

# VOICE OF NETIZENS- UNDERSTANDING CHINA IN NEW ERA

Author's Name- Subhendu Ghosal

*PhD Scholar and Guest Faculty*

*Department of Chinese Language and Culture*

*Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan*

*Email-subhendu.ghsl@gmail.com*

*Ph- 9475850755*

## *Author's description:*

Completed Graduation and Masters in Chinese Language from Department of Chinese Language and Culture (Cheena-Bhavana), Visva-Bharati, pursued one year advance diploma in Chinese Language and Culture from Anhui University China. Currently pursuing Ph.D in Chinese at Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan and also working as a Guest Faculty at Department of Chinese Language and Culture, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan. I have presented papers in various national and international conferences in India. Contributed a chapter entitled "Dragon-Elephant dancing on the stage of mutual benefits and cooperation (互利合作大舞台- 龙象共舞显神威)" in the book "China through the eyes of Indian Youths (印度青年眼中的中国) (page No.195). Area of interest includes Chinese language, Chinese Culture, Chinese Society, Chinese Politics.

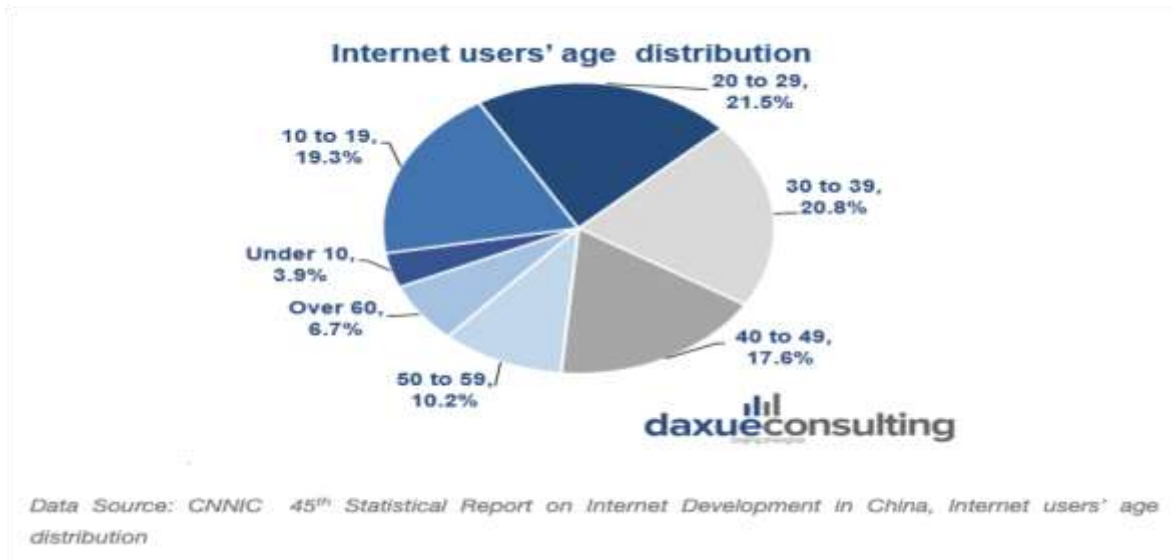
## **Abstract**

*Ever since the introduction of the world wide web in 1994, the development of the Internet in China has gathered momentum since then, and now China has topped the list of internet users with 829 million internet users as of Dec 2018(CNNIC -Feb2019) in the world and its increasing. Nowadays with free access to WiFi, Internet has become a pervasive and inseparable daily necessity in people's lives, particularly among the youth. The ever-changing technology of the Internet reflected in the language is the emerging of myriads of neologisms relative to today's society. With the rapid progress and easy access to social networking, online communication has become a common occurrence for Chinese netizens, hence the spring up of internet neologisms. These newly coined words adopted by netizens enter the language and provide the vocabularies suitable to the need of the user and reflects much of the innovation and individualism of the netizens themselves. These newly coined terms reflect emerging phenomena, new changes and social trend, also play an increasingly important role in giving new directions to people's psyche. These newly coined words and expressions are formed beyond the boundaries of conventional linguistic regulation and are full of profound social and cultural connotations, which render it necessary to inquire into these terminologies because it offers an ocean of potential for understanding the rooted socio-cultural aspects of contemporary China. In this paper, I will be discussing 10 newly coined words or terminologies and their origin which came into popular use in the recent few years. The investigation will unveil much of the constant change in Chinese society and people's "Digital Response" to that.*

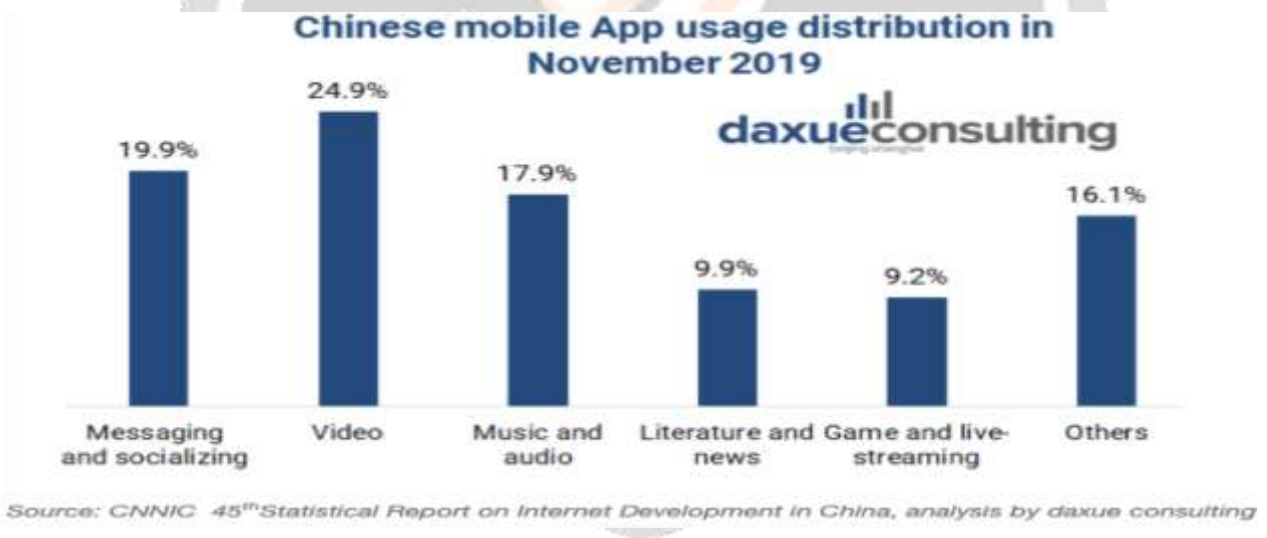
**Keywords-** *Internet, China, Neologism, Chinese Society, Netizens*

With its booming economy and emergence as a great power, China's development has taken the world by surprise since the country took the path of reform and opening-up(改革开放- gaige kaifang) led by veteran Chinese leader Deng Xiao Ping in 1978. The emergence of the internet has made an unprecedented contribution to the development of an open market economy in the present world. The emergence of the internet has brought unprecedented changes in people's lives throughout the world. China was also not out of the digital revolution in communication which took place because of the internet. Now a day's people throughout the world are connected through various modes of communication on the internet. As per the latest data released by China Internet Network Information Centre or CNNIC (China Internet Network Information Centre, the administrative agency responsible for Internet affairs under the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology of the People's Republic of China.) China has a 904million internet users as of Nov 2019, which is almost 65% of China's total population. The unique thing about China's internet usage is that almost 99% of the total internet usage in China happens through mobile instead of laptop or desktop. With 897 million mobile users (source-CNNIC) and growing, the growth of internet usage has been very conducive to the rise of

renowned Chinese Tech Giants. The below-mentioned data shows an age group division Chinese netizen, and it shows that nearly 60% of China’s total internet users are below the age of 50 years among which age group below 30yrs holds the major share. This means that the Chinese youth are dominating its cyberspace, although there is nothing alien to it if we compare it with any other country of the world, but the equation changes when we take into account China’s size and population.



As mentioned earlier that almost 99% of China’s internet usage happens through mobile phones it gives an account of the cyber life of every Chinese netizen. The below-mentioned chart is an account of the cyber activity of Chinese netizens. As per data of CNNIC an average Chinese spends 38hrs online in a week as of the first quarter of 2020.



Source: 45<sup>th</sup> statistical report on Internet Development in China, analysis by daxue consulting

Talking about Chinese Netizen’s cyber life besides conventional use of online surfing, use of social media platforms are an important part of Chinese netizens. Chinese are watching, enjoying and sharing their lives online through various platforms and channels of communication. Therefore, China is a market on which both Global and Chinese Tech Giants are aiming at and this market will continue to grow. Especially in the era of Big Data technology China’s potential and capability is beyond any doubt.

China’s social media and Instant messaging Apps:

Now talking about the user of instant messenger we can connect it with the vastly increasing number of social media users. The primary and most important platform of neologism in the Chinese language has been these social media platforms where large numbers of people exchange their views and share information. As we all know that unlike other countries internationally accepted instant social media platform and messaging apps such as Facebook, WhatsApp,

Twitter is banned in China but this didn't stop the Chinese to engage themselves socially in the digital platform. Chinese are world-famous for their "Made in China" therefore they have supplemented themselves with similar homemade apps, thanks to the huge population, these Made in China social media platforms are now even challenging their globally recognized counterpart.

#### Some main social media apps in china as of 2019

Sl No.	Name of the Platform	Description	No of User
1.	WeChat	Not Just the Chinese FaceBook it is an app for everything	MAU (Monthly Active User) 1.112 Billion (Q2 2019)
2.	Sina Weibo	Twitter of China	MAU (Monthly Active User) 446 Million (Dec 2018)
3.	Tencent QQ	Popular Instant Messaging App	MAU (Monthly Active User) 803.2 million (Aug 2018)
4.	Momo	Tinder of China	MAU (Monthly Active User) 108 Million (Aug 2018)
5.	Dou Yin or TikTok	Video sharing platform	MAU (Monthly Active User) 400 million As of November 2018 200 million daily active users and an average time spent on the app per user of 52 minutes per day

**Source:** Dragon Social Report - Most Popular Social Media Sites in China (2019 Updated)  
<https://www.dragonsocial.net/blog/social-media-in-china/>

Internet language has entered people's lives with the growing popularity of the internet and social media apps. The mode of communication in the present world is changing with time, therefore the language of communication has also witnessed significant changes or transformation in the process. Internet being the greatest product of the information age has had a far-reaching influence on the life of people in general and the language of the people in particular.

Since the beginning of the new century, China's Internet users have grown rapidly. With the rapid popularization of computers, the meaning of the Internet to users is no longer simply to provide convenience but has begun to affect all aspects of lives. People of different age groups have created their sphere of activity in their respective cyber worlds. This sphere has become versatile in a country like China where such a large group of the population has shifted an important part of their activity on the internet. Although many of the international websites or social media platforms are banned in China the Chinese have successfully created a "Chinese alternative" for every such thing.

The emergence of Internet buzzwords has broken the fixed expression of Chinese vocabulary and brought people the opportunity to express themselves more creatively and interestingly. Definition of internet buzzwords has always been controversial in academia. Because of its nature of not sticking to the rule of the book. The so-called internet buzzwords refer to the language vocabulary that uses the Internet as a communication medium to rapidly spread a certain internet vocabulary under certain circumstances and directly affect the expression of modern Chinese vocabulary. These internet buzzwords include not just new words, but also new constructional patterns, morphological patterns, and innovative parts of speech. Indeed, in the constant flux of cultural development, social change, and through the continuous evolution of knowledge, such innovations emerge to refer to new things, express new ideas, construct new identities, and creatively do all of these. Thus, neologisms are a necessary part of language if it is to be a successful tool of communication (Zhuo Jing-Schmidt and Shu-Kai Hsieh ,2019)

In Chinese language, neologisms emerged in many waves, which were driven by different agents to accomplish different goals for different reasons at different historical moments. In recent years, with the rapid transformation of network usage, network communication has entered the era from 3G,4G to 5G. Along with the essential changes in the composition of Internet users in China, the spread of Internet buzzwords has also been increasing rapidly in popular use. Internet buzzwords are ubiquitous in people's daily lives in modern society. These newly coined words are hybrid forms that mix characters with alphabetic signs, emojis and other graphemes. As a language phenomenon, it has begun to directly affect the vocabulary of modern Chinese constitute. Under normal circumstances, it is believed that as long as it is a language form related to the Internet, it can be defined as an Internet



buzzword. This is a broad qualitative. The scope of the discussion is the broad Internet buzzwords, including Internet special terms, a language commonly used in Internet communication and its emoticons.

Factors behind the formulation of Internet Buzzword:

Language is a tool of communication, the composition of any language is a comprised version of different aspects such as individualism, creativity, social representation and ability of expression. Factors that play an important role in the formation of internet buzzwords in Chinese can be divided into two below-mentioned categories.

- Individualism and creativity: Individualism and creativity are the very two core factors that stand parallel with every individual especially when it comes to Chinese netizens. This plays an important role in the formation of buzzwords in the course of communication on the internet chat room. Netizens use existing Chinese characters with whole new meanings and interpretations. The meaning is easy to work out and attracts others observation much quicker. Some Chinese scholars have argued that the three characteristics of the Chinese language are Character, Meaning and Pronunciation. But web-users in writing archaic characters use only the Character and pronunciation but change the meaning. The new meaning is defined by the meanings of radicals building the character. As the character 呆 *méi* (original meaning is plum) consists of two 呆 *dāi* 'stupid', it has acquired the meaning of the word 很呆 *hěn dāi* 'very stupid' in the form of Internet buzzword. Chinese actress Li Yuchun's (李宇春) fans are called 玉米 *yùmǐ* 'corn', because 玉 *yu* sounds similar to 宇 *yǔ*, and 迷 *mí* -is homophone to 米 *mǐ* meaning 'fan'. Similarly, fans of a singer named Zhang Liangying (张靓颖) are called 凉粉 *liangfěn* 'cold mung bean noodles', as 凉 *liang* sounds similar to 靓 *liang*, and 粉 *fěn* is a part of the word 粉丝 *fěnsī* or fan'. Another example is the character 凸 (*tū*) due to pictographic similarity netizens have given this character a new identity as an emoji representing giving somebody the finger. A simple phrase in Chinese 一见钟情 (*yījiànzhōngqíng*) which means, love, at first sight, netizens have given it another meaning just by replacing the word 见 with a homonym 键 changing the phrase as 一键钟情 (*yī jiàn zhōng qíng*) which defines a person who is addicted to the internet and online games. Numerous such examples can be given defining how creative Chinese netizens are when it comes to the formulation of internet buzzwords use for online communication, combination of numbers is such for exam 88 represents 'bye bye' as it sounds close to the Chinese pronunciation of 88. 748 "Go and die!", 748 (pinyin: qīsibā) represents 去死吧 (pinyin: qùsǐbā), the equivalent of "Get lost", or "Go to hell!" sometimes phonetic abbreviations are also used to interact online for exam 'GCD gòngchǎndǎng (共产党), the Communist Party, MM mèimèi (妹妹 or 美美 or 美妹 or 美眉), little sister, young girl, pretty girl. Often written as "MM," which usually refers to a young girl or pretty girl (source -Wikipedia). Frustrated with the immense pressure both on the professional and personal front. Chinese netizens can also be found using different words or phrases to mock themselves by using words like 房奴 (*fáng nú*) Mortgage Slaves- Mortgage Slaves refers to people whose income is channelled mostly toward repaying a mortgage. Another similar word 蚁族 (*Yi Zu, Anttribe*) is a sort of self-mockery, used to describe a group of low-income university graduates who settle for a poverty existence in the cities of China. Lian Si (Chinese: 廉思), then a postdoctoral researcher at Peking University, coined the term "ant tribe": To draw a comparison between the lives of these college graduates and ants he said, "They share every similarity with ants. They live in colonies in cramped areas. They're intelligent and hardworking, yet anonymous and underpaid." (Wikipedia <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/>). Numerous such examples can be given which reflects the individualism and the message these words or phrases contain.
- Socio-political factor: Socio-Political factors are an important part of neologism in any language; it is no different with Chinese as well. In the case of internet neologism, these factors function more prominently. The formation of these words is rooted in several socio-political factors like humour, depression, frustration, anger, criticism, protest, happiness, forming a collage of socio-political issues covering both positive and negative factors. Internet censorship is also one of the major factors that have accelerated the evolution of internet buzzwords in the Chinese cyberworld. Digital media technologies have become popularised, rendering information more accessible and expanding opportunities for self-expression since the rapid development of the internet in China. Alongside these developments, the regime made constant efforts to control content disseminated through digital media, as we all know "The Great Fire Wall" keeps a close watch on every netizen, prevent and eradicate everything that doesn't conform to CCP 's rulebook in globalised China, but on the contrary, this effort has also stimulated the efforts of netizens becoming more creative in formulating words or phrases that can escape the tight grip of the government. From May-June 2014 Chinese government carried out massive online censorship throughout China as it was the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of The Tiananmen Incident, but the netizens were smart enough to cross the "Great Fire Wall" which is always on a run to scan

and delete sensitive words or content on Chinese cyberspace. According to China Digital Times, a US-based news website reported that Chinese netizens came out with 262 different Tiananmen related phrases that were widely used by Chinese Netizens. words such as “6+si” which mean 4<sup>th</sup> of June (no 6 representing the month), “5yue35” (which means 4<sup>th</sup> day of June) as the month May consist of 31days and if we add 4 more days to it becomes the 4<sup>th</sup> day of June, “VIIV” which is the romanization form of 64 (which defines the 4<sup>th</sup> of June in a coded way that can easily escape the censorship). The need for the creation of so many buzzwords is that it’s a never-ending online battle between the government and the netizens, once the government machinery catches one such word and delete it the netizen quickly create another alternate and carry out their conversation online and the race continues. During the recent outbreak of the pandemic in Wuhan when people were frustrated and angry over the handling of the outbreak and they started expressing their grievances online, the government tightened its grip on online censorship then netizens formulated different buzzwords to discuss and share opinions online such as “wh” which stands for Wuhan “red ten” (representing the red cross society of China) “物质归红” (wuzhiguihong) means that all that foreign aid that was coming to china that time were being stolen by the Chinese red cross society and hasn’t reached the common Chinese people was in popular use that time till it was taken down by the Government. “Diao si” (屌丝), loser- is another term popularized by netizens. Since 2012, Chinese youths have been using the term to refer to themselves as a protest of unfair social standards and limited socioeconomic mobility, calling attention to the number of young people whose lifestyles are characterized by mediocre incomes, lack of marital opportunities, this expression helps Internet users to articulate their desired lifestyles and the extent to which the desired life seems unachievable to them in the face of economic uncertainty. 五毛军 (wǔ máo jūn) Fifty Cents- Originally referred to Internet users believed to have received 50 cents for each favourable comment they posted about the government. In the corpus, the term refers to a person who is blindly patriotic and wilfully unaware of harsh reality. Fifty Centres are seen as liars, who spread false rumours and are brainwashed, blind government supporters.

The interesting part is it is not always the fact that all the internet buzzwords are being censored by the Chinese government or its censorship machinery, there are several occasions when the government-backed electronic and print media has diligently picked up buzzwords or phrases from the internet and published it in different articles and propaganda program, for example, the word ‘地堡男’ (dibaonan) or the bunker boy in English translation, this three-word phrase mocking the then US President Donald Trump was trending in Chinese social media when the secret service had to take him to the bunker in the white house in the uprising of BLM movement, the state mouthpiece Global Times proudly published it on an editorial mocking President Trump. In some cases, they also censor online search results of that particular buzzword, for example, a random search on Baidu which is the Chinese equivalent of Google search engine on 4<sup>th</sup> June 1989 or 30+5 (which is an internet buzzword for Tiananmen massacre) will show you no mention of Tiananmen, instead will display random news of any other events such as someone’s birthday or even marriage anniversary, it’s all about suiting the interest. But the interesting fact is that internet buzzwords have opened a door for the Chinese netizens to express themselves in a manner with “Chinese Characteristics” in a broader sense.

This typology of the Chinese netizen’s blogosphere has reconceptualized online commentary as a networked practice. These online satires are a networked practice that emphasizes on fulfilment of social function, which may not be political itself but can be used for political purposes. These buzzwords can also be seen as a form of “counter-power” associated with “the capacity by social actors to challenge and eventually change the power relations institutionalized in society” (Castells 2007).

Below are some of the popular internet buzzwords in the Chinese language which are in popular use in Chinese cyberspace and had a certain impact on Chinese society.

**1. 逆行者: 逆行者 Nixíng zhě:** Means someone who walks oppositely, but it refers to someone who takes extraordinary measures to help others, such as medical workers worldwide during the covid 19 pandemic. Chinese social media platforms like Weibo, Wechat, Bilibili etc were flooded with such posters using hashtags paying tribute to the Covid warriors.



2. **内卷 Nèi juǎn or 'inside examination'** was one of the top Chinese online buzzwords this year. 'Nèi juǎn' originally is a scientific term referring to the stagnation of the social-cultural model. But now many college students use '内卷 Nèi juǎn' to refer to the irrational competition they have to face everywhere starting from taking admission in universities to getting a job and then surviving in an organisation it's kind of an involuntary competition people are sucked into. In the second half of 2020, a picture of a man using his laptop while cycling suddenly become internet-famous. He was called as the 'king of involution' by netizens.



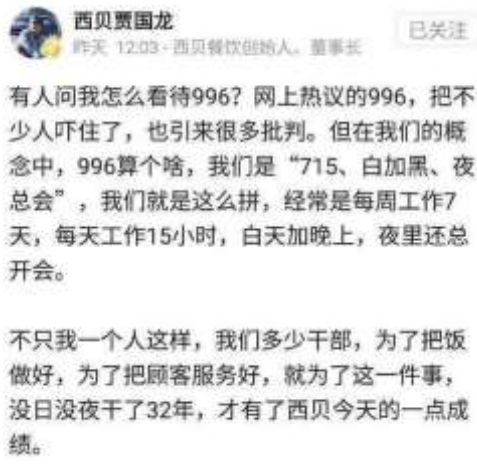
Source: Sina Weibo

3. **“我酸了 Wǒ suān le” or “I am sour”** is a self-mocking line that people say when they admire someone else having a good job, a beautiful or handsome partner and good life in general. Often accompanied with images of lemons.



Source: Sina Weibo

4. **996 and 715** are the two top searched words on Baidu the main search engine in China this year. 996 is a phrase that depicts the harsh working hours that common Chinese worker has to work in various Chinese companies, a 9 am to 9 pm shifts and 6 days a week Chinese netizens enraged when Chinese tech tycoon Jack Ma famously said it was a "blessing" for anyone to be part of the so-called "996 work culture"- where people work 9 am to 9 pm six days a week. The matter got so viral online and people started protesting that finally, the Chinese government had to intervene and issue a notice to companies that it is illegal to make employees work for such long hours. Netizens even shared different memes online to show their protest against this inhuman work culture.



上班996 下班ICU

source: Twitter

such images were flooding the Chinese social media with one-liners as “上班 996, 下班 ICU”(shangban jiujiuliu , xia ban ICU) which translates as one will end up being in ICU after force to adopt this work culture”.715 is also a phrase with similar meaning, The CEO of a restaurant chain boasted that his employees work 15 hours per day, 7 days a week — which wasn't received with much admiration online.

5. **伞兵 sānbīng, “paratrooper”**: On September 3 ,2021, the word *shǎibi* 傻逼, politely translated as “dumbass,” was banned from Baidu’s messaging forum Tieba because of its sudden rise in use. This time around, netizens were too quick to choose an existing homophone: *sānbīng* 伞兵, “paratrooper” instead of 傻逼 (shabi) it went viral within minutes online , ultimately the Govt mouthpiece Xinhua news agency had to step in to disburse this verbal hostage situation and wrote on Weibo which is the Chinese version of Twitter that Paratroopers are the best of the best-netizens must not slurry their name. To save the reputation of China’s paratroopers—and, of course, its reputation Baidu unblocked shabi, the whole event was regarded as “linguistic Prisoner Exchange” on September 6 , 2021.

6. **干饭人 gānfàn rén**: This term is used to describe anyone who is proactive in having meals on time and able to eat a large quantity of food. It is a humorous way to describe busy office workers with positive attitudes who don't have time to sit around for a long meal.



干饭了 干饭了 干饭了

Source: Google image



**7. F4:** Originally referred from the name of a Chinese Band New F4 which is comprised of four young men who are known to be “feminine looking” ‘sissies’ (娘炮男) was used by a netizen to refer to four people who they accused of being responsible for the epidemic outbreak in Wuhan, these people are the governor of Hubei, the Secretary of the Provincial Party Committee, mayor of Wuhan and secretary of the municipal party committee. As this was a very highly sensitive word it was later deleted from every possible online platform including those beyond the border of mainland China.

**8. 懂王 (Dǒng wáng) king of Omniscience:** This high buzzword was widely in popular use on Chinese social media for describing former US President Donald Trump. It means “the king of knowing everything”, which fits with his outspoken demeanour, frequently proclaiming he knows best. As mentioned earlier this was not censored but rather encouraged by Chinese state media.



Source: Twitter handle of Global Times dated June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020

**9. 躺平 Tǎng píng -lying flat:** is a lifestyle choice and social protest movement that was launched in China by some young people who reject societal pressures for hard work or even overwork (such as the 996 working hour system, which is generally regarded as a rat race with ever diminishing returns), and instead choose to "lie down flat and get over the beatings" via a low-desire, more indifferent attitude towards life.



Source: Google image

**10. 凡尔赛 (Fán'ěrsài):** The direct translation of Fán'ěrsài is Versailles, but it isn't used to describe the place in France in this context. It refers to people who are trying to show off their luxurious lifestyle or achievements by inadvertently talking about it. Below mentioned is a screenshot of a Weibo post, where the lady is trying to show off her affection towards luxury brands, she seems to be confused about choosing between products of the world-famous luxury brand Dior and Jo Malon.





Source -Sina Weibo

Socio-Political, cultural, ideological factors have played an important role in the coining of neologism in the Chinese language. These newly coined terms and phrases have become a tool for netizens to express their view online platform, the significance of this practice is huge especially considering such restricted cyberspace as of China. Neologism is not only a linguistic phenomenon but also a reflection of a social phenomenon. As the magnifier and microscope of social evolution, these buzzwords highlights both dynamic changes of language and changes in society.

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