

## Diaosi, Nüzhubo and Enclosure of Desire

The [first story](#) is that of a lonely male *diaosi* (literally “dick hair”, a neologism to describe mediocre losers) who vents his frustrations of his hopeless working life and temporarily escapes his isolation by watching *nüzhubo* (female casters on livestreams) bantering, singing, and most of all being alluring on a livestream platform like [Douyu](#) or [YY](#); the [second story](#) is that of a filthy rich *tuhao* (nouveau riche, a derogatory term for the rich) with an inferiority complex who showers the *nüzhubo*, albeit virtually, with barrages of donations bombarding her otherwise vacant livestream channel; the third story (which is less told) is that of a *nüzhubo*, from an impoverished background, who strives to climb up the ladder of the attention economy by enduring long working hours, poor management practices (of clans, or guilds or agencies or the livestreaming platform itself), unconventional working conditions (for instance, streamer studios are strange caricatures of feminine domesticity), abusive fans, unstable income, and finally the pain of maintaining her precarious fame.

The stories are then shrunk to the basic socio-economic premise of common sense about China—extreme economic inequality, stagnant social mobility, social isolation, an abnormal gender gap and prevalent sexism (none of these are untrue nor are they news for any followers of China). A self-fulfilling argument. The seemingly unlimited supply of *nüzhubo* are fulfilling the pre-existing desires of the millions strong lonely (presumably) male (possibly migrant worker) *diaosi*—the archetypal average male of Chinese super-modernity as the West understood it. [“The unifying factor” is “isolation”](#) or social inequality, ultimately attributed to the much exoticized “Capitalism (Socialism) with Chinese Characteristics”.

What is at stake? [Thomas Lamarre](#) identifies a similar issue in the reports on Korean *Mukbang* (eating livestreams),

*When accounts of eating on the air address the other side of things, the audiences’ side, they commonly dwell on a sociological factor: more and more people work long hours, live alone, and thus tend to eat alone...such an emphasis on pre-existing demand tends to enclose, to interiorize and pathologize, desire: this is what Korean women want, or this is what Korean society wants of women.*

The desire of the lonely *diaosi* is to vicariously participate in the spectacle of hypermediated and performative social life with a *nüzhubo*; and, if this represents the collective desire of the masses, docile bodies of *nüzhubo* must satisfy these desires in order to hold onto the ephemeral upward mobility that is eclipsed by rentier capitalism. This desire is then deemed vulgar, therefore controlled, pathologized, but certainly not eliminated. The Chinese livestreaming industry flourishes on simultaneously encouraging and sanitizing such desire of *diaosi*.

*Diaosi* emerged in trollish shitposts on *Tieba*, then became a popular gesture of self-depreciating humor, to a slang officially adopted by *People’s Daily* (hastily disposed due to political incorrectness), to a term that is taken on by too many academics and journalists to be explicitly associated with internet subculture, [sociolinguistics](#), stagnant class mobility, and [disillusionment](#). Ad hominem attacks of class hatred. If everyone, literally from migrant workers, to middle-class hipsters, to billionaires, is calling themselves *diaosi*, the term is devoid of any precise class politics—maybe we are missing the point. [Cao yifan](#) manages to move beyond this fixation on social mobility and proceed to dissect the desires of *diaosi* literature (translation is my own),

*they (the male protagonists of diaosi literature) repetitively create or simulate the setbacks of them enduring their relationship with the nüshen (goddess)...through constantly confessing and recalling their emotional scars, (they) demonstrate their tragic position as the weakling (in this emotional relationship). This traumatic experience as 'the weakling' is further projected to bodily sensory, that is 'sexual impotence'—diaosi enjoy the fantasies of 'sexual impotence', this seems to be also closely related to their material poverty. The former diminishes their masculinity, the later completes their identification as 'the weakling'...The melancholic narratives of diaosi suffering through their loyal commit to this (unequal and unsustainable) relationship, seems to prove that, in contrast to the gaofushuai (the tall rich and handsome) who are unable to commit to a relationship and oscillate between different women, their emotion is the most reliable, thus achieving the moral high ground...on the one hand, he is loving, introverted and compromising; on the other hand, he is aggressive, (self)destructive, narcissistic to the degree of cold-bloodedness.*

*Diaosi* is therefore an instrument of moral integrity that must be performed in relation to the established gender roles (and social class) rather than being inherently incapacitated. *Diaosi* is not necessarily [the innocent victim that intellectuals rally to patronize](#) nor is the term the epitome of “[esu \(vicious vulgarity\)](#)”. *Diaosi* is not a viable identity because it desires to implode itself: everyone calls themselves *diaosi* and no one wants to be a *diaosi*. Let’s pose the question differently: [why are incels or involuntary celibates dangerous losers](#) while *diaosi* are considered [subversive and critical social solidarity](#)? Why is it so difficult to critique *diaosi*’s desires in gender relations, for which Cao yifan’s essay is a rare exception?

To invoke *Diaosi* in the contexts of livestreaming, it encloses our ways of seeing: new media in China needs to fit into, as Lamarre critiques, the “familiar paradigm of ‘Asian modernity’”. The internet, Weibo, dating apps, and now the rise of livestreaming platforms, are all supposed to be catalysts of desirable social changes and if not, we just dictate that China prospers even without addressing the issues of extreme inequality and rampant sexism. However, the issue is not the absence of gender politics on Chinese livestreams or how people internalize the patriarchal regime, which fuels the inertia of the intellectual’s premature disappointment (as [Hao Wu](#) writes),

*diaosi seem to have followed the government’s dictates on good online behaviour—no politics, lots of vulgarity but only moderate sexual innuendos, spiced with sporadic nationalistic outbursts.*

It is, rather, gender politics does take place on livestreams and we are often conditioned to only see them in specific ways, whatever “with Chinese characteristics” or “subcultural resistance” or “subaltern subjects”. We are obsessed with finding the “sub”-ness of our subjects. We therefore see what we want to see and reproduce it in our writing: the male gaze and the objectified female body. It is of course crucial to criticize institutional sexism, which is coded in the core of today’s livestreaming industry in China. But the next step depends on whether we can move on from the pair of *diaosi* and *nüzhubo*, not necessarily the terms themselves but the cultural logics of reiterating them. The enclosure of boiling *diaosi* down to socio-economic factors and *nüzhubo* to the objectified body misses the affluent opportunities to see and not ignore the already existing alternative performances: gender politics on the margins of both mainstream socioeconomics and subcultural integrity.

*Dino Ge Zhang is a PhD candidate at the Digital Ethnography Research Centre at RMIT University. His research interests include media theory, live-streaming, videogames and ethnographic research in China. More of his work can be found at his website [Anthropos.live](http://Anthropos.live)*