technique called "overlapping sound (OS)" to illustrate tǔcáo as an internal mental

[13] NYTimes article: http://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/10/27/better-than-a-tweet-using-four-characters-young-chinese-create-internet-idioms-with-a-new-world-of-meaning/?_r=0.

activity. OS appears in text such as posts, Internet novels, and news, with the words to be said written in Chinese and the real message written in Pinyin. In the example of 心(è)疼(gǎo) in Fig. 7, the article says that people "feel sorry for (心疼)" Leonardo Dicaprio but it actually means "making fun of (èg ǎo)" him. Ambiguous facial expressions in Baozou emoticon can serve as good indicators of OS.

Fig. 7. An example of textual "overlapping sound (OS)" (screenshot of a NetEase news article. Copyright © NetEase).

5 DIY Emoticon Engineering

In addition to being expressive and evoking, the ability to turn users from pure consumers to producers is another reason why Baozou emoticons can quickly gain wide adoption. Depicting facial expressions is usually the most critical and the most difficult part of emoticon design. Baozou emoticons make it easier by allowing amateurs to exploit pre-made faces of biǎoqíngdì (表情帝, an individual with rich expressions) from online comics, photos, and videos. Some of the popular examples include the well-known Yao Ming Face and Jackie Chan's Duang[14]. Some celebrities even published their own Baozou-style sticker pack (Fig. 8 left).

Fig. 8. Left: a professional sticker of idol Luhan; middle: example of simple customization of Bubble Pup stickers to fit the Lunar New Year theme; right: examples of how adding simple graphical elements can help disambiguate the emotion, while combining multiple elements can express complicated feelings. (Copyright © Tencent).

[14] BBC article about "Duang": http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-31689148.

To make a Baozou emoticon, creators can simply crop out the character from a web image or a screenshot, turn a photo into a line drawing, or convert a selected video segment to an animated GIF. Alternatively, they can copy and paste the face onto different cartoon figures, and add other graphical elements such as sweat, flush, shadow, symbols, motion lines props, and text to further customize the emoticon (Fig. 8 middle and right). This emoticon engineering process can be carried out with ordinary image editing tools such as Microsoft Paint and Photoshop, or a dedicated Baozou comic generator (a.k.a. ragemaker).

6 Discussion

Baozou comic strips encourage readers to put themselves in the character's shoes and reflect upon their own experiences. Baozou emoticons instead allow both senders and receivers to separate their image in real life from the representations. For example, in the fourth sticker from the left in the bottom row of Fig. 5, the sender drew an arrow with a "that's me" remark towards the panda that is kowtowing at the fastest pace. The receiver recognizes and accepts the sticker as an expression of appreciation, but will not expect the sender to perform the illustrated action in reality. Such mutual understanding gives Baozou sticker users more freedom of choice. My senior male colleagues actually sent Baozou sticker of cute girls and babies (Fig. 5 bottom right).

The fad of stickers has penetrated different age groups. In a Taiwanese talk show called University (大学生了没), the college students shared stories of their parents who are in their 50 s and 60 s flooding the IM services with stickers. There are similar blog posts on Chinese social media. While the parents seem to master the motivational poster-type of stickers pretty well, Chinese young netizens have discovered a new type of generation gap called "your mom don't understand your Baozou sticker."

There are several reasons for this, which also reveals potential issues in emoticon engineering. First, older Internet users are not very familiar with the newly invented Internet slangs, and thus they often intuitively take the witty phrases accompanying the emoticons in their literal meaning. For example, a common caption for the "hand-over-face" emoticon (Fig. 6 right) is wǒyěshìzuìle (我也是醉了, I am drunk). It actually means a person is speechless or knocked out by something shocking, and can be mistaken as a complaint of overdrinking. Misunderstanding frequently occurs when a sticker receiver does not realize that the message uses metaphor or hyperbole. Second, the emphasis of a Baozou emoticon is the face, but people may get distracted by other things in the scene. For example, a mother replied "Don't smoke" to the sad Baozou sticker (a crying man taking a cigarette) sent by her son. Third, as mentioned earlier, many Baozou expressions are subtle and complicated. Without sufficient visual cues and/or knowledge about the original source of the face, readers may find the emotion difficult to interpret. Fourth, readers may not notice that the emoticon is showing an affect that is different from what is being said; that is, the visual is serving as the overlapping sound of the words. In the end, the usual response of the younger generation to such miscommunication is, "Never mind. It is just an emotional expression."

7 Conclusion and Future Work

In summary, the Baozou emoticon phenomenon in China exemplifies an ongoing grassroots creation movement. Its emergence satisfies the need of expression of a new generation of Chinese Internet users. Its ugly aesthetics reflects the self-perception of the users, and is a unique component of the trend of cuteness in many East Asia countries. Easy production, replication, and customization further boost the popularity of Baozou emoticons. In the future, I plan to conduct more systematic studies on the creation and use of emoticons and related gender, cultural, and socio-economic issues.

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