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Making Fun of Foreign Leaders in the Chinese Cyberspace: Understanding *Zhihu* Users' Political Entertainment in Assigning Posthumous Names to U.S. Presidents

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Abstract
Growing up in an era of rapid socioeconomic development, China's younger population is viewed by older generations and political theorists as "somewhat paradoxical" in that they are active and skillful in self-expression but apparently accommodative of the prevailing political authoritarianism. This paper presents a case study of how young Chinese internet users draw on their knowledge of Chinese dynastic history to comment on U.S. politics. We question the contention of contemporary scholars that Chinese youth use political entertainment as an alternative means of political participation, arguing instead for a more nuanced relationship between political entertainment and authoritarianism. In the context of the close surveillance of the Internet by the Chinese government, making foreign politicians targets of critique or humor is a relatively safe outlet for the passion of Chinese youth for online political comment. Chinese youth look to the internet for entertainment and as a space for political discussion and criticism, and the Chinese government is willing to tolerate these forms of harmless entertainment for the legitimation of its power. By characterizing the roles of young internet users' political entertainment and party-state surveillance as mutually supportive, this article sheds new light on some intriguing aspects of contemporary Chinese society.

Keywords
Chinese cyberspace, Chinese youth, political entertainment, political participation, critical discourse analysis

Introduction

Growing up in an era of rapid socioeconomic development and political stability, China's younger generation is viewed as "somewhat paradoxical" (Wallis, 2011, p. 4009) by older generations and

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political theorists. Although often criticized by older generations for lacking traditional values or even moral standards, the greater access of the current young generation of Chinese to education and material resources has made them confident, autonomous, active, and enthusiastic about civic and political participation (Chi et al., 2023). However, the political effects are not what would be expected under conventional modernization theory. In the absence of a vibrant civil society and free and open channels for political participation, and with a weak culture of individualism, youth enthusiasm, and activism for political participation has not translated into the pursuit of free elections or lobbying, and has not produced massive social movements that could substantially affect the political landscape and promote democratization (Jennings, 1997).

Moreover, the advent of the Xi era has brought a change in the political climate in China, with a strong emphasis on ideology and stability (Brown & Bērziņa-Čerenkova, 2018). The Chinese government is on high alert to the possible spread of critical information and potential resentment in cyberspace, which can break out into offline collective action or social protest (Moynihan & Patel, 2021). Through a combination of legal regulations, technological mechanisms, and proactive manipulation, the Chinese government under Xi has further restricted its control over political participation and expression.

Against this backdrop, Chinese youth have continued to find creative ways to participate in political discussion and debate politics humorously and playfully online. For instance, they create nicknames for foreign politicians, especially those who smear China or are highly controversial for other reasons: as a recent example, Zelensky, the Ukrainian president, has been nicknamed Ze Sheng ("Saint Ze") and mocked for his "contribution" to the opening of the Russian market to China (Meme Mingling, 2024). Furthermore, young Chinese internet users usually refer to China as *Dongda* (an abbreviation of "great Eastern power") when discussing the current international context, and when referring to something negative about China, they replace "China" with "India" to avoid censorship.

Nonetheless, there has been extensive scholarly and public discussion over the apparent paradox that the government's restricted control over online political participation and expression is promoting Chinese youth's support for, rather than resistance to, the Party-state regime (Jin & Zhou, 2021). Some commentators contend that the favorable attitudes toward authoritarianism among Chinese youth have been largely shaped by their socialization into strongman politics amidst the repressive political context (Jin & Zhou, 2021) and tighter restrictions on civil liberties (Nathan, 2016). In this light, Chinese youth are described as a group of "powerless cynics," frustrated and disappointed with the repression of political participation and their inability to determine their political identity or bring about social change (Fu, 2020, p. 413; Zhang, 2022). However, other studies have found that the reason Chinese youth are not exhibiting obvious dissent is that they are implicitly participating in discussions on politics and public issues with a mentality of self-entertainment and self-realization through the creative use of humor, satire, and parody (Cui, 2024). The apparent contradiction in the literature on how Chinese youth think and behave in their pursuit of political participation impedes the understanding of the complex interconnection between political participation and political entertainment, and especially of how political entertainment is appropriated by the Party-state to serve its political needs.

To address the paradox, this study explores the case of an entertaining discussion of U.S. presidents on Zhihu, which is a popular online question-and-answer forum in China, similar to Quora. To comment on the accomplishments and faults of foreign political and historical figures, young Chinese Internet users adopt the ancient Chinese practice of assigning them posthumous names. Our data are collected from questions posted in Zhihu since September 2013 about the names of U.S. presidents and the answers and comments added to these posts. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is used to explore the political participation and political entertainment behavior of young Chinese internet users engaged in this discursive practice of posthumous naming. We find that political entertainment and participation are interconnected. In the context of close surveillance of the internet by the Chinese

government, targeting foreign politicians for critique or humor is a relatively safe way for young internet users to satisfy their passion for online political commentary. Meanwhile, these playful but sometimes serious discussions are strategically tolerated by the Chinese government as it considers such harmless entertainment useful for the legitimation of its own power.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. In Section 2, we review the current scholarly debates on political participation and political entertainment in the Chinese context to identify the research gap and outline the main contribution of our primary argument. In Section 3, we provide background information on the practice in Chinese history of assigning posthumous names. In Section 4, we introduce the CDA framework and explain our data collection. In Section 5, we present the data analysis of the case study. In Section 6, we discuss the pursuit of political entertainment through this discursive practice. Section 7 concludes the article.

Political Participation and Entertainment on the Internet in China

There is an extensive scholarship on the political participation of Chinese youth through the Internet. These studies are mainly carried out along one of two lines of research. The first line examines how the Chinese government's restricted control over political participation has encouraged "negative emotions" as a form of resistance by Chinese youth, especially those who are well-educated and have high incomes (Xu et al., 2018). Chinese youth express these negative emotions, which include subversive affirmation, self-deprecation, ambiguity, absurd fantasy, and irony (Chen, 2023, p. 199), to undermine the hegemonic rhetoric promoted by the state (Williams, 2022). For instance, Tan and Cheng (2020) and Yang et al. (2015) articulate the subcultural phenomena of *sang* (丧, "bereavement") and *diaosi* (屌丝, "underdogs"), respectively, as a linguistic form of catharsis amidst the "positive energy" discourse promoted by the state as a mainstream social value. By sharing memes and "speaking bitterness" with each other, young Chinese Internet users engage in limited self-organized community involvement or virtual civic participation (Tan & Cheng, 2020, p. 96). This represents a perspective on Chinese youth as a frustrated and dissenting population whose needs for political participation and expression are suppressed by the Party-state, especially through the government's Internet censorship (Dodge, 2017; Zhang, 2015), and aligns with research findings that young people in countries with weak civil societies tend to resort to satire, irony, or countercultural traits online (Theocharis, 2011).

The second line of research investigates how Chinese Internet users skillfully deploy various activities involving amusing wordplay as an alternative means of political participation. With the popularization of the Internet and social media during a time of rapid socioeconomic development and in the unique sociopolitical context in China, Chinese youth produce and consume a wide range of textual, audio, visual, and gaming materials in a satirical spirit, creating and recreating memes (Cui, 2024), jokes and parodies (Yang & Jiang, 2015), humor (Wesoky & Le, 2018), and cyber-vernacular for the intertextual commentary of serious, including politically sensitive, topics (Han, 2018).

Cui (2024) describes young Internet users as engaging in wordplay to promulgate their perspectives and disseminate the manifestations of their creativity with others who share their beliefs, values, and identities. These wordplay activities are a means to express not only political resistance or a sense of loss but also pride, confidence, and optimism in their national identity and Chinese culture and history. Li (2021, p. 312) observes that because of the complex socioeconomic and sociopolitical differences, young people in mainland China differ from their much more pessimistic counterparts in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and many Western countries. When producing and reproducing memes, humor, and satire, Chinese youth are serving their individual and social needs for political participation (Pavitt, 2010). The cultural and social functions of this wordplay can also be examined within the communication theory framework of "political entertainment" (Pavitt, 2010). From this perspective, Chinese youth engage in online wordplay entertainment to obtain personal pleasure through

self-expression and to escape pain or discomfort in their daily lives. Through the creation and dissemination of political satire and humorous content, young Internet users satisfy their need for recognition and respect from others (Meijer Drees & de Leeuw, 2015).

Nevertheless, the scholarly debate remains inconclusive on whether political entertainment should be conceived as a fun and harmless form of individual realization or as a form of resistance (Yates & Hasmath, 2017). The predominant assumption that Chinese youth use political entertainment simply as an alternative form of political participation impedes the understanding of the sophisticated interconnection of political entertainment and participation in China today. Recently, the scholarly attention to "funny politics" has increased (Beck & Spencer, 2024; Brassett et al., 2020; Koivukoski et al., 2024) on the recognition that various types of wordplay activities, such as humor, irony, satire, parody, and mockery, introduce an element of unpredictability and ambivalence into the understanding of political participation. These wordplay activities are understood differently by different actors (Koivukoski et al., 2024) and can be used not only as a form of resistance by the "weak" but also by the state for the purposes of regime legitimization (Crilley & Chatterje-Doody, 2020). Despite their limited tolerance for political entertainment, authoritarian states such as China, Russia, and Saudi Arabia permit these exercises in wordplay to consolidate power hierarchies (Beck & Spencer, 2024), blame adversaries (Brassett et al., 2020), gain and distract attention (Spencer & Oppermann, 2024), and establish a collective identity (Agerschou-Madsen & Malmvig, 2024). This scholarship can therefore contribute to an understanding of why, in contrast to the influential predictions of conventional modernization theories, Chinese youth are oriented more toward maintaining the status quo of their political engagement than to criticizing their authoritarian government (Hyun & Kim, 2015; Jin & Zhou, 2021).

To fully explain this puzzle, this study examines the ongoing discussion topic on the Chinese social media platform *Zhihu* of assigning posthumous names to U.S. presidents. In this entertaining word game, a shared contextual and intertextual linguistic system is used to evaluate foreign politicians, criticize international politics, and sometimes make implicit references to domestic politics. Despite being small in scale, this case illuminates not only the mutual embeddedness of political entertainment and participation in the Chinese context but also the strategic use of political entertainment by the Party-state as a means of legitimizing its power.

The examination of the nebulous function and role of political entertainment in this study contributes to discussions on youth in authoritarian states in comparative politics and China studies in two main ways. First, through analysis of a vivid case of wordplay entertainment, it reveals the paradoxical behavior of young Chinese Internet users by drawing on political and communication theories to understand their thoughts and actions. Second, it contributes to the understanding that political entertainment in China serves not only as a way for Chinese youth to fulfill their individual and collective needs but also as a tool for Party-state legitimization.

The Practice of Posthumous Naming in Ancient China

Historical China, which officially ended in 1911 with the collapse of the Qing Dynasty, featured a complex naming system encompassing personal, courteous, and posthumous names to indicate the major stages of a person's social adulthood and others' judgments of their status and accomplishments (Brashier, 2014). The purpose of assigning posthumous names was to evaluate a deceased person's positive or negative deeds using one or more adjectives that most accurately summarize their life. These adjectives were selected from a predetermined pool of options found in the "Rules for Posthumous Names" (谥法) (hereafter "the Rules") in the 54th chapter of the *Yi Zhoushu* (逸周书), originating from the early Zhou period (van Ess, 2008). Each adjective specified in the text has a specific range of associated attributes.

Generally, a posthumous name comprised three elements: the name of the deceased's territory, clan or dynasty, an adjective summarizing their legacy, and a title (Nordvall, 2020). In Chinese, the format for posthumous names is [state] [adjective] [title]; when translated into English, the names follow the format [title] [adjective] of [state]. For instance, the posthumous name 汉武帝 would be translated into English as "Emperor Wu of Han," where "Han" (汉) represents the state/dynasty, "Wu" (武) the adjective assigned to the deceased, and "Emperor" (帝) the title.

Temple names (庙号) were also bestowed upon competent, accomplished, and virtuous emperors (Dubs, 1945). Like posthumous names, temple names consisted of two words: the first an adjective and the second either 祖 (*zu*, "progenitor") or 宗 (*zong*, "ancestor"). These words indicated the place and role of the emperor within the dynastic ancestral line (Dubs, 1945). Typically, 祖 was bestowed upon dynastic founders and 宗 upon emperors with significant achievements. When combining an emperor's temple name and posthumous name, the temple name was placed before the posthumous name. In English translations, the format is [title] [adjective], [title] [adjective] of [state]. For instance, as the temple name of the Emperor Wu of Han (汉武帝) was Shizong (世宗), his temple and posthumous names are combined to form "Shizong, Emperor Wu of Han."

Analytical Framework and Data Collection

We adopted CDA to explore the discursive practice of assigning posthumous names to U.S. presidents by young Internet users in China. CDA treats discourse as a social practice that is underpinned by and embedded in power and ideology (Wodak, 1996), with critical discourse analysts typically stressing "patterns of domination whereby one social group is dominated by another" (Philips, 2006, p. 288). According to Richardson (2007), CDA is used to explore how knowledge and social relations are linguistically constituted by discourses and their underpinning power and ideology. As such, it aligns with this study's aim of exploring the discursive practice of assigning posthumous names to U.S. presidents—a practice with ideological and political implications—on an online forum.

The analysis was conducted within Fairclough's (2001, p. 122) widely accepted framework containing three dialectically related dimensions of textual, intertextual, and contextual practice. The three dimensions serve distinctive purposes but are closely interlinked as complementary ways of reading and interpretation (Fairclough, 2001). In the first step of textual analysis, the discourse structure of the textual data is unpacked (Wang, 2017) to extract the use of linguistic devices, such as lexical choice, referential strategy, metaphorical framing, and predicational association (Lan & Navera, 2022). In this step, we also examined the attitudes that are revealed in the texts and the notions that are associated with the posthumous names assigned to the U.S. presidents.

In the second step of intertextual analysis, the interplay between the text and discursive practice is explored by identifying the patterns in the textual data. We analyzed the referential, predicational, and argumentation strategies that facilitate the communication of the ideology-specific meanings of the posthumous names. In the third and final step of contextual analysis, the relationship between the discursive practice and sociopolitical context is explored to reveal how discourse is contextually shaped by the wider society. The inclusion of this dimension implies that discourse should not be reduced to language (Joye, 2010). In this study, the assignment of posthumous names is understood as a contextual practice that informs the interwoven relationships in a broader milieu, such as the Internet environment of political talk, the broader contexts of international politics, the state's Internet censorship, and the underlying thought of young Chinese Internet users on political entertainment and participation.

This study's critical lens of discourse analysis is informed by the ideas of van Dijk (2006), who understands the ideology underpinning discourse as reflected in texts through the positive representation of the Self and the negative representation of the Other. These two categories were analyzed through their meanings and the use of rhetorical devices, generalizations, and comparisons. Viewed

through this critical lens, the analysis of the discursive practice of assigning posthumous names reveals how the negative Other is differentiated from the positive Self through the structural properties of the discourse adopted by the young Chinese Internet users and, more importantly, how the discursive practice is strategically tolerated by the Party-state.

Zhihu is a major social media website in China. It operates as an online knowledge-sharing community composed mainly of educated Chinese youth. According to market research by Walk-theChat (Graziani, 2018), Zhihu users are generally young and well educated: 80% are educated to bachelor's degree level or above, and more than 80% are aged 35 years or younger. Zhihu users are typically used to reading long articles, enjoy serious discussions, and seek knowledge. Thus, Zhihu serves as a valuable source of descriptive data for a CDA of the discourse of young Chinese Internet users and their expression of opinions on trending international political topics (Peng & Talmacs, 2023; Yang, 2023). Zhihu is structured around user-generated question threads that are categorized under specific topics (话题, *huati*) or hashtags. Each question thread consists of multiple answers (回答, *huida*), and each answer is followed by users' comments (评论, *pinglun*) (Zhang, 2020).

Two relevant questions regarding the practice of giving posthumous names to U.S. presidents were selected for this study, because they accounted for the most answers, posts, and discussions among the relevant questions. The first question thread, created in September 2013, is titled "What would it be like to give the U.S. presidents a temple name and a posthumous name?" (给美国总统上上庙号和谥号, 会是什么样呢?); the second, created in February 2017, is titled "If Chinese posthumous naming rules were used to evaluate U.S. presidents, what should their names be?" (如果用中国谥法评价历届美国总统, 应该怎么取?). As of December 2022, the first question had been viewed 1,419,622 times, with 2651 users following it and 102 answers generated, and the second question had been viewed 378,062 times, with 275 users following it and 33 answers generated.

Data Analysis

For the research corpus, we extracted 137 posthumous names assigned by young Chinese Internet users that strictly followed the naming practices. These names were selected from among the 135 answers generated by Zhihu users from 2013 to 2022. Of the 137 names, 37 were combinations of temple name and posthumous name, indicating that these presidents were regarded as the greatest leaders in American history; 72 were posthumous names with positive adjectives; and the remaining 28 were posthumous names with negative adjectives, indicating that these presidents were considered poor leaders.

Textual Analysis

The majority of the U.S. presidents were assigned relatively positive posthumous names, indicating that they were evaluated positively and also reflecting the historical practice in China of showing respect to the dead.[1] George Washington was given a combination of temple name and posthumous name, "Taizu, the Emperor Gao" (太祖高皇帝), which was traditionally given to emperors who had established a dynasty. This name was bestowed because the forum users regarded George Washington as analogous to the founders of historical dynasties in China, such as Liu Bang, the founder of the Han Dynasty, and Zhu Yuanzhang, the founder of the Ming Dynasty. Assigning both temple and posthumous names suggests that the forum users had a high opinion of Washington and his historical achievements, including his leadership of the U.S. in winning the War of Independence, founding the country, and serving as its first president.

Conversely, William Henry Harrison provides an example of the use of a negative posthumous name. The three posthumous names assigned to him by different users—"The Emperor Min" (愍帝, "pitiful"), "The Emperor Shang" (殇帝, "die prematurely"), and "The Emperor Ai" (哀帝,

"lamentable")—are all characterized as deprecative in the Rules as they indicate that a person has led a short life. As Harrison died 31 days after his inauguration, and thus held the shortest presidency in U.S. history, he was given posthumous names resembling those of emperors who died early in historical China.

A user named 李晓宇 (Li Xiaoyu[2]) assigned the posthumous name "The Emperor Huang" (荒帝) to the 31st president, Herbert Hoover, because he believed that he was a significantly below-average president, blaming him for the Great Depression and his inability to solve the crisis. This evaluation fits the explanation of this adjective in the Rules: 治国无方, 民不聊生 ("had no way to govern the country and made the people destitute"). Li Xiaoyu's opinion echoed that of another user, 夜玄三 (Yexuansan), who named Herbert Hoover "The Emperor Yin" (隐, "concealed"): according to the Rules, 不显尸国曰隐, 隐拂不成曰隐 ("Those whose defects in life are hard to hide are called 'concealed'"). Yexuansan believed that Hoover's lack of presidential competence resulted in an economic crisis.

Intertextual Analysis

During the process of discussion and dissemination, the meanings of some posthumous names were recreated by Zhihu users through interpretations of historical metaphor, making the discussion a playful and parodic expression of their opinions on serious politics. 韧竹子 (Renzhuzi) assigned Barack Obama the posthumous name of "The Emperor Huan" (桓帝, "exploratory"); this is a positive posthumous name, which according to the Rules applies to "those who expand the realm, work hard and win the support of the people, and attack and conquer others." However, the name becomes negative through its intertextual association with the posthumous name that Renzhuzi assigned to Donald Trump: "The Emperor Ling" (灵帝). This is a negative posthumous name, but more importantly, by associating the two names the user was making a reference to a sentence in the novel *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*: 推其致乱之由, 殆始于桓灵二帝 ("The search for the causes of the chaos probably began during the reigns of Huan and Ling in the Later Han Dynasty").[3]

This referential strategy was also adopted by 十五和三十五 (Shiwu he sanshiwu) in naming Joe Biden "The Emperor An" (安帝). The adjective 安 ("calm") is positive, referring to "those who are harmonious and good at reconciliating conflict." However, this user explained that assigning this name to Biden was a reference to Sima Dezong, or Emperor An of the Jin (晋) Dynasty, who historical records describe as developmentally disabled and lacking the ability to speak or dress himself. With this interpretation, this user was mocking Biden's age-related health issues and the prevalent belief among Chinese Internet users that he was suffering from dementia.

Contextual Analysis

This stage of the analysis examines how the young Chinese forum users drew on the sociopolitical context to justify their assignation of posthumous names. Referencing the domestic political disorder in the U.S. and its relative decline in power over recent decades, Renzhuzi explained that Presidents Obama and Trump should be held responsible just as Emperor Huan and Emperor Ling should be considered responsible for the decline and eventual collapse of the Eastern Han Dynasty. The intertextual interpretation of posthumous names with historical metaphor by Renzhuzi was therefore grounded in the user's understanding of the current international context, with the recent decline and disorder in the U.S. regarded as a sign that this "empire," like many dynasties in Chinese history, was approaching collapse under fatuous and self-indulgent political leaders. In contrast, without such an intertextual correlation, the posthumous name "The Emperor Huan" given by user Li Xiaoyu to President James Knox Polk is positive. Li Xiaoyu explained that Polk continued to expand the country's territory and worked diligently during his term of office; he won support from the people and

conquered land from other countries, and deserved to be assigned the name Emperor Huan (波尔克, 第十一任总统。任内开疆拓土, 勤政不辍。克敬勤民, 辟土兼国, 谥为桓帝). This comparison represents how a positive posthumous name can become negative through Zhihu users' intertextual interpretation of historical analogies and contextual interpretation of the current international landscape. By the same token, by assigning Joe Biden a posthumous name historically given to a developmentally disabled emperor, Shiwu he sanshiwu implied that Joe Biden was an incapacitated president contributing to the decline of the U.S. and even to its collapse in the near future.

Another vivid example is provided by user 天蓝计 (Tianlanji), who assigned President George W. Bush the negative posthumous name "The Emperor Li" (厉帝, "severe"). Tianlanji explained that Bush waged the Iraq War, which was unjust and caused the death of many innocent people in Iraq. His behavior was in line with the explanation of this adjective in the Rules: "those who are severely cruel and kill the innocent are called 'Li'." In contrast, the same user named Woodrow Wilson "The Emperor Xuan" (宣帝, "proclaiming"), believing this adjective (given to those who are kind and knowledgeable) was appropriate to describe the president who led the United States to victory in the First World War and made a great contribution to establishing the international reputation of the country. Similarly, Tianlanji gave another wartime president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, the positive posthumous name "Shengzu, the Emperor Ming" (圣祖明皇帝). The differences in the names assigned by this user to these three presidents reflects a belief that U.S. participation in the two world wars was right and just and that the two wartime presidents were deserving of praise, whereas the Iraq War was an unjust war that exposed the hegemonic aggression of the U.S. in pursuing its own interests with little regard for human life and suffering in other countries.

Two further examples are informative. Richard Nixon was given two posthumous names: "The Prince of Hailing" (海陵王) and "The Latter Deposed Emperor" (前废帝). These names differ from the usual format introduced above. The Prince of Hailing is a reference to the fourth emperor of the Jin (金) Dynasty of China, Wanyan Liang, who was assassinated when his subordinates rebelled against him, and The Deposed Emperor was a posthumous name usually given to an emperor who was forced to abdicate. Assigning these two posthumous names to Nixon emphasizes his resignation in the wake of the Watergate scandal. The prefix "Latter" was added to distinguish Nixon from Andrew Johnson, who was the first U.S. president to be impeached and thus given the posthumous name "The Former Deposed Emperor."

These examples, summarized in Table 1, show how the young Zhihu users created and recreated the posthumous names based on their interpretation of historical metaphors and the current international context, making the linguistic practice a playful discussion of serious politics. The next section discusses how these young Chinese Internet users engaged in political entertainment and political participation online and the strategic tolerance of this humorous linguistic practice by the Chinese government.

Discussion

Demonstrating Political and Historical Knowledge through Self-Entertainment

The practice of assigning posthumous names to U.S. presidents can be considered a type of "humorous politics," defined by the use of playful text and through which young Internet users can depict themselves as charming, brilliant, and smart (Yu, 2024, p. 1586). The above analysis demonstrates that the users of Zhihu, who are mostly young and well-educated, perceived this entertaining discussion as an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge of U.S. history and specifically of the biographies and major contributions of U.S. presidents. As members of an opinionated generation, they were eager to fulfill their individual and social needs to gain others' attention, respect, envy, and recognition.

Table 1. Textual, Intertextual, and Contextual Interpretations of Posthumous Name Adjectives.

Posthumous Name	Textual Interpretation	Intertextual Interpretation	Contextual Interpretation
The Emperor Huan	*Huan* = "exploratory," referring to those who expand the realm, work hard and win the support of the people, and attack and conquer others.	Naming Barrack Obama as "The Emperor Huan" and his successor Donald Trump as "The Emperor Ling" made reference to the historical analogy of Emperors Huan and Ling of the Later Han Dynasty.	The relative decline of U.S. power and domestic disorder in the country are understood as a sign of the collapse of a dynasty, comparable to the experience of the Later Han during the reigns of Huan and Ling.
The Emperor An	*An* = "calm," referring to those who are harmonious and good at reconciliation and resolving conflict.	A particular reference to Emperor An of the Jin (晋) Dynasty, who was developmentally disabled.	A wide belief expressed on Chinese internet forums that Joe Biden suffers from dementia and other age-related health issues.
Taizong, Emperor Hui	*Hui* = "kind," referring to those who are gentle, meek, and kind to their people.	Emperor Hui, the second emperor of the Han Dynasty, displayed qualities of gentleness, kindness, and a diligent commitment to serving the people but failed to make significant achievements.	A sense of regret that John Adams did not make significant achievements during his presidency. Nevertheless, as one of the Founding Fathers, he was respected for his good moral qualities.
The Emperor Li	*Li* = "severe," referring to those who are cruel and kill innocents.	George W. Bush waged an unjust war that caused the death of many innocents.	The Iraq War was considered an act of aggression by the hegemon that caused the death of many innocents.
The Emperor Xuan	*Xuan* = "proclaiming," referring to those who are kind and knowledgeable.	Woodrow Wilson led the U.S. to victory in a just war and thereby established an international reputation for the U.S.	The First World War was considered a just war.
The Emperor Xian	*Xian* = "wise," referring to those who are intelligent and perspicacious.	Emperor Xian was the last emperor of the Han dynasty.	The U.S. is in decline and its global hegemony is collapsing, comparable to the collapse of a dynasty in Chinese history.
The Emperor You	*You* = "secluded," referring to those who lose the throne, suffer from isolation, and violate the ancestral norms and principles.	King You was the last king of the Zhou dynasty.	The US is in decline and its global hegemony is collapsing, comparable to the collapse of a dynasty in Chinese history.

Through this entertaining discursive practice, the young Internet users, perhaps inadvertently, characterized their ideas about an ideal political leader by drawing on China' culture and history, with which they were most familiar. In user Li Xiaoyu's interpretation, President James Knox Polk's acquisition of the west coast following a successful war against Mexico was a significant success in expanding the territory of the United States; this was perceived as a major accomplishment and meant he deserved a positive posthumous name. Conversely, Herbert Hoover was given a negative posthumous name as a criticism of his failure to cope with the Great Depression. These young Internet

users perceived a political leader as responsible for the prosperity or disorder of their country. The case of John Adams, the "kind" president, is indicative of the good reputation and morality of emperors who loved their people in Chinese history, despite a lack of notable accomplishments. In contrast, the controversial claims, behaviors, and policies of Donald Trump during his presidency were considered a problem of personal morality that would bring the U.S. "empire" to extinction.

These young Chinese Internet users were well informed about U.S. politics and history as well as traditional Chinese political culture, and were able to draw comparisons between the two cultures and histories. Through the cross-cultural and interdisciplinary interplay between traditional Chinese political culture and their knowledge of U.S. politics, these young Internet users inadvertently revealed their expectations and imagination of an ideal political leader: a paragon of personal morality; with sympathy and compassion for the people; possessing certain traits important to governing the country, such as political diligence and thoughtfulness; and making a great contribution to the development of the country. This multilayered evaluative standard for a political leader is indicative of the underlying socio-cognitive aspects of the production and interpretation of assigning posthumous names to leaders as a linguistic practice. This imagined ideal is not necessarily a form of dissent against current sociopolitical contexts but perhaps suggests that these contexts, and societies in general, can be governed by such an ideal leader but not by one who is incapable or fatuous.

A Space for Exercising Political Criticism

The young Chinese users of the Zhihu platform enjoyed playing the role of political commentators expressing their political views, at times conveying discontent or even vitriolic critiques of politicians, similar to the function served by court historians in the traditional Chinese context. To illustrate, Joe Biden, Donald Trump, Barack Obama, and George W. Bush were the major targets of negative posthumous names assigned to them by users. In some cases, these posthumous names were playful, but in others the comments were directed in a more serious manner. The posthumous name "The Emperor An" mocks Biden's age-related health issues, reflecting the prevalent belief among Chinese Internet users that Biden suffers from dementia. Donald Trump was assigned the names "The Emperor You" (幽帝) and "The Emperor Xian" (献帝), which were assigned to the last emperors of the Western Zhou Dynasty and Later/Eastern Han Dynasty, respectively, and signify a serious belief held by these young Internet users that the controversial claims, behaviors, and policies of Donald Trump during his presidency resembled those of an absurd ruler who would lose his empire.

These examples illustrate that with their rich knowledge of history and political culture, young Chinese Internet users are happy to act as official historians in bestowing posthumous names on emperors based on their positive or negative deeds as a way of expressing their criticism or praise of political phenomena. As Liang and Lu (2010) explain, Chinese youth are mostly apathetic about substantive political engagement online but are interested in sharing personal opinions on politics on appropriate occasions; that is, they consider commenting on politics an important element of political participation. Unlike the scholarly consideration of political entertainment as merely an alternative means of political participation for Chinese youth facing Party-state repression, the findings of our analysis contend that political entertainment and participation are interconnected in nuanced ways and with blurred boundaries.

Protecting the Discussion from State Censorship

The negative posthumous names given to recent presidents reveal a typical semantic expression informed by the changing international context of Sino–U.S. competition. In particular, by comparing Donald Trump with King You of Zhou (周幽王), who is portrayed in historical archives and novels as an absurd ruler with eccentric behavior, Zhihu users were insinuating that the ridiculous behavior of

Donald Trump would bring the U.S. "empire" to extinction. Drawing insights from Chinese history, these young Internet users saw certain parallels between the recurring patterns of Chinese imperial dynasties and aspects of international politics today. Especially, they portend that the United States is destined to fall from its peak, because its political leaders are fatuous and self-indulgent and the country is experiencing domestic political and socioeconomic disorder.

Giving recent U.S. presidents posthumous names associated with a dynasty's last emperor implicitly adheres to the historical practice of the court historians in the new dynasty bestowing the posthumous name on a previous dynasty's last emperor. This suggests that the old dynasty has lost its mandate from heaven due to the last emperor's absurd behavior, and the new dynasty should take its place. Acting as official historians in the new dynasty making closing remarks about the old, the Zhihu users were suggesting that China was the new dynasty that would eventually replace the United States.

By demonstrating their knowledge, understanding, and judgment, these young Chinese Internet users incorporated a traditional Chinese cultural practice into their online discussion of international politics, with clear reference to a negative Other in the form of fatuous and self-indulgent political leaders, especially those of countries that have tense relations with China. By aligning with the government's position, their discussions were protected from state censorship. Furthermore, by assigning negative posthumous names to recent U.S. presidents, these young Internet users also sought to fulfill another function of the court historians in the traditional Chinese context: that of using historical stories as a cautionary tale for current leaders. They implicitly warned Chinese leaders that if they behave as ridiculously as have recent U.S. presidents, China will also experience decline.

Strategic Tolerance by the Government

This entertaining discussion of serious political topics has persisted for a decade. The participants are well aware of the "red line" of government surveillance, while the government deliberately tolerates such discussion that is "appropriating and co-opting" as it fulfills its identity-shaping needs (Agerschou-Madsen & Malmvig, 2024). Explicitly or implicitly, these young Internet users expressed pride in Chinese history and culture. They believed that the wisdom of Chinese history can provide invaluable insights into current world affairs, such as the decline of U.S. hegemony and the rise of China. For example, Zhihu user 珞珈之熊 (Luojia zhixiong) indicated that China's rich cultural resources enable the Chinese people to generate this linguistic and sociocultural practice and learn from these historical texts to guide their behaviors in both domestic and international politics. As such, they possessed a culturalist pride in China's grand history, from which they gained wisdom, insight, and knowledge to help them understand international politics. The young Internet users also believed that the rich cultural and political philosophies accumulated through China's grand history provide Chinese political leaders with a worldview and an invaluable understanding of statecraft. Another user, 何许人 (Hexuren), wrote that "China is not a nation of 200 years of history but one with 5000 years … What a ruler has done or will do cannot escape the experiences of our ancient wisdom" (中国不是一个两百年的民族。中华民族是一个五千年的民族…一个皇帝无论做什么，都逃不过古代人的总结).

This discussion is underpinned by a clear reference to a positive self, which is the culturally insightful China. It is therefore consistent with the government's need for the discursive construction of positive emotions, attitudes, and actions as the collective identity of Chinese youth, thereby appropriating the mainstream ideological values into their desires (Tan & Cheng, 2020). This finding aligns with recent scholarly opinion that state surveillance tolerates "like-minded" political entertainment. In doing so, the Chinese government can consolidate its long-standing self-image as pragmatic, benevolent and tolerant, people-centered, committed to cultural heritage, and open to innovation (Shih, 1990).

Conclusion

Scholarly interest in the role of political entertainment has often been linked to resistance and criticism from the "weak," "anxious," and "depressed" (Beck & Spencer, 2024). In this vein, there has been extensive discussion about the innovative use of linguistic practices, such as humor, satire, and parody, by those who seek to resist and challenge the powers of the state (Crilley & Chatterje-Doody, 2020; Meijer Drees & de Leeuw, 2015; Williams, 2022). In the democratic context, politicians often behave like entertainers who use humor to blame opponents and therefore distract attention from their own mistakes (Spencer & Oppermann, 2024). The way that authoritarian governments utilize political entertainment to legitimize their power has also attracted scholarly attention (Agerschou-Madsen & Malmvig, 2024). Our study adds to this scholarly discussion of the "funny side of politics," highlighting how the Chinese government permits the entertaining discussion of foreign politics by Chinese youth online.

This study calls into question the main body of research on this topic by contending that Chinese youth do not use political entertainment merely as an alternative form of political participation in response to tight government surveillance; instead, political entertainment is an inherent element of political participation. Young Chinese Internet users hold that by commenting on selected political issues, giving criticism or praise in an entertaining or serious way, they have fulfilled the roles of court historians in dynastic China. They give advice on current affairs, provide a cautionary tale for current leaders, and, more importantly, help to legitimize the current leadership. Despite its humorous and somewhat satirical nature, the government allows this discussion to proceed because it aligns with the needs of the Party-state to shape a collective identity and legitimize its authority.

Through a critical lens, this study identifies the ideologies underpinning an entertaining discussion in which posthumous names have been assigned to U.S. presidents by young Chinese Internet users. The discussion represents an ideology of a positive Self: a culturally insightful China and political leaders who are inspired by Chinese cultural and historical wisdom. Meanwhile, it presents as a negative Other the fatuous and self-indulgent political leaders of other nations that lack the same grand history as China. We therefore conclude that in today's China, the complex divergence and convergence of youth thought and behavior might not follow the trajectory of sociopolitical development in the ways anticipated by major social and political theories of modernization. This deviance from expectations warrants further research on reconceptualizing and retheorizing the key tenets of prominent theories to ground them more solidly in the Chinese context.

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Notes

1. Presidents who have left office are generally understood in this case to have terminated their political lives, thus equating to the death of an emperor in Chinese history.

2. Considering the ethical and legal requirements for personal data protection, all user names mentioned in this study are their online pseudonyms.
3. Owing to the influence of a popular Chinese classic romance novel, the adjective "*huan*" is used as a pejorative word, associated with the collapse of a dynasty. However, it was a positive term according to its original meaning in the Rules (谥法). Here, the word is used in its interpreted negative meaning, based on the quotation from *Zhihu* user Renzhuzi.

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